



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Section: *Literature, Linguistics & Criticism*

Challenges and factors causing difficulties in mastering writing skills: A case study of Indonesian students with mental disability

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to describe the challenges and factors causing difficulties in learning to write for students with mental disability at Special Needs Senior High School in Indonesia. It was focused on Inclusive School at Kudus Regency, Central Java, Indonesia. It involved students with mental disability. The subjects were taken using purposive sampling. This study involved 40 students and 4 teachers. Data was obtained using observations, interviews, concentrated discussions, documentations, and questionnaires. Results of the study showed that students' challenges in learning to write Indonesian language were (a) having difficulties to write structurally correct sentences; (b) their hand-writing was unclear and illegible; (c) having difficulties to master vocabulary; (d) having difficulties to understand punctuations, and (e) having difficulties in writing correct spelling and grammar. The factors causing those difficulties were (a) students were lack of concentration in learning to write; (b) they had less exercise in writing; (c) limited learning sources; (d) there was no textbook from the government; (e) they had limitations and low abilities; (f) they forgot the learning easily; and (g) there was less interaction and communication in the learning process.

KEYWORDS: Indonesian language, inclusive school, learning, mental disability, writing

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Introduction

Education is a fundamental right for everyone, including disabled people (Aro et al., 2019; Currie et al., 2022; Katz et al., 2020). In Indonesia, the Law number 8 in 2016 concerning disabled people states that they have equal rights to obtain education (Gusman et al., 2022; Paikah, 2017). However, students with mental disability have many challenges, especially in learning to write at Senior High School level (Anidi & Anlianna, 2022)s (Anidi & Anlianna, 2022). In the learning process, students with mental disability have problems in writing. The writing activities require concentration, structured thinking, and expression of ideas that quite hard for students with certain cognitive or emotional impairments (Morales, 2023; Novelti et al., 2022).

Learning to write in Senior High School level requires abstract thinking skill, mastery of language structures, and written communication skill (Öğülmüş & Açıköz, 2024; Ray et al., 2019). Writing is very crucial skill (Ahsin et al., 2025). It becomes a great challenge for students with mental disability such as autism, ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), or anxiety disorder. They have to understand the standardized writing technique and struggle with internal obstacles such as short attention span, impulsivity, or less motivation (Melati, 2023).

Those obstacles are exacerbated by the lack of adaptive and inclusive pedagogical approaches in schools (Mariappan et al., 2024)(Mariappan et al., 2024). Most teachers have not obtain specific training to teach writing for students with special needs (Aktifah et al., 2021; Wardah, 2019). As a result, learning to write is ineffective, unpleasant, and frustrating for students with mental disability. They have low academic achievement and confidence.

Based on the results of field study at a Special School in Kudus Regency, Central Java, Indonesia, there are many students with mental disability. The observations reveal that they have certain characteristics which influence their learning process. Students with mental disability have adequate, moderate, and low intellectual ability. They are difficult to understand the instructions, maintain their concentration, and remember information. They need more concrete, gradual, and repetitive learning approach. In the classroom learning, they easily distracted, have less responsive to learning stimuli, and require intensive guidance from teachers. In Indonesian subject, they have difficulties in learning to write. This condition requires teachers and policymakers to create more inclusive and empathetic educational environment for students with mental disability in Special Schools (Natalia et al., 2025). Classroom learning for students with mental disability needs certain attention (Putra et al., 2025).

Social environment at school plays a crucial role in providing learning experiences for students with mental disability. Discrimination drives them to feel isolated (Bartz, 2020). Moreover, the role of families in supporting students with mental disability to write is also important. However, not all families have good understanding to provide tutoring at home. Some parents even struggle to accept their child's condition. This makes disabled students have less emotional and academic support. Therefore, there is an academic gap between non-disabled students and students with mental disability especially in writing skill (Mawardi, 2025).

The proposed inclusive education policies have not been optimally implemented. It remains a gap between the regulations and the real conditions. There are many Special Schools which have less inclusive facilities, curriculum, and teachers. It presents a structural challenge that hinders the students with mental disability in developing their writing skills (Juanita et al., 2024).

Writing is productive skill used for communication. This skill is useful for students when they graduate from school (Abidin et al., 2025). Writing which is coupled with reading is called literacy (Darmuki et al., 2021). Writing develops through understanding meaningful contexts (Hyland, 2016). It requires planning and hard work; it also needs reading skill to produce more qualified writing (Arsyad et al., 2021).

Writing needs ideas and more reading. Revision cannot be conducted while writing. It can be conducted after the writing is complete. Revision involves the process of editing spelling, punctuation, and mechanics to create better result of writing. The stages of writing are pre-writing, writing, and editing (McMahan et al., 2015).

Writing skill is crucial for students; however there is less research about challenges of students with mental disability in understanding Indonesian materials in Special Schools. Therefore, this study is conducted to investigate the challenges and factors causing difficulties in mastering writing skills for students with mental disability. This study is expected to be a starting point to create more inclusive and empathetic educational

environment for students with mental disability in Special Schools. Moreover, this study is expected to contribute to the literature on inclusive education in Indonesia related to written literacy and mental disability. By identifying specific and systemic inhibiting factors, the stake holders are able to develop more effective approach for students with mental disability.

Research Questions

1. What are the challenges of learning writing skills for students with mental disability in Indonesian Special Schools?
2. What are the factors causing difficulties in mastering writing skills of Indonesian subject for students with mental disability at Indonesian Special Schools?

Literature Review

Writing Skill

Writing was productive language skill and crucial for academic success. More practice was needed to improve writing skill (Baixauli et al., 2021). In language education, writing was defined as productive skill that enabled people to express ideas, information, and arguments through clear, structured, and correct written language (Ebadi, 2021; Graham, 2019; Rad, 2023; Sari, 2021).

Writing was said to be productive activities to share ideas into meaningful text (Jong & Kim Hua, 2021; Keller, 2020). Students had to master this skill. It was also said as thinking process because thinking skill was needed in creating good writing. Good writing had correct structure, appropriate rules, and could be understood. Good writing provided clear information for the reader (Mulyaningsih et al., 2022).

Writing was complex language skill which required integration of cognitive, psychomotor, and linguistic abilities. According to Saddler & Asaro-Saddler (2019), students with mental disability intended to have difficulties in organizing ideas, sentence structure, punctuation, and fine motor skills. These difficulties were exacerbated by low vocabulary mastery, difficulty to understand grammar, and inability to convey coherent written ideas (Graham et al., 2018). In case of mental disability, writing skill was more challenging because of limited memory, limited attention, and difficulty to organize information (Bouck & Park, 2021). Without appropriate intervention, students with cognitive impairment could experience significant delays in writing mastery which influenced academic ability and social participation (Herman et al., 2023).

Writing process was more challenging for students with intellectual impairment because they had difficulties in (1) creating logical sentences (Strickland et al., 2002) (2) understanding syntactic structures (Graham, 2019); (3) controlling fine motor skills for handwriting (Yakut, 2025). Those difficulties in writing were common characteristics of students with cognitive impairment.

Inclusive Education at School

Inclusive education at school was an approach which ensured that all students could study in the same educational environment (Nagase et al., 2021; Opoku et al., 2022; Ramango & Naicker, 2022). This approach aimed to eliminate learning barriers by providing various services, facilities, and learning methods to fulfill disabled students' needs (Kivirand et al., 2021). Inclusive education in Indonesia was expected to promote equitable educational access and provide equal opportunities for all students to develop without discrimination (Minsih et al., 2020).

Inclusive was educational approach which aimed to provide equal learning opportunities for all students with different backgrounds, abilities, and needs (Elmira & Negmatzhan, 2022; Ibourk & Raoui, 2024). This approach emphasized the integration of students with various characteristics into a single learning environment, so they were able to study together (Bessarabova & Kurysheva, 2020; Fäth & Selenius, 2024). In inclusive education, adjustments to the curriculum, learning methods, and supporting facilities were conducted to ensure optimal learning access for every student. This approach focused on embracing student diversity and empowering all students to achieve their potentials in inclusive and supportive environment (Yudina & Alekhina, 2021).

Inclusive education for disabled students was an educational approach which guaranteed their rights and opportunities to learn together with non-disabled students in the same school (Govender & Nunan, 2023). This approach emphasized on the elimination of physical, social, and academic barriers, so disabled students

could participate in the learning process (Rachmawati et al., 2022). The school provided curriculum, learning method, and special support for disabled students to develop optimally (Nurdin et al., 2024).

Inclusive was said as strategic approach in educational system which had a goal to ensure that all students with different learning abilities, backgrounds, physical conditions, and mental conditions could study in the supporting environment. This approach highlighted the equal access and support for every student (UNESCO, 2020).

In Indonesia, the concept of inclusive education was adopted from national policy such as the Minister of Education and Culture Regulation number 70 in 2009 and the Law number 8 in 2016 about disabled people. However, many schools had less trained teachers, less facilities for disabled students, and low public awareness about the importance of inclusive education (Sulistyowati & Marlina, 2021).

A research conducted by Lindsay et al. (2021) revealed that the success of inclusive education depended on teachers' readiness in modifying curriculum, implementing differentiated learning, and creating friendly classroom environment. Inclusive teachers had to be sensitive to every student's need, have good skill in utilizing learning media, and have flexible pedagogical approach.

One of challenges in inclusive education was to provide support services such as therapists, counselors, and shadow teachers. Most schools had not provided those services, so students with mental disability did not obtain optimal learning supports to develop their writing skills.

Mental Disability

Mental disability was individual condition that influenced their abilities to think, understand, and have social-emotional interactions (Willner et al., 2020). This condition could hinder a person in daily activities, including learning, working, or fostering good social relationships. Mental disability could be congenital or develop over time because of environmental factors, genetics, or psychological trauma (Widodo et al., 2018).

Mental disability was not moral weakness or personal failure. This was medical and psychological condition which required holistic understanding and treatments. An inclusive and non-discriminatory perspective was crucial to increase the quality of life for people with mental disability (Handayani et al., 2023). Therefore, it was important for families, healthcare professionals, and the government to create supports the participation of disabled people in social life (Hutasoit et al., 2024).

Disability became a hot topic which referred to individual condition that needed assistance because of physical impairments. Mental disability or intellectual disability was characterized by significant limitations in intellectual and adaptive behavior which impacted daily life. This category included delays in cognitive development, social barriers, and difficulties in developing academic skills such as reading, writing, and arithmetic skills (Association, 2018). In Indonesian education, mental disability had been stated in national policy through the Law number 8 in 2016 about disabled people that emphasized children's right to obtain appropriate education. The Minister of Education and Culture Regulation also stated the importance of inclusive education; However its implementation faced challenges at the school level (Nuryadi, 2020).

Disability was people who had physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments for a long period, so it could hinder their effective and equal participation in society. According to John C. Maxwell, disabled people had abnormality that disturbed their activities (Sugiono et al., 2014). People with disability had limitations, so they found difficulties in their daily life. Moreover, they had obstacles in developing themselves and interacting with others. Therefore, they needed others' assistances to carry out their activities (Rydzewska, 2021).

Mental disability referred to conditions with limited intellectual development which affected cognitive and adaptive behavior. According to DSM-5 TR (Association, 2018), mental disability was classified based on IQ levels and adaptive abilities (mild, moderate, severe, and profound). Students with disability had limitations in conceptual understanding, abstract thinking, social skill, and communicating. Students with mental disability required learning approach that was appropriate for them. They tended to learn slowly, have more repetition, and easily distracted. Graham et al. (2018) argued that in learning to write, students with mental disability needed direct assistances, explicit learning strategy, and visual learning method.

In Indonesia, Special School was an educational institution that served students with mental disability. However, they could study in general schools with inclusive education that conducted learning modification. The main challenge was the limitation of teachers, learning materials, and collaboration between stake holders

(Moriña, 2017). The explicit strategy, repeated practices, the use of images, and implementation of technological media were effective to support writing skills of students with mental disability. Gillespie Rouse et al. (2022) emphasized the positive feedbacks and scaffold in the writing process to improve motivation and learning outcomes.

The society underestimated disabled people. They thought that disabled people had physical and mental limitations that became national burden. This opinion appeared because it had been instilled in Indonesian, for example, when there was a disabled person in a family, he would be hidden inside the house, forbidding him from socializing and pursuing education. This condition disturbed his mental health. Many people with disabilities faced difficulties in looking for a job, accessing internet, and achieving education (Srasuebkul et al., 2021).

Method

Research Design

This study was qualitative research design in form of case study. This design was chosen to obtain deep understanding about the experiences of students with mental disability in learning to write and identify the factors causing difficulties in mastering writing skills. Case study was relevant because it enabled the researchers to explore the phenomena in real life. According to (Yin & Campbell, 2018), case study was appropriate to answer the questions “why” and “how” in a complex phenomenon.

Case study was conducted in Indonesian subject at Special School in Kudus Regency, Central Java, Indonesia. This study involved 4 Special Schools. Case study was relevant to respond questions which needed in-depth description of social phenomenon. In this study, the researchers implemented case study because the research sites were several different schools. This study involved 40 students and 4 teachers.

This study was focused in Special Schools at Kudus Regency, Central Java, Indonesia that was conducted on April to August 2025. The total respondents were 40 students and 4 teachers from 4 Special Schools, namely *Sekolah Luar Biasa Purwosari*, *Sekolah Luar Biasa Kaliwungu*, *Sekolah Luar Biasa Cendono*, and *Sekolah Luar Biasa Swasta Sunan Muria*. The students had mental disability in Senior High School level.

Data was collected using observations, interviews, concentrated discussions, questionnaires, and documentations. Observation was conducted in the writing class to identify the students' direct obstacles. The teachers, students, and parents were interviewed to investigate their perceptions on students' challenges and their efforts to overcome it. The concentrated discussion was conducted to investigate the factors causing difficulties in mastering writing skills. The documentations of students' hand writings were analysed to identify error patterns and linguistics aspects. The questionnaire was utilized to obtain information needed. Triangulation technique was implemented to ensure data validity and reliability (Moleong, 2021).

Data was analysed using stages of data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusion. The data from observation and interview were transcribed and coded based on categories of difficulty and causal factors. The analysis was conducted using the approach from Miles and Huberman (2020) to obtain pattern and theme of collected data. The researchers also conducted member checking to ensure the data interpretation was accurate and appropriate.

Result and Discussion

Results of this study are explained into two components, namely (a) difficulties / challenges faced by students with mental disability in learning to write, (b) factors causing the difficulties of students with mental disability in learning to write

Challenges Faced by Students with Mental Disability

A research on challenges of students with mental disability is started by a closed question about the perceptions of students with mental disability on the material of Indonesian subject in inclusive schools. Based on students' responses, it can be concluded that they find challenges / difficulties in understanding the material, writing sentences, and simple paragraphs. Moreover, questionnaire is utilized to determine their challenges in writing sentences and paragraphs. Results of this study show that students' challenges in learning to write Indonesian language are (a) having difficulties to write structurally correct sentences; (b) their hand-writing is unclear and

illegible; (c) having difficulties to master vocabulary; (d) having difficulties to understand punctuations; and (e) having difficulties in writing correct spelling and grammar.

Students with mental disability often find difficulties to construct sentences using correct Indonesian language structure. They cannot differentiate subject, predicate, object, and adverb in a sentence. This causes their writing to be disorganized and confusing (Saddler & Asaro-Saddler, 2019). Their hand-writing is often illegible due to fine motor coordination problems. It is uneven in which the font size is inconsistent and deviates from the lines. This indicates the limitations of students' motor nervous system (Graham et al., 2018).

Students with mental disability tend to be difficult in memorizing and using appropriate words. Limited vocabulary causes difficulty to construct meaningful sentences (Khasawneh, 2025). Students less understand the use of punctuation marks such as periods, commas, and question marks. As a result, their sentences are meaningless or unclear (Suwandono, 2017). Common misspelling can be in form of addition or omission of letters and errors in using affixes. Incorrect structures have also be found (Siregar et al., 2025).

Factors Causing Difficulties in Mastering Writing Skills

There are various problems in learning to write. This study has been conducted to investigate the factors causing difficulties in mastering writing skills for students with mental disability. Based on result of study, the factors are (a) students are lack of concentration in learning to write; (b) they have less exercise in writing; (c) limited learning sources; (d) there is no textbook from the government; (e) they have limitations and low abilities; (f) they forget the learning easily; and (g) there is less interaction and communication in the learning process.

Students' short attention span causes them to have difficulties in following teacher's directions and completing writing assignments. Without regular and systematic practice, students struggle to develop good writing skills (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2018). The lack of supportive learning media drives students to be difficult in writing (Melati, 2023). Special textbooks for disabled students are rarely available, so the learning process is unfocused and tends to be teacher centered (Bryant & Hemsley, 2024).

Limited intellectual becomes the main factor. Without appropriate learning strategy, this limitation is difficult to be overcome (Aro et al., 2019). The low short-term memory makes it difficult for students to remember the learning material and apply it in writing. Lack of two-way communication between teacher and students causes students' writing skills to be low.

Conclusion

Based on results and findings of this study, it can be concluded that challenges faced by students with mental disability in learning to write Indonesian language are (a) having difficulties to write structurally correct sentences; (b) their hand-writing is unclear and illegible; (c) having difficulties to master vocabulary; (d) having difficulties to understand punctuations, and (e) having difficulties in writing correct spelling and grammar. In learning to write for students with mental disability, the factors causing those challenges are (a) students are lack of concentration in learning to write; (b) they have less exercise in writing; (c) limited learning sources; (d) there is no textbook from the government; (e) they have limitations and low abilities; (f) they forget the learning easily; and (g) there is less interaction and communication in the learning process.

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Conflicts of Interest

The Authors declare no conflict of interest.

Disclaimer Statement

This manuscript is not part of a thesis or dissertation for any degree.

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Authorship and Level of Contribution

All authors have participated in writing this article, starting from organizing idea, creating concept, conducting literature review, collecting data, writing manuscript, revising it, and approving final manuscript.

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