

The Urgency of Inclusive Classroom Design to Support Holistic & Integrative Learning of Early Childhood Children in Ruteng Catholic Kindergartens

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Abstract. Inclusive education in Early Childhood Education (ECE) fosters an equal and supportive environment for children with special needs. This study examines the importance of inclusive classroom design in supporting holistic learning, using three Catholic Kindergartens in Ruteng as case studies. Employing qualitative descriptive methods through observation, documentation, and literature review, the findings reveal that these institutions have implemented inclusive principles, including physical accessibility, safety, sensory comfort, and spatial flexibility. The designs also align with Catholic values and support teacher effectiveness. However, the study identified several obstacles and elementary deficiencies in current classroom developments. Ultimately, adaptive and sensitive classroom design is a critical component for the success of inclusive education and the achievement of Holistic-Integrative goals in kindergartens.

Keywords: inclusive classroom; classroom design; holistic and integrative learning; early childhood children

1 Introduction

As an important foundation for comprehensive child development, Early Childhood Education (ECE) encompasses various aspects of child development. Early childhood is in a critical golden age where it is crucial to receive appropriate stimulation for optimal growth and development (Arifudin et al., 2019) [1]. Minister of National Education Regulation No. 70 of 2009 [2] emphasizes that in the context of inclusive ECE, every child with special needs (ABK) has the right to receive equal, quality, and non-discriminatory educational services. Therefore, inclusive ECE institutions present both challenges and opportunities in creating an equal and equitable learning environment for all children, including those with special needs in the school. Bunga Mawar Santa Elisabeth Tenda Kindergarten, Inviolata Watu Ruteng Kindergarten, and

Sta. Clara Redong Kindergarten are three examples of inclusive schools, which accept children with various needs and backgrounds. Indeed, the number of children with special needs in these schools varies. However, based on initial observations, not all classrooms and learning facilities are designed based on inclusive principles that are friendly to all children without exception. Physical accessibility and open space planning remain barriers at Inviolata Watu Ruteng Kindergarten. Sensory comfort, flexibility, and usability are lacking at Sta. Clara Redong Kindergarten. St. Elisabeth Bunga Mawar Tenda Kindergarten still lacks a clear structure and clarity of the learning environment, as well as safety measures that support the active participation of children with special needs.

Inclusive classroom design is crucial for supporting holistic learning in early childhood education (ECE) because a safe, structured, accessible, and diversity-responsive environment enables every child—both those with and without special needs—to optimally develop all aspects of development. Fulfilling the requirements for inclusive classroom design supports independence, strengthens social interactions, facilitates emotional regulation, and provides multisensory learning experiences that are appropriate to children's developmental characteristics (UNESCO, 2017; NAEYC, 2020) [3][4]. Appropriate spatial planning also facilitates teachers' supervision, individual support, and integrated learning, enabling children's holistic development across cognitive, social-emotional, physical, and language aspects (UNICEF, 2014) [5]. Therefore, inclusive classroom design is not merely a technical requirement but a crucial foundation for holistic and equitable early childhood education.

According to the Inclusive Education Guidelines from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (2022) [6], the main principles of inclusive education include curriculum adaptation, learning strategies, and learning environments that support the active participation of all students. Meanwhile, Kartika et al. (2018) [7] in their research emphasized the importance of implementing inclusive design in designing functional, accessible, flexible, and sensory-friendly classrooms.

2 Holistic-Integrative

Holistic-Integrative ECE is an integrative activity that includes educational activities and expanding knowledge and skills for parents such as character education, health check-ups and nutritional and behavioral services, including efforts in developing early childhood through three pillars, namely parenting, nutrition and health management and educational support. The objectives of planning a Holistic-Integrative ECE program for children are: (1) empowering parents; (2) filling parents' free time with education; and (3) broadening the horizons of ECE parents (Sarinastitin, 2019). [8] These three things support each other, because people understand the holistic-integrative approach in real terms, see the implementation directly and become a learning space for parents. The arrangement of an open, friendly, and educational classroom can be used as a learning space with parents. Literacy corners, play corners, and displays of children's work become visual educational media for parents about how children learn. Parental support with the physical design of the classroom is an application of the concept of a learning ecosystem. In holistic integrative care,

education does not stop at the classroom door, but continues in synergy between home and school. Parents who are educated about the importance of mental health and emotional regulation in children will support the existence of "quiet corners" in the classroom, for example for children with special needs.

According to Asih et al. (2024) [9], the goal of implementing Holistic-Integrative ECE is to build children's character as early as possible. Building character and moral values in early childhood is done through several methods, such as habituation, role modeling, and application in teaching and learning activities. The implementation of Holistic-Integrative learning in ECE can be effective and efficient if carried out according to established procedures. This is because holistic integrative learning is designed to help children solve problems through activities that reflect events and are based on real life (Asmawati et al., 2022) [10]. Inclusive spatial design eliminates "environmental barriers" so that children no longer feel limited by their conditions. When the physical environment is supportive (supportive environment), education, health, and protection services can run simultaneously without having to separate children from their group (fully inclusive).

3 Inclusive Classroom Designing

A distinctive feature of inclusive school spaces is the stimulus space used when children with special needs cannot receive lessons in regular classes. This ensures that children with special needs continue to receive stimulation according to their needs. In the Holistic-Integrative concept, meeting the emotional needs of children with special needs is crucial due to sensory overload. For children with physical disabilities (blindness or physical impairment), the space must be able to "communicate" without barriers. The application of spatial and holistic support is crucial in Holistic-Integrative education for children. When arranging outdoor classrooms, a safe and comfortable design must be provided to facilitate stimulation and channel their energy, with an area that can serve as a warm-up before children begin activities. The design must prioritize safety, convenience, usability, and independence for children with special needs (Yusra et al.; 2019) [11].

Indoor and outdoor classroom arrangements that integrate sturdy equipment and dedicated fall zones are a form of Universal Design implementation. For early childhood education children with various disabilities, these physical elements are not merely complementary but prerequisites for safety and participation. Sturdy and strong equipment is crucial for child safety and provides sensory support for children with ADHD. Special drop zones also benefit children with disabilities by mitigating the risk of seizures, encouraging fearless exploration, and fostering gross motor skills in children with ADHD. From an Integrative Holistic Education (HI) perspective, this arrangement fulfills the Protection and Health aspects. When the physical environment is perceived by children as "safe" (through drop zones) and "reliable" (through sturdy equipment), psychological barriers to learning are removed. This allows children with special needs to achieve independence (parenting) and equal social participation.

Here, inclusion becomes an approach to building an open environment for anyone with different backgrounds and conditions, including: characteristics, physical conditions, personalities, status, ethnicity, culture of children with special needs, and so on. Arranging an inclusive classroom for children with special needs will have a

specific impact on increasing a sense of security and self-confidence, optimizing holistic development for children with special needs, reducing problematic behavior, and strengthening social interactions between children. Inclusive classrooms become spaces of healing, growth, and empowerment for children with special needs because they will develop optimally according to their potential.

4 Inclusive Classroom and School

The purpose of classroom design is to help children effectively participate in learning. In this context, inclusive classroom design is an effort to create a welcoming classroom atmosphere for both children with special needs and regular children. Here, inclusive classroom design aims to create effective teaching and learning processes and activities by encouraging early childhood to appreciate differences. Classrooms that are open to collaboration, with clear and structured activity zones, enable children to learn independently or in groups according to their individual interests and abilities (Yusra et al., 2019) [11].

The learning designed by teachers in inclusive classrooms can be adaptive, or designed to provide opportunities for all children to participate as fully as possible in classroom activities. Early childhood education teachers must be accustomed to dealing with children with varying learning levels, learning styles, strengths, weaknesses, and abilities in daily learning. Furthermore, classroom design allows teachers to devote time to developing students' abilities and personalities to address their behavior and social needs (Muttaqien, 2023) [12].

In implementing inclusive classrooms, strategy and preparation for organizing and managing the classroom are crucial. At the beginning of learning activities in inclusive classrooms, regular students and students with special needs are usually asked to sit together in a circle, but once they enter the main activity, they are allowed to choose their seating positions freely within the classroom. There is no specific layout for children with special needs. If a student with special needs suddenly experiences an emotional outburst or tantrum, the teacher's strategy is usually to slowly approach the student and gently and attentively calm them down. If the student wishes to be alone, they remain under the teacher's supervision but remain in the same classroom. Children with special needs are not permitted to leave the classroom without supervision from a teacher or school staff. Therefore, in setting up the classroom, teachers must be very careful and focused on teaching all students, whether special needs or regular students. In addition to teacher reinforcement, classmates must also be mentally prepared and welcoming to the presence of children with special needs as part of the class (Asih, et al., 2024) [9].

Indoor inclusive classroom settings are usually designed to fit the size and level of play equipment appropriate to the children's age. The equipment is well-resilient and sturdy, and poses no potential trapping hazards or injury from pinch points. There is adequate cushioning under climbing equipment and other fall zones. In addition to ensuring the safest and most comfortable facilities for children, providing facilities that reflect their diversity is equally important. As an inclusive school, the

indoor classroom setting prioritizes comfort, safety, and stimulation for child development.

5 Method

This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach through case study methods and literature review. Data were collected through technical triangulation, which began with passive participant observation to record the natural interactions between students with special needs and the classroom spatial environment. The researcher captured the dynamics of space use during their time at school. This process was followed by a documentation study to validate physical data with administrative data. In the context of spatial design and inclusion in Catholic schools, observations made as review criteria were: the presence or absence of special needs students in the school which was then matched with the classroom design as an answer to specific needs and an inventory of the school's infrastructure. Observations were conducted in classrooms at Bunga Mawar Santa Elisabeth Kindergarten, owned by the Fransiskanes Sisters, Inviolata Kindergarten, an inclusive school owned by the SSpS Sisters, and Sta. Clara Kindergarten, owned by the Claris Sisters. All three schools are inclusive schools where regular children and children with special needs learn together. Scientific justification is placed on the three schools representatively because TKK Inviolata represents a formal school model that explicitly declares itself as an inclusive school, TK Bunga Mawar and TKK St. Clara represent a traditional Catholic education model that has a unique approach in classroom arrangement for children. These three schools were chosen because they are considered "key cases" that have the most prominent facilities or policies related to ABK compared to other ECE in Ruteng. Data analysis techniques are carried out through data reduction, data presentation and drawing conclusions from the Miles and Huberman model. This study is considered important to examine and describe whether the design and arrangement of inclusive classrooms can be applied in TK Bunga Mawar Santa Elisabeth, TKK Inviolata and TK Sta. Clara and how the design supports the success of the early childhood learning process as a whole.

6 Result and Discussion

The results of observations at Santa Elisabeth Bunga Mawar Kindergarten, Inviolata Kindergarten, and Sta. Clara Kindergarten show that the elementary principles of inclusive education have indeed been implemented in the schools studied, although they are still not optimal. However, several basic principles that have been implemented and refer to the concept according to Tanuwidjaja (2013) in Kartika, et al. (2018) [7] are as follows:

1. Accessible Environment/Physical Access

The availability of wide and barrier-free access paths, classrooms are accessible to wheelchairs or children with mobility impairments (Kartika et al., 2018) [7]. The results of observations regarding the Accessible Environment at Santa Elisabeth Kindergarten, Inviolata Kindergarten and Sta. Clara Kindergarten show that classrooms have paths wide enough for children with mobility limitations, there are no stairs in the classroom, and the position of furniture allows children with special needs to move around without

obstacles. Most areas are accessible with fairly wide paths and children can reach most objects/facilities. This explanation can be seen in Fig. 1:



Fig. 1. Classroom design in the context of accesible environment

2. Personal Space

The results of observations related to Personal Space in the description of Kartika, et al. (2018) [7] found that the children of the three kindergartens observed were given the freedom to choose seats and play areas according to their preferences, avoiding feelings of crowding and conflict between children. Bunga Mawar Kindergarten and Inviolata Kindergarten combine various play activities such as sensory play, constructive play and role play which can increase the participation of children, including children with special needs, because they have the same opportunity to choose and be involved. However, it needs to be criticized, the access and personal space prepared are still insufficient to support access for children with special needs in the school. The active involvement of children from positive social interactions, increased self-confidence, and courage in using ideas is done through play activities. This shows that the classroom design not only supports the physical but also facilitates the social and emotional dimensions. This explanation can be seen in Fig. 2:



Fig. 2. Classroom design in the context of Personal Space

3. Sensory Awareness

The use of soft colors, natural lighting, and the arrangement of teaching aids reduces overstimulation for sensory-sensitive children (Susilowati et al.,

2025). [13] At Santa Elisabeth Bunga Mawar Kindergarten, the spatial arrangement takes into account visual and sensory comfort with natural lighting, calming pastel colors, and the arrangement of teaching aids in areas that are easily accessible to children. This is very beneficial for children with high sensory sensitivity, such as autistic children (Susilowati et al., 2025). [13] These elements also support a conducive and enjoyable learning atmosphere, so that children feel the classroom is an interesting and safe place to explore and learn. In the observation, the sensory environment is very conducive with soft lighting, noise around the school is managed with calm colors and has a quiet corner. Sensory comfort in the classroom and school area has not been implemented optimally. The physical environment and learning materials that support inclusive education at Bunga Mawar Kindergarten, Inviolata Kindergarten and Sta. Clara is also seen in classrooms equipped with multisensory learning tools such as puzzles, construction blocks, flannel boards, and other educational interactive play tools that support play-based learning. The arrangement of furniture in and outside the classroom also pays attention to the ergonomics or safety of early childhood children as recommended by Nisa (2024) [14]. This explanation can be seen in Fig. 3:



Fig. 3. Classroom designing for sensory awareness

4. Flexibility & Usability

The layout of tables and play equipment can be changed according to activities, to support the diversity of children's learning styles (Nisa, 2024) [14]. The arrangement of classrooms in all schools, TKK Inviolata, TK Bunga Mawar and TK Sta. Clara can also be adjusted to the activities and learning models. This is evident in the spatial arrangement which is not permanent, but can be moved and designed based on needs. However, it is important to realize that the concept of flexibility and usability in the context of space according to Tanuwidjaja (2013) in Kartika, et al. (2018) [7] has not been maximized properly in the three schools. This explanation can be seen in Fig. 4:



Fig. 4. Classroom design for flexibility and usability.

5. *Safety & Safeguarding*

The layout of tables and play equipment can be changed according to activities, to support the diversity of children's learning styles (Nisa, 2024) [14]. The arrangement of classrooms in all schools, TKK Inviolata, TK Bunga Mawar and TK Sta. Clara can also be adjusted to the activities and learning models. This is evident in the spatial arrangement which is not permanent, but can be moved and designed based on needs. However, it is important to realize that the concept of flexibility and usability in the context of space according to Tanuwidjaja (2013) in Kartika, et al. (2018) [7] has not been maximized properly in the three schools. This explanation can be seen in Fig. 5:



Fig. 5. Classroom for safety and safeguarding

6. *Structure and Clarity of the Learning Environment*

The layout of tables and play equipment can be changed according to activities, to support the diversity of children's learning styles (Nisa, 2024) [14]. The arrangement of classrooms in all schools, TKK Inviolata, TK Bunga Mawar and TK Sta. Clara can also be adjusted to the activities and learning models. This is evident in the spatial arrangement which is not permanent, but can be moved and designed based on needs. However, it is important to realize that the concept of flexibility and usability in the context of space according to Tanuwidjaja (2013) in Kartika, et al. (2018) [7] has not been maximized properly in the three schools. This explanation can be seen in Fig. 6:



Fig. 6. Class design for structure and clarity of the learning environment

7. Social Interaction and Cooperative Learning

Social interaction and cooperative learning are the reasons why inclusive classroom design is important in holistic learning for early childhood, because the design of a space that allows children to interact, collaborate, and share roles has been proven to encourage the development of social-emotional, language, empathy, and problem-solving skills from an early age. At Santa Elisabeth Kindergarten Bunga Mawar, Inviolata Kindergarten, and Sta. Clara Kindergarten, the arrangement of collaborative play areas, group tables, and open spaces that are easily accessible to all children—including those with special needs—facilitate positive relationships and cooperative learning experiences that are essential for holistic development (Kartika, 2018; [7] UNESCO, 2017) [3]. Furthermore, an inclusive environment helps children learn to accept differences, develop a sense of togetherness, and strengthen the ability to work in groups, as an integral part of holistic education and character building (UNICEF, 2014) [5]. Therefore, classrooms that are designed to support social interaction and cooperation play a key role in ensuring that each child grows optimally in social, emotional, and cognitive aspects. This explanation can be seen in Fig. 7:



Fig. 7. Classroom design for social interaction and cooperative learning

8. Teacher's effectiveness and supervision during learning

Inclusive classroom design is fundamental to holistic early childhood education, as it fosters social interaction and cooperative learning essential for developing socio-emotional, linguistic, and problem-solving skills. At Santa Elisabeth Bunga Mawar, Inviolata, and Sta. Clara Kindergartens, accessible collaborative zones and group seating facilitate positive peer relationships and an appreciation for diversity among all children, including those with special needs (Kartika, 2018; [7], UNESCO, 2017; [3] UNICEF, 2014) [5]. Furthermore, an open, barrier-free, and well-organized spatial layout enhances teacher effectiveness by allowing for seamless supervision and timely, responsive support. By streamlining activity flows and ensuring visual clarity, these inclusive environments empower educators to implement integrated learning experiences that optimize each child's physical, emotional, and cognitive growth, as illustrated in Fig. 8.



Fig. 8. Classroom design for effectiveness and supervision during learning

9. Responsiveness to Children's Diverse Needs

Holistically, this is the main reason for the urgency of designing inclusive classrooms for early childhood. Flexible, accessible, and diversity-oriented learning environments enable every child—with varying abilities, learning styles, and sensory and emotional needs—to receive appropriate support. At Santa Elisabeth Kindergarten, Inviolata Kindergarten, and Sta. Clara Kindergarten, classrooms that provide various learning areas, activity options, multisensory materials, and visual and physical adjustments help teachers respond to children's development comprehensively, encompassing cognitive, social-emotional, motor, and language aspects (UNESCO, 2017 [32]; Susilowati, 2025) [33]. The inclusive approach also emphasizes that the environment must be “ready to accept children” rather than demanding that children adapt, in line with the principles of child-centeredness and the protection of children's rights (UNICEF, 2014) [34]. Thus, responsive and inclusive spatial planning is an important foundation for ensuring that every child can develop optimally according to their holistic needs. This can be seen in Fig. 9:



Fig. 9. Classroom design for responsive to children’s needs

10. Alignment with Catholic Values and Identity

Alignment with Catholic values and identity holistically also emphasizes the urgency of designing inclusive classrooms for early childhood, because a friendly, open, and respectful learning environment for every child reflects the principles of human dignity, love, and universal acceptance taught by the Church. Inclusive classrooms allow children to experience a learning atmosphere that fosters solidarity, respect for differences, and involvement in the community, in line with the vision of Catholic education that emphasizes holistic development—physical, social-emotional, intellectual, moral, and spiritual (Instrumentum Laboris; Document of the Congregation for Catholic Education, 2014) [15]. By providing safe, accessible spaces that support the participation of all children, Santa Elisabeth Kindergarten Bunga Mawar, Inviolata Kindergarten, and Sta. Clara Kindergarten help realize the pastoral mission of presenting Christian love in daily practice. Therefore, inclusive classroom design is not only a pedagogical necessity, but also a concrete form of holistic proclamation of Catholic values in early childhood education. This can be seen in Fig. 10:



Fig. 10. School design that aligns with *Catholic Values*

However, despite the strong desire of the three kindergartens above to create an ideal environment, they are hampered by realities and obstacles on the ground. These obstacles are usually systemic and interconnected. The following are practical obstacles encountered, preventing the maximization of flexibility and sensory comfort:

1) *Structural Limitations of Buildings (Architectural Heritage)*

Many of the ECE buildings above occupy old buildings or old-style schools. This lack of adequate cross-ventilation, windows positioned too high for children, or the use of permanent flooring materials (such as slippery ceramic tiles) that are difficult to convert into fall zones.

2) *Safety Standards and Sensory Aesthetics*

There is a conflict between administrative safety regulations and children's sensory needs. Safety standards often require the use of easily cleaned and fire-resistant materials (such as hard plastic or steel), which are sensorially "cold" and reflect sound (noise).

3) *Sub-ideal Teacher-to-Child Ratio*

Space flexibility requires more intensive supervision. Ideally, when a classroom is highly flexible (furniture can be moved around), the risk of accidents increases if there aren't enough teachers to monitor every child's movements. Teachers tend to choose static, rigid room arrangements for ease of control and physical safety, even though they know they're less sensory-friendly. Outdoor and indoor designs also don't blend organically; sensory zones become isolated and inaccessible to children at all times.

4) *Lack of Inclusive Design Training for Teachers*

Teachers' efforts are often not based on a technical understanding of ergonomics and universal design. Teachers often try to rearrange the classroom but inadvertently create "dead ends" or overload visual stimuli (too many posters) that disrupt sensory comfort. These efforts are ineffective because they don't address the specific needs of the types of disabilities present in the classroom.

Beyond physical design, the success of inclusive spaces must also be supported by teacher preparedness. Teachers at Bunga Mawar Kindergarten, Inviolata Kindergarten, and Sta. Clara Kindergarten have attempted to adapt the curriculum to the needs of children with special needs through individualized learning programs. Most teachers at these schools are able to adapt methods and evaluations for the children with special needs, such as the use of visual media, short instructions, and repetition of activities, as emphasized by Nuraidah et al. (2025) [16], but some have not.

As stated by Muttaqien (2023) [12], the challenges of inclusive education in Indonesia are still hampered by limited teacher training to be competent and competent in inclusive education patterns, a lack of professional support staff and uneven classroom/school infrastructure. Nevertheless, Bunga Mawar Kindergarten, Inviolata Kindergarten and Sta. Clara Kindergarten continue to strive within their limitations to be good examples in implementing inclusivity based on existing human resources.

6 Conclusion

The design of inclusive classroom layout in Bunga Mawar Kindergarten, Inviolata Kindergarten, and Sta. Clara Kindergarten or in State Kindergarten and similar schools, based on the theories studied and the inclusive design criteria applied to inclusive schools, must at least refer to functional, usable, desirable, and viable elements. The three schools have indeed implemented the principles of effective and sustainable inclusive design practically as a guideline and evaluation of the design of increasingly inclusive ECE in the city of Ruteng. The application of these criteria should be able to produce more optimal design guidelines for use by children with special needs and normal children specifically in the context of education for children with special needs in the city of Ruteng, as follows: a) Selection of classroom locations that are in accordance with land use, easily accessible, and safe for use as educational buildings. b) Building access equipped with ramps, guiding blocks, handrails, and safe movement space for users of special aids in schools, especially for children with special needs. c) Provision of inclusive classrooms that are designed flexibly, safely, and comfortably according to the characteristics of their users. d) The quality of inclusive classrooms is manifested in the lighting and appearance of the room. The implementation of inclusive design based on these four criteria in the observed school or other kindergartens is expected to address the need for inclusive early childhood education (ECE) in Ruteng, ensuring that other schools are accessible and function optimally. Accessible, flexible, safe, and sensory-friendly learning environments enable children, including those with special needs, to develop optimally. These findings confirm that the physical design of classrooms plays a crucial role in supporting the success of inclusive education in ECE.

7 Recommendations

To realize truly inclusive and Holistic-Integrative ECE services, the following matters need to be the focus and concrete actions of all related parties, including ECE unit organizers, the Church, the Government, and the community: (1) *Designing Universal Learning Spaces*. Schools are encouraged to implement *universal design for learning* (UDL), namely designing learning spaces and methods so that they can be used by all children without the need for major modifications, including children with special needs. (2) *Requiring a Holistic-Integrative Approach in Inclusive ECE*. All ECE institutions that serve children from various backgrounds (both regular and special needs) need to implement an HI approach by integrating education, health, nutrition, protection, and care services in an integrated manner. (3) *The Government or Local Education Office* is expected to provide budget support for the arrangement of inclusive classrooms, facilitate special training for ECE teachers in implementing inclusive learning and spatial arrangements that are friendly to special needs children, as well as preparing regulations or minimum standards for inclusive ECE facilities and infrastructure that are integrated with holistic service aspects. (4) *Cross-Sector Collaboration*. Kindergartens and ECE should establish cooperation and collaboration with Community Health Centers (for monitoring the health of children with special needs), Psychologists or child therapists (for accompanying children with special needs), the Catholic Church/NGOs/Donors for education about children with special

needs, financial support in the formation of special schools for children with special needs, funding for community-based inclusive schools to support ECEs that are concerned with the above issues. (5) *Increasing Inclusive Literacy in the Community*. ECEs must actively carry out outreach and education to the community so that more parents understand and support the importance of non-discriminatory inclusive education.

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