

Fostering Adaptive Behavior in Students at Risk of Mild Intellectual Disabilities Through the Role of Homeroom Teachers at Public Junior High Schools in Kaubun District (A Case Study at Kaubun Public Junior High School No. 3)

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ABSTRACT

The current implementation of adaptive behavior training for students at risk of mild intellectual disabilities at SMP Negeri 3 Kaubun remains suboptimal due to the absence of specialized support teachers. This study was motivated by the importance of adaptive behavior training in enabling students with mild intellectual disabilities to function more independently in their daily lives within the school environment. The study examined how the school fostered adaptive behavior through the role of homeroom teachers in addressing students' cognitive and social limitations. A qualitative case study approach was employed. Data were collected from three key informants—the parents, the homeroom teacher, and the school principal—through observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. Data were analyzed using an interactive qualitative analysis model comprising data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings revealed three main results: students experienced difficulties in processing complex explanations and demonstrated limited social interaction; homeroom teachers implemented seven adaptive strategies, including classroom responsibility agreements, attendance-based rewards, and empathetic communication; and parents reported that their children interacted less socially at home but consistently completed their homework. The study concluded that homeroom teachers played a crucial role in fostering adaptive behavior through structured routines and active school–parent collaboration. However, the lack of inclusive educational infrastructure, limited specialized training, and persistent social stigma remained significant barriers requiring systematic policy intervention.

INTRODUCTION

Education is the right of every citizen, as mandated by Article 31 of the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia and Article 5 of Law Number 20 of 2003 on the National Education System, which affirm that education must be provided for all children, including children with special needs (Anak Berkebutuhan Khusus [ABK]) and typically developing children. Educational services for ABK may be provided through Special Needs Schools (Sekolah Luar Biasa [SLB]) or inclusive schools, which accommodate all students within the same learning environment (Alsabilah et al., n.d.; Isnawati et al., 2025; Maryanti et al., 2021; Wahyudi & Masuwd, 2024; Wahyuningtyas & Suprihatiningrum, 2023). Regulation of the Minister of National Education Number 70 of 2009 further emphasizes that inclusive education is an educational service system that provides equal learning opportunities for all

students, including those with disabilities or exceptional potential, alongside their peers in regular schools. Baharun and Awwaliyah (2018) explained that inclusive education aims to minimize barriers to children's growth and development, prevent temporary developmental limitations from becoming permanent disabilities, and reduce the emergence of additional limitations resulting from primary disabilities.

Children at risk of mild intellectual disabilities are among the groups of children with special needs who are generally able to socialize and perform daily activities but still require supervision and educational support. This condition is characterized by cognitive abilities that can develop through structured, concrete, and repetitive learning, with intellectual functioning typically corresponding to an IQ of approximately 55–70. Consequently, these students require curriculum modifications, individualized support, and gradual instructional strategies to promote functional independence (Ministry of Education, Research, and Technology, 2022). Pratika, as cited by B. Nugroho and Hastuti (2024), identified three indicators of intellectual disabilities: below-average intellectual functioning, deficits in adaptive behavior that limit age-appropriate functioning, and developmental delays occurring before the age of 18. Adaptive behavior refers to an individual's ability to meet the demands of everyday life and interact effectively within the social environment (American Association on Mental Deficiency, 1983; Sattler, 1992), making it a fundamental competency for all students, particularly those at risk of mild intellectual disabilities.

The preliminary problem identified by the researchers at SMP Negeri 3 Kaubun was the absence of a Special Guidance Teacher (Guru Pendamping Khusus [GPK]) and a guidance and counseling (Bimbingan dan Konseling [BK]) teacher, resulting in suboptimal assessment of students' abilities and the lack of a formal inclusive education policy. Since 2025, the school has assigned two teachers to pursue further studies in special education to support the East Kutai Regency Education Office's initiative to develop inclusive schools. Initial observations during the first semester identified a student at risk of mild intellectual disabilities who experienced difficulties interacting with peers, often sat alone, and understood only simple instructions. However, by the middle of the second semester, the student demonstrated notable improvements in adaptive behavior, including increased interaction with classmates during recess, willingness to serve as a ceremony officer, confidence in leading group prayers, and improved academic performance. These positive changes appeared to be closely associated with the homeroom teacher's efforts to establish classroom agreements that promoted a safe and supportive learning environment while maintaining active communication with the student's parents (Adam & Benoliel, 2025; Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; Kasor, 2026; Moshel & Berkovich, 2025; Palupy & Sauri, 2025; Zhang & He, 2025).

Unlike homeroom teachers at the elementary school level, junior high school homeroom teachers do not accompany students throughout the school day because instruction is delivered by subject teachers. Consequently, homeroom teachers interact with students only during the classes they teach and on specific occasions outside instructional hours. This organizational structure makes the role of homeroom teachers in managing student development particularly important and worthy of investigation, especially because studies examining how junior high school homeroom teachers foster adaptive behavior among students at risk of mild intellectual disabilities remain limited.

Several recent studies have investigated teachers' contributions to the development of adaptive behavior and independence among students with intellectual disabilities. Fadhly et al. (2026) explored adaptive communication between teachers and students with intellectual disabilities at SLBN 8 Jakarta using a qualitative case study involving three teachers, three eighth-grade students, and one senior teacher as an expert informant. Data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña. The study found that teachers predominantly employed convergence communication strategies, including concise verbal instructions, task segmentation, repetition of key concepts, confirmation of student understanding, demonstrations, gestures, and positive reinforcement. These strategies contributed to improvements in students' functional independence in initiating tasks, following work sequences, and completing activities independently.

These findings are consistent with those of Apriati (2021), who examined the implementation of learning for eighth-grade students with intellectual disabilities at SMPN 191 West Jakarta using a qualitative narrative approach with Special Guidance Teachers (Guru Pendamping Khusus [GPK]) as participants. The study found that the school implemented an Individualized Learning Program (Program Pembelajaran Individual [PPI]) supported by life-skills training, instructional adaptations, and effective collaboration between classroom teachers and GPKs. These interventions contributed to improvements in both academic and non-academic outcomes among students with special needs. Together, these studies demonstrate that successful support for students with mild intellectual disabilities at the junior high school level depends on consistent communication, structured mentoring strategies, and effective collaboration between schools and families.

Although these studies provide valuable insights into the role of educators in supporting students with mild intellectual disabilities, several limitations remain. Fadhly et al. (2026) conducted their research in a Special Needs School (Sekolah Luar Biasa [SLB]), where all students have special needs and receive continuous teacher support throughout the school day. Consequently, the communication strategies identified in that context may not be directly applicable to inclusive mainstream schools, where students with mild intellectual disabilities learn alongside typically developing peers and interact with teachers for more limited periods. Moreover, the study focused primarily on classroom communication and did not examine how teachers support students' adaptive behavior in broader social contexts, such as peer interactions outside formal learning activities.

Similarly, Apriati's (2021) study focused on schools equipped with Special Guidance Teachers (GPKs) and established inclusive education facilities. It did not address schools lacking GPKs or guidance and counseling teachers, as was the case at SMP Negeri 3 Kaubun. Furthermore, both studies were conducted in Jakarta, where special education resources are relatively well developed, limiting their applicability to schools in regions with fewer educational resources, such as Kaubun District, East Kutai Regency. In addition, little research has specifically examined the role of junior high school homeroom teachers, who interact with students only during scheduled instructional periods rather than throughout the school day, in fostering adaptive behavior among students at risk of mild intellectual disabilities. This gap is particularly evident in relation to establishing classroom agreements and strengthening communication with parents in schools that have not yet formally implemented inclusive education policies.

Based on these considerations, this study addressed three primary issues: the incomplete implementation of inclusive education, the limited social interaction of students at risk of mild intellectual disabilities, and the suboptimal development of adaptive behavior resulting from the absence of specialized support teachers. The study aimed to examine the characteristics of students at risk of mild intellectual disabilities at SMP Negeri 3 Kaubun, identify the adaptive behavior development strategies implemented by homeroom teachers, and explore the challenges encountered during the implementation process. Theoretically, the findings contribute to the development of knowledge on inclusive education at the junior high school level and provide a reference for future research. Practically, the study offers guidance for schools in implementing adaptive behavior development programs, assists parents in aligning home-based support with school initiatives, and provides evidence for policymakers and researchers interested in strengthening inclusive education practices.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design to examine the development of adaptive behavior among students at risk of mild intellectual disabilities. The research was conducted at SMP Negeri 3 Kaubun, Cipta Graha Village, Kaubun District, East Kutai Regency, from January to July 2026.

Data were collected from three key informants: one parent of a student at risk of mild intellectual disabilities, one homeroom teacher, and the school principal. Data collection methods included in-depth interviews, structured classroom observations, and document analysis. The reviewed documents included student records, teacher records, the Educational Unit Operational Curriculum (Kurikulum Operasional Satuan Pendidikan [KOSP]), school planning documents, school–parent communication records, and activity documentation.

Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured format following the procedures described by Sugiyono (2020). The principal was interviewed regarding school policies, student characteristics, and challenges in fostering adaptive behavior. The homeroom teacher provided information on students' adaptive behavior, instructional strategies, and implementation challenges, while the parent described the student's adaptive behavior in the home and community environments.

Data credibility was established through source triangulation and method triangulation by comparing information obtained from interviews, observations, and document analysis. Data were analyzed using an interactive qualitative analysis model consisting of data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing to identify student characteristics, homeroom teachers' adaptive behavior development strategies, and the challenges encountered during implementation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Adaptive Behavioral Status of Students at Risk for Mild Intellectual Disabilities

Observations and interviews revealed that students were not yet fully autonomous in navigating daily routines that, for teenagers their age, were considered elementary. Activities such as preparing study materials according to schedule, managing pocket money, and wearing uniforms according to the daily rules still required repeated verbal prompting from the homeroom teacher, not because of resistance, but because of the difficulty of translating multi-

step instruction sequences into concrete actions. The fundamental problem lies in the gap between the ability to process abstract language and the demands of the complex junior high school environment. When teachers delivered complex instructions, for example asking students to discuss observational findings and then prepare presentation materials, students entered a state referred to in this study as cognitive freezing : falling silent, staring blankly, and then returning to solitary activities such as doodling. However, when the same instructions were broken down into concrete, numbered steps, students demonstrated straightforward execution, confirming that the barrier experienced was not one of intention but rather one of information processing.

In the functional academic domain, students are able to copy neatly but have difficulty drawing conclusions, inferring, or connecting two concepts, for example when working on math story problems that require language analysis, identifying arithmetic operations, and simultaneously ignoring distracting information. As a result, self-monitoring behaviors such as double-checking answers are almost never observed. In the social domain, students' communication is reduced. They have a vocabulary sufficient for basic needs but have difficulty taking turns speaking in a group, reading body language, or understanding sarcasm, so they tend to only interact with one or two friends who speak slowly and articulate clearly. Behaviors that are often misinterpreted as "childish" by peers are actually compensatory strategies to fill the gap in social navigation when students do not understand the implicit rules of the game. This fragility of adaptive behavior is rooted in executive function deficits, namely difficulties in task initiation , sustained attention , and cognitive flexibility . So when reprimanded for violating rules they do not yet understand, the response that appears is freezing or crying, rather than negotiation or clarification.

Students' daily living skills are partial: they can put on their own shoes but cannot decide on appropriate shoes for sports or ceremonies without prior guidance; they can shop in the cafeteria but have difficulty calculating change for large bills; they can walk to the library but are confused about the process of borrowing books. There is a missing link between knowing "what" and understanding "how" and "when," so their independence is incomplete. Students' adaptive behavior is also tested most severely when faced with disruptions such as sudden schedule changes or substitute teachers, which trigger acute anxiety due to the lack of cognitive flexibility to adapt without rehearsed scenarios. On the other hand, students demonstrate areas of strength such as extraordinary persistence when working on tasks with familiar patterns, compliance, rarely arguing, and strong loyalty to routines and close friends. These compliance, persistence, and loyalty become modalities of adaptive behavior that can anchor teacher development. Overall, the student's adaptive behavior is in a "developing with assistance" state: not yet fully independent, but able to function if instructions are translated, broken down into concrete steps, and accompanied, so that his service needs are not a special curriculum but rather a "curriculum bridge" in the form of simplified language, visualization of steps, trained peer mentoring, and tolerance for different learning paces. This student's compliance, persistence, and minimal discipline problems confirm that he is not looking for trouble, but rather lost in a maze of instructions that are too complex for his information processing capacity. This finding has important implications for school services: the student's need is not simply a separate special curriculum, but a curriculum bridge in the form of simplified instructional language, visualization of work steps, trained peer mentoring, and tolerance for

different learning paces, so that the student is not perpetually trapped in the stigma of "slow" or "childish."

Homeroom Teacher Strategies in Fostering Adaptive Behavior

Based on in-depth interviews with the homeroom teacher of class VII of SMP Negeri 3 Kaubun, seven main strategies were found to be implemented in a structured, contextual, and repetitive manner:

First, maintaining the neatness and cleanliness of the classroom through a daily duty agreement; unlike other classes that leave the group assignment to the class leader, the homeroom teacher at this school is directly involved in dividing the duty groups equally between boys and girls, while also mixing students with potential learning obstacles with friends who are cognitively and emotionally intelligent, thus gradually opening up the side of peer group solidarity.

Second, providing additional value for discipline is present as a reinforcement of the personality of diligent learners, while also showing that school is not only a place for formal learning but also a place for learning while playing.

Third, provide support for students to sharpen their understanding by asking questions directly to subject teachers who best align with their preferred communication style, whether they use two-way or one-way communication. Fourth, cultivate the habit of setting aside pocket money for class tuition without coercion; interestingly, students at risk of intellectual disabilities actually demonstrate sincerity by paying their tuition earlier than regular students, who pay closer to the end of the semester.

Fifth, implement a rotation system for ceremony officers carefully, considering the risk of " blunders " such as nervousness or holding the flag incorrectly can trigger serious social injuries and even potential bullying from other classes; teachers anticipate this by emphasizing the principle that trying is better than not at all and that every ability is acquired through a gradual learning process. Sixth, build communication based on the principle of empathy to create a sense of mutual respect and a sense of security among students with different abilities.

Seventh, establish active communication with parents or guardians regarding the progress of school assignments, including coordinating with subject teachers to maintain facial expressions, because students at risk of mild intellectual disabilities often misunderstand a teacher's stern face as a sign of anger. These seven strategies demonstrate a holistic and systematic approach, focusing not only on academic modification but also on engineering the social, emotional, and communicative environment, with the essence of translating the complex and implicit world of junior high school into a structured, predictable, and psychologically safe world for students at risk of mild intellectual disabilities.

Table 1. Summary of Adaptive Behavior Development Strategies by Homeroom Teachers

No.	Strategy	Short Description
1	Class cleaning duty	Teachers are directly involved in dividing daily duty groups equally and mixing students with various abilities.
2	The added value of discipline is present	Attendance discipline is given additional value as positive reinforcement.
3	Support asking subject teachers	Students are encouraged to ask the subject teacher whose communication style best suits them.

4	Class cash contribution	Students are accustomed to setting aside pocket money voluntarily without coercion.
5	It's the turn of the ceremony officer	The turn-taking system is carefully implemented to foster courage without triggering social wounds.
6	Empathy-based communication	Interactions are built so that students feel safe and valued amidst diverse abilities.
7	Active communication with parents	The homeroom teacher coordinates student development and the expression of communication between subject teachers and parents.

Source: Author's compilation from in-depth interview results with the homeroom teacher of class VII at SMP Negeri 3 Kaubun, East Kutai Regency (January–July 2026)

Barriers to Adaptive Behavior Development

According to parents, children tend to be less social at home compared to their interactions at school, preferring to hang out with younger children. Children also tend to choose only a few specific friends and ignore others, for various reasons: shyness and an inability to socialize with hedonistic groups (showing off expensive items), a consumerist culture of groups that spend excessively on snacks while neglecting financial contributions, groups that frequently lie to parents, and groups that frequently blame and gossip. These findings suggest that fostering adaptive behavior by homeroom teachers requires systematic collaboration with families and the social environment to ensure consistency across settings, both at school and at home. The findings regarding students' difficulty understanding complex instructions align with research (Sätälä et al., 2022) on 651 children and adolescents with borderline intellectual functioning, which showed significant declines in verbal-visual memory processing, executive function, and working memory as task complexity increased. However, that study focused on psychometric data and retrospective medical records without directly observing students' behavior in the classroom. This research fills this gap by capturing and naming the concrete phenomenon of cognitive freezing and its behavioral markers, and demonstrating through direct observation that decomposing instructions into numbered steps can shift students' state from frozen to straightforward execution.

Regarding daily living skills, research (FT Nugroho et al., 2024) shows that a daily habituation approach through repetition and consistency is effective in increasing the independence of children with special needs, but the evaluation tends to focus on quantitative scores of independence in general. This study offers added value by revealing in detail that the subjects' life skills are not absent, but rather inconsistent; the core problem is not in the implementation of the action ("what") but rather in the missing link between knowing "what" and understanding "how" and "when" a skill should be used. Compared to research (Clarisa et al., 2023) which emphasizes learning environment adjustments, simple instructions, and consistent routines as general strategies for teachers with children with intellectual disabilities, this study provides tactical details on how adaptive behavior is built through inclusive and collaborative micro-routines, such as duty agreements, added discipline value, cash contributions, ceremony officer rotations, and cross-subject teacher support, which have not been widely explored in detail in previous research.

Meanwhile, research (Ramoply & Bua, 2021) at the Dharma Wanita Special School in Makale found that homeroom teachers had difficulty understanding the learning characteristics of students with intellectual disabilities, particularly regarding attention spans, comprehension,

and vocabulary limitations, but were still limited to the context of school learning. This study fills this gap by focusing on barriers that occur outside the academic context, namely children's social interactions at home and with peers, thus emphasizing the need for systematic collaboration between homeroom teachers, families, and the social environment to maintain consistent development of adaptive behavior. Overall, these four comparisons confirm that the main contribution of this study lies in the in-depth description of micro-behaviors obtained through direct classroom observations and in-depth interviews with three informants (the principal, homeroom teacher, and parents). This allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how the cognitive and social conditions of students at risk of mild intellectual disabilities interact with the homeroom teacher's concrete daily strategies, as well as how barriers at home influence the sustainability of development carried out at school.

A review of previous research reveals clear distinctions, and this study has three major limitations. First, the limited subject area, as the case study approach focused on only one student at risk for mild intellectual disability in one school, does not fully reflect the full range of adaptive behavior challenges in the broader population. Second, the limited generalizability of the theory, as the findings are closely tied to the geographic context, rural socio-cultural context, and policies of SMP Negeri 3 Kaubun, cannot be directly applied to other schools with different inclusion systems and facilities. Third, the study's timeframe was limited, covering only one academic period, while the formation of adaptive behavior is inherently a longitudinal process that requires years of observation to ensure consistent, long-term changes in student character. The implications of this study's findings also emphasize that the role of the homeroom teacher cannot stand alone as a mere administrative figure, but must serve as a bridge between the values instilled in the school and the habits prevailing at home. Synergy between the homeroom teacher and parents is key to transforming development principles into concrete, empathetic, and applicable social habits for students at risk for mild intellectual disability, ensuring that the continuity of adaptive behavior development does not cease once the student leaves the school environment.

CONCLUSION

Students at risk of mild intellectual disabilities required more time to process complex explanations, making the use of simple, clear, and coherent instructional language essential. Socially, they tended to withdraw, were selective in forming friendships, and often exhibited behaviors perceived as immature, which sometimes discouraged their peers from interacting with them. In response, homeroom teachers played a crucial role by implementing seven adaptive strategies: establishing classroom responsibility through daily cleaning duties, recognizing consistent attendance, encouraging students to ask subject teachers questions, promoting responsibility through routine class contributions, rotating ceremony officer assignments, fostering empathetic communication, and maintaining active collaboration with parents. However, the development of adaptive behavior continued to face several challenges, including limited inclusive education infrastructure, the absence of a flexible adaptive curriculum, insufficient specialized teacher training, inconsistencies in school-parent collaboration that reduced the continuity of interventions at home, and persistent social stigma that restricted students' opportunities to develop independence. These findings support the principles of inclusive education by emphasizing that adaptive behavior develops through

consistent practice, structured routines, and supportive learning environments rather than occurring naturally. They also reinforce the understanding that students with mild intellectual disabilities require individualized instructional approaches, simplified communication, and appropriate environmental adaptations. The collaboration between homeroom teachers and parents emerged as a critical factor in translating these principles into meaningful and sustainable improvements in students' adaptive behavior.

Based on these findings, several recommendations are proposed. Homeroom teachers and subject teachers should increase the use of visual and concrete learning media and implement structured peer-tutoring activities to strengthen students' social interaction and participation. School principals should prioritize regular professional development in inclusive education, collaborate with special education practitioners, and provide appropriate support facilities and flexible assessment strategies. Parents should maintain regular communication with homeroom teachers to ensure the continuity of adaptive behavior development between school and home. Future research should further explore this topic using phenomenological or in-depth case study approaches to examine students' social experiences and the dynamics of collaboration between homeroom teachers and parents in supporting adaptive behavior development.

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