Contextual Teaching and Learning for Teacher Professionalismin Inclusive Early Childhood Education

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive early childhood education requires teachers to possess professional competencies in managing diverse learner needs, yet many kindergarten teachers lack adequate training in implementing effective inclusive pedagogies. This study investigated the implementation of Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) to enhance teacher professionalism in managing inclusive classrooms at Darul Falah Islamic Kindergarten, East Kutai Regency, Indonesia. Employing a School Action Research design across two cycles with four instructional sessions, the study involved two kindergarten teachers and utilized structured observation instruments validated by expert reviewers. Data were analyzed using both quantitative methods (percentage calculations with predetermined success criteria) and qualitative approaches (thematic analysis following Miles and Huberman's framework). Results demonstrated substantial improvements in teacher implementation proficiency, increasing from 66.66% in Cycle I Meeting 1 to 86.66% in Cycle II Meeting 2, while student engagement levels improved from 53.33% to 83.33% across the same period. Both metrics exceeded the 80% success threshold by the intervention's conclusion. The iterative cycles of planning, implementation, observation, and reflection enabled teachers to progressively develop competencies in connecting curriculum content with students' lived experiences, facilitating collaborative learning communities, and employing authentic assessment strategies. These findings provide empirical evidence supporting CTL as an effective approach for enhancing teacher professionalism in inclusive kindergarten contexts, with significant implications for teacher education programs and professional development policies.

Keywords: contextual teaching and learning, inclusive education, teacher professionalism, early childhood education

ABSTRAK

Pendidikan anak usia dini yang inklusif memerlukan guru untuk memiliki kompetensi profesional dalam mengelola kebutuhan belajar yang beragam, namun banyak guru taman kanak-kanak yang kurang mendapatkan pelatihan yang memadai dalam menerapkan pedagogi inklusif yang efektif. Studi ini menyelidiki penerapan Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) untuk meningkatkan profesionalisme guru

dalam mengelola kelas inklusif di Taman Kanak-Kanak Islam Darul Falah, Kabupaten Kutai Timur, Indonesia. Menggunakan desain Penelitian Tindakan Sekolah (RTA) selama dua siklus dengan empat sesi pembelajaran, penelitian ini melibatkan dua guru taman kanak-kanak dan menggunakan instrumen observasi terstruktur yang telah divalidasi oleh para ahli. Data dianalisis menggunakan metode kuantitatif (perhitungan persentase dengan kriteria keberhasilan yang telah ditentukan sebelumnya) dan pendekatan kualitatif (analisis tematik berdasarkan kerangka kerja Miles dan Huberman). Hasil menunjukkan peningkatan signifikan dalam kemampuan implementasi guru, meningkat dari 66,66% pada Pertemuan 1 Siklus I menjadi 86,66% pada Pertemuan 2 Siklus II, sementara tingkat keterlibatan siswa meningkat dari 53,33% menjadi 83,33% selama periode yang sama. Kedua metrik tersebut melampaui ambang batas keberhasilan 80% pada akhir intervensi. Siklus berulang perencanaan, implementasi, pengamatan, dan refleksi memungkinkan guru untuk secara bertahap mengembangkan kompetensi dalam menghubungkan konten kurikulum dengan pengalaman hidup siswa, memfasilitasi komunitas belajar kolaboratif, dan menerapkan strategi penilaian autentik. Temuan ini memberikan bukti empiris yang mendukung CTL sebagai pendekatan efektif untuk meningkatkan profesionalisme guru dalam konteks taman kanak-kanak inklusif, dengan implikasi signifikan bagi program pendidikan guru dan kebijakan pengembangan profesional.

Kata Kunci: *Pengajaran dan pembelajaran kontekstual, pendidikan inklusif, profesionalisme guru, pendidikan anak usia dini*

INTRODUCTION

According to Windayani and colleagues, "the childhood period plays a crucial role in shaping the foundation of character that will influence the course of a child's future life." (Windayani, N. L. I., 2021). According to The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), as cited by Carol Scefeldt and colleagues (1998:13), "early childhood education is defined as a series of learning activities designed for children from birth to eight years of age, which can be implemented through short-term or long-term programs, both at home and in formal educational institutions." (Suryana, 2016). Susanto explains that "the goal of Early Childhood Education is to support children in developing their full potential." These talents include moral growth, religious values, physical development, social relationships, emotions, speaking skills, arts, scientific understanding, and other skills appropriate for the child's age level. In this way, it is hoped that children will be enthusiastic, innovative, and have a positive outlook on learning (Susanto, 2017).

The learning process is an integral part of education, both inside and outside the classroom (Tahir, M., et al, 2024). In order for learning activities to take place optimally, support from a supportive and conducive learning environment is needed. The learning environment here includes methods, tools, and the use of technology that help achieve educational goals (Safira, 2020). One approach that continues to develop is inclusive education, which is a way of providing education that ensures there is a place for all children without exception (Rini, 2023).

Inclusive education is an innovative approach that aims to expand children's access to education, including children with special needs (Nurfadhillah, 2021). Based on Article 31 paragraph 1 of the 1945 Constitution and Law Number 20 of

2003 concerning the National Education System, it is emphasized that "the state has an obligation to guarantee the fulfillment of the rights of children with special needs to obtain proper and quality education" (Switri, 2020). Therefore, teaching staff need to have sufficient skills to handle inclusive classes in order to create a conducive learning environment that supports the progress of each student (Farihin, 2022).

In general, the teaching profession encompasses three main roles, namely guiding, teaching, and training . Educating is related to shaping and instilling life values; teaching is related to the process of imparting and expanding knowledge; while training focuses on developing skills. These three aspects must be carried out in a balanced manner so that a teacher's responsibilities can be carried out optimally. Thus, every teacher is required to have certain skills and abilities as a manifestation of their professionalism (Anwar, 2018).

In practice, teachers face various challenges in managing inclusive classrooms (Octavia, 2021). These challenges arise due to differences in children's characteristics and learning needs, coupled with limited training and support for teachers to address this diversity. Thus, the implementation of inclusive education still requires extra attention so that in the future, children with special needs will truly receive educational services that suit their needs, while also promoting respect for diversity in social life (Nurfadhillah, 2021).

In addition, public understanding of inclusive education still shows significant differences between individuals. Even today, there is still often confusion in distinguishing inclusive education from special education (SLB) intended for children with special needs (Sopwandin, I., & Rostiana, 2024). Some people still believe that "inclusive education is only for children with disabilities." In fact, inclusive education should be provided to all children who need educational services without being treated unfairly.

The success of inclusive education programs is highly dependent on management by teachers with high competence. Teacher competence is evident in their mastery of various fields of knowledge, educational backgrounds relevant to their teaching fields, possession of certifications or training that support the learning process, and commitment to complying with professional teaching standards. Only through teachers who carry out their responsibilities optimally can this nation become a nation that is respected and valued in the eyes of the world (Windarti, 2023).

One strategy for addressing the challenges of teaching in inclusive classrooms is to utilize Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL). This approach emphasizes the importance of relating learning materials to everyday experiences, so that students can more easily understand, become more enthusiastic about participating, and have a meaningful learning experience. CTL is considered an effective method for improving teacher capabilities, especially in managing diverse classrooms.

Through CTL, teachers are encouraged to create a variety of teaching techniques that are in line with real-world conditions, including problem-based learning, group collaboration, and the use of technology that supports the learning process. These methods are designed to accommodate the diverse learning styles of students in inclusive classrooms. CTL aims not only to improve the quality of learning, but also to adapt to the needs and optimize the potential of each student, so that the learning experience becomes more inclusive, adaptive, and valuable.

Based on the researcher's initial observations, many kindergarten teachers still lack the skills to manage inclusive classrooms professionally. This is evident in

the teachers' difficulty in understanding differences and adjusting their teaching methods, resulting in learning activities that are less innovative and less beneficial. Thus, the implementation of inclusive learning in early childhood education still needs to be developed, both in terms of suitability to the needs of children with special needs and in terms of the innovations applied.

The CTL approach has great potential in improving teacher professionalism, especially in relation to inclusive classroom management. However, empirical studies that specifically discuss the application of CTL at the kindergarten level are still limited, so more comprehensive research is needed on the implementation of contextual teaching and learning in order to improve teacher professionalism in managing inclusive classrooms at Darul Falah Islamic Kindergarten, Muara Wahau District, East Kutai Regency.

METHODE

This study employed a School Action Research (SAR) design with a qualitative approach to systematically investigate the implementation of Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) in enhancing teacher professionalism within inclusive classroom settings. The cyclical nature of action research, encompassing planning, implementation, observation, and reflection phases, enabled iterative improvements to teaching practices while generating rich qualitative insights into the dynamics of inclusive classroom management. The research was conducted over three months at Darul Falah Islamic Kindergarten, located on Jalan Nuri, Wahau Baru Village, Muara Wahau District, East Kutai Regency. This site was purposefully selected due to its established inclusive education program that accommodates children with special needs alongside typically developing children, providing an authentic context for examining CTL implementation in diverse learning environments.

The research participants comprised kindergarten teachers directly involved in inclusive classroom instruction. Employing purposive sampling, two teachers with varying levels of teaching experience were selected as primary subjects, with their teaching practices observed across two complete action research cycles. Each cycle consisted of two instructional sessions, yielding four distinct observation periods that captured the progressive implementation of CTL strategies. The collaborative nature of this research involved close partnership between the researchers and participating teachers in designing contextually relevant lesson plans, developing CTL-based instructional materials, and creating inclusive learning activities that addressed diverse student needs and abilities.

Data collection utilized multiple instruments to ensure comprehensive documentation of the intervention process. Teacher activity observation sheets, structured according to CTL implementation indicators, assessed pedagogical practices including the establishment of meaningful connections, facilitation of inquiry-based learning, promotion of collaborative learning communities, and application of authentic assessment strategies. Correspondingly, student activity observation sheets documented learner engagement, participation levels, collaborative behaviors, and responses to contextual learning activities. These observation instruments underwent content validation by expert reviewers specializing in early childhood education and inclusive pedagogy, with modifications made based on their recommendations to enhance clarity and relevance. Additionally, teacher reflection journals provided qualitative insights into perceived

challenges, adaptations made during instruction, and self-assessed professional growth throughout the research process.

The research timeline allocated two weeks for preparatory activities including proposal development, site coordination, and ethical clearance procedures. Subsequently, one month was dedicated to intensive classroom observations during CTL implementation, followed by one month for systematic data analysis and interpretation. The final month focused on comprehensive report writing and dissemination of findings. Data analysis followed a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative techniques. Quantitative analysis employed descriptive statistics to calculate percentage scores for teacher and student activities using the formula $P(\%) = (f/n) \times 100\%$, where P represents the percentage, f denotes the frequency of observed indicators, and n indicates the total number of indicators. These percentages were then categorized according to predetermined success criteria: 0-58% (poor), 59-79% (adequate), and 80-100% (good). Qualitative data from observation notes and teacher reflections underwent thematic analysis following Miles and Huberman's framework, involving data reduction, systematic data display, and conclusion drawing through iterative comparison across cycles. Success indicators were operationally defined as achieving minimum 80% implementation fidelity on observation instruments by the conclusion of Cycle II, coupled with qualitative evidence of enhanced inclusive teaching practices and improved student engagement across diverse learner profiles.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The implementation of Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) to enhance teacher professionalism in managing inclusive classrooms at Darul Falah Islamic Kindergarten was systematically evaluated across two complete action research cycles. Each cycle comprised two instructional sessions, enabling progressive refinement of teaching practices and comprehensive assessment of both teacher and student activities. The findings presented below demonstrate quantitative improvements in pedagogical implementation and qualitative shifts in classroom dynamics throughout the intervention period.

To assess teacher professionalism in implementing CTL strategies, structured observations were conducted during each instructional session across both cycles. Table 1 presents the progression of teacher activity performance, revealing initial implementation challenges and subsequent improvements in applying contextual teaching principles within inclusive classroom settings.

Table 1. Teacher Activity Observation Results Across Cycles I and II

Cycle	Meeting	Percentage (%)	Category
I	1	66.66	Adequate
I	2	71.66	Adequate
II	1	73.33	Adequate
II	2	86.66	Good

The data in Table 1 indicate a consistent upward trajectory in teacher performance throughout the research implementation. During Cycle I, teachers demonstrated moderate proficiency in applying CTL principles, with performance improving from 66.66% in the first meeting to 71.66% in the second meeting, representing a 5.00 percentage point increase. Although this improvement reflected enhanced familiarity with contextual teaching strategies, the performance remained

within the adequate category (59-79%), suggesting that teachers required additional practice to fully internalize and effectively implement CTL methodologies. The progression into Cycle II showed continued growth, with teacher activity rising from 73.33% in the first meeting to 86.66% in the second meeting, marking a substantial 13.33 percentage point improvement. This final measurement exceeded the predetermined success threshold of 80%, categorizing teacher performance as good and indicating successful mastery of CTL implementation in inclusive classroom contexts. The accelerated improvement rate in Cycle II compared to Cycle I suggests that iterative practice, combined with reflective feedback between cycles, significantly enhanced teacher competence in managing diverse learner needs through contextual approaches.

Parallel to teacher performance assessment, student engagement and participation were systematically monitored to evaluate the effectiveness of CTL implementation from the learner perspective. Table 2 summarizes student activity levels throughout both research cycles, providing insight into how contextual teaching strategies influenced learner involvement in inclusive classroom environments.

Table 2. Student Activity Observation Results Across Cycles I and II

Cycle	Meeting	Percentage (%)	Category
I	1	53.33	Adequate
I	2	65.00	Adequate
II	1	70.00	Adequate
II	2	83.33	Good

The student activity data presented in Table 2 demonstrate a pattern of progressive improvement that closely parallels the teacher performance trajectory. Initial observations in Cycle I revealed that students exhibited moderate engagement levels, with 53.33% activity in the first meeting increasing to 65.00% by the second meeting, representing an 11.67 percentage point gain. This initial improvement suggested that students were beginning to respond positively to the contextual learning environment, though their participation remained within the adequate range. The continuation into Cycle II showed sustained growth in student engagement, with activity levels rising from 70.00% in the first meeting to 83.33% in the second meeting, achieving a 13.33 percentage point increase. The final measurement of 83.33% surpassed the 80% success criterion, indicating that students demonstrated strong engagement, active participation in collaborative learning communities, and meaningful interaction with contextually relevant learning materials. Qualitative observations noted that students with diverse learning needs showed particular responsiveness to the authentic, experience-based learning activities characteristic of CTL implementation.

To provide a comprehensive overview of the intervention outcomes, comparative analysis across both cycles was conducted to highlight the magnitude of improvement achieved through systematic CTL implementation. Figure 1 illustrates the comparative progression of both teacher and student activities throughout the research period, enabling clear visualization of the parallel developmental trajectories.

Teacher Activity Progression:
Cycle I-1: 66.66%
Cycle I-2: 71.66%
Cycle II-1: 73.33%
Cycle II-2: 86.66%

Student Activity Progression:
Cycle I-1: 53.33%
Cycle I-2: 65.00%
Cycle II-1: 70.00%
Cycle II-2: 83.33%

Legend: ▒ = Gap to 100% | ■ = Achievement | ✓ = Success (≥80%)

Figure 1. Comparative Analysis of Teacher and Student Activities Across Cycles I and II

The comparative visualization in Figure 1 underscores several critical findings. First, both teacher and student activities demonstrated continuous improvement across all four observation points, with no regression observed. Second, the improvement rate accelerated markedly in Cycle II, with both metrics showing approximately 13 percentage point gains compared to the 5-12 percentage point improvements in Cycle I. Third, the parallel trajectories suggest a strong positive correlation between teacher proficiency in implementing CTL strategies and student engagement levels. By the conclusion of Cycle II, both measures exceeded the 80% success threshold, with teacher activity reaching 86.66% and student activity achieving 83.33%. These quantitative outcomes were substantiated by qualitative observations documenting enhanced teacher confidence in differentiating instruction, increased student enthusiasm for learning activities, and more effective accommodation of diverse learning needs within the inclusive classroom environment.

The methodological approach—school action research with iterative cyclesproved instrumental in achieving outcomes. This aligns with Nilholm and Göransson's (2017) recommendations regarding practice-based research generating actionable insights for teachers in inclusive contexts. The collaborative research design, wherein teachers actively participated in planning and refining CTL implementation, embodied professional learning community principles advocated by Hornby (2015) as essential for sustainable inclusive education reform. The reflective component enabled teachers to identify specific challenges and develop contextualized solutions grounded in CTL principles, exemplifying adaptive problem-solving that Roy et al. (2013) identified as characteristic of effective differentiated instruction.

Despite encouraging findings, several considerations warrant acknowledgment. The relatively small sample size and single-site implementation limit generalizability, though the depth of observation provides valuable mechanistic insights. The three-month intervention period, while sufficient to demonstrate measurable improvements, represents a brief timeframe for comprehensive professional transformation. Longitudinal studies examining sustained implementation would provide important complementary evidence. Additionally, while this study documented improvements in teacher practice and student engagement, direct assessment of student learning outcomes would strengthen

understanding of CTL's educational impact. Future research might explore how specific CTL components differentially contribute to outcomes for students with varying types of special needs.

The findings hold significant implications for teacher education and professional development programs. First, they demonstrate feasibility of integrating CTL principles into kindergarten instruction, suggesting preservice programs should incorporate explicit training in contextual teaching alongside foundational content on inclusive practices. Second, the accelerated improvement in Cycle II underscores the value of iterative, practice-based professional development models. Educational institutions should consider adopting similar action research frameworks to support in-service teachers. Third, the parallel improvement in teacher and student outcomes emphasizes that effective inclusive education requires systemic approaches addressing both pedagogical methods and teacher professional capacity.

In conclusion, this study contributes empirical evidence supporting CTL as a viable approach for enhancing teacher professionalism in inclusive early childhood education. By demonstrating substantial improvements in both teacher implementation proficiency and student engagement, the findings validate the theoretical proposition that contextually grounded, authentic learning experiences benefit both educators and learners in diverse settings. The research extends existing literature by providing quantitative documentation of CTL's impact in kindergarten inclusive classrooms, addressing a gap identified by Recchia and Lee (2013). As educational systems embrace inclusive education mandates (UNESCO, 2020), evidence-based frameworks such as CTL offer practical pathways for translating policy commitments into effective classroom practices that honor diversity and promote equitable learning opportunities for all children.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) effectively enhances teacher professionalism in managing inclusive kindergarten classrooms, as evidenced by substantial improvements in both teacher implementation fidelity (66.66% to 86.66%) and student engagement levels (53.33% to 83.33%) across two action research cycles. The iterative cycles of planning, implementation, observation, and reflection enabled teachers to progressively develop competencies in connecting curriculum content with students' lived experiences, facilitating collaborative learning communities, and employing authentic assessment strategies that accommodate diverse learner needs. These findings contribute empirically to the limited research base on inclusive early childhood education by providing quantitative evidence of CTL's effectiveness in kindergarten contexts, extending previous studies that predominantly focused on primary and secondary education levels. The research validates constructivist learning theory principles and demonstrates that practice-based professional development yields more meaningful competency gains than traditional training approaches.

The implications for educational practice are significant. Teacher education programs should integrate explicit CTL training within preservice curricula, while in-service professional development should adopt iterative, practice-based models incorporating reflective cycles. Educational policymakers must recognize that effective inclusive education requires systemic investment in both pedagogical innovation and sustained teacher professional development rather than superficial

policy mandates alone. However, the study's limitations—including small sample size, single-site implementation, and three-month intervention period—necessitate cautious interpretation of generalizability. Future research should conduct longitudinal studies examining sustained CTL implementation across multiple sites, investigate direct impacts on student learning outcomes and developmental progress, explore differential effectiveness across various disability categories, and examine scalability within resource-constrained settings. Additionally, comparative studies contrasting CTL with alternative inclusive pedagogy approaches would strengthen the evidence base for informed educational decision-making in diverse early childhood contexts

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