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## EXPLORING EARLY READING AND WRITING LEARNING STRATEGIES FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES IN INCLUSIVE ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

**Khairunnisa<sup>1)</sup>, Sari<sup>2)</sup>, Aris Sugianto<sup>3)</sup>**

<sup>1, 2</sup> State Islamic University (UIN) Antasari Banjarmasin, Indonesia

<sup>3)</sup>Western Sydney University, Australia

E-mail: annisa@uin-antasari.ac.id

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### Abstract

Early reading and writing skills are essential foundations of literacy, including for children with disabilities (CWD) in inclusive schools. This study aims to describe the strategies, media, and assessments applied in teaching early reading and writing for CWD in first grade at SDN Banua Anyar 8 Banjarmasin. A naturalistic qualitative approach was employed with eight participants, consisting of a classroom teacher, three special education assistants, and five CWD diagnosed with mild to severe autism. Data were collected through interviews, observations, and documentations, and analyzed using Miles and Huberman's model. The results indicate that teaching strategies were adapted to the students' characteristics, such as the TEACCH method for students with severe autism and cooperative or game-based learning for those with mild autism. Instructional media included posters, flashcards, pictures, puzzles, and videos, while assessments were individualized, ranging from simplified reading tasks to recognition of letters and numbers. These findings highlight the significance of individualized approaches, visual-audio media, and flexible assessments to enhance early literacy among CWD. The study implies fostering more responsive and meaningful inclusive literacy practices.

**Keywords:** autism, early reading and writing, strategy, media, assessment.

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## INTRODUCTION

Reading and writing are fundamental skills for understanding lessons in every educational stage. Reading involves decoding visual and auditory information through mechanical aspects like recognizing letters, the spelling-sounds relationship, and reading speed, and comprehension aspects, including understanding words, the author's intent, and content (Unruh & McKellar, 2017; Rahayu et al., 2016). This process requires readers to actively and critically interpret written symbols to relate to themselves or others, understand the text, and learn about internal and external factors (Rustinarsih, 2021). Meanwhile, writing enables students to record, retain, and express ideas, thoughts, opinions, or feelings through written language as indirect communication (Yoswanto, 2021; Dalman, 2016). At the early stage, first grader often struggle with writing their names, forming letters correctly, and maintaining proper alignment, challenges largely related to fine motor skills and visual perception abilities (Atthoriqoh et al., 2024; Farida et al., 2019).

Children with disabilities (CWD) often experience delays in reading and writing due to cognitive, emotional, sensory, and physical barriers that interfere with language processing, fine motor skills, and individual perception (Putri et al., 2022; Rahmawati et al., 2023). According to the Simple View of Reading theory, reading ability consists of two main components: decoding (the ability to recognize words) and comprehension (understanding). When children encounter difficulties in decoding, for example, due to phonological or motor disorders, their literacy skills will be hindered as a whole (Hoover & Gough, 1990). This theory explains that delays in decoding in CWD cause greater difficulties in building text comprehension, which in turn hinders their literacy development. In addition, Sensory Integration Theory, proposed by Ayres, explains that disturbances in processing sensory information also interfere with children's ability to understand text visually and kinesthetically, causing delays in reading and writing (Karch et al., 2003). Therefore, barriers to integrating sensory information play a major role in disrupting literacy development in children with disabilities.

However, literacy delays in CWD are not only caused by cognitive and sensory factors, but also by low motivation and self-esteem, which often follow repeated failures in literacy learning. Research shows that the Repeated Failures Theory explains how repeated failures in literacy can lower children's motivation and self-confidence (Harahsheh, 2021). Children who experience continuous failure in reading and writing often feel incapable, which leads to decreased motivation and self-esteem. Since early reading and writing are the foundation of literacy and predictors of future academic success (Mejala, 2024; Peixoto et al., 2023), the role of educators becomes crucial in creating stimulating environments, respecting individual learning pace, and fostering a positive attitude towards literacy activities (Medina-Hinostroza et al., 2024).

Learning to read and write, particularly in inclusive settings, requires teachers to apply strategies, methods, media, and evaluation that are individualized and flexible, ensuring they meet each child's unique needs (Fitri, 2015; Sari et al., 2024; Fritz & Harn, 2021). Interactive methods like games, songs, storytelling, role-playing, and movement-based activities can enhance engagement, reduce anxiety, and build confidence (Dewi et al., 2023; Fauzi, 2022; Gelizon, 2024). Meanwhile, writing skills can be strengthened through techniques such as the structural analytical synthesis method, syllable breakdown, graphic organizers, and step-by-step guidance (Anugerah et al., 2023; Davidova, 2024). By designing targeted strategies, selecting media, and developing appropriate assessments, teachers can make learning instruction more effective and meaningful for children with special needs.

This study has a specific focus on learning in the first grade of elementary school in the context of inclusive education, which has rarely been the subject of previous studies. The location of the study, namely SDN Banua Anyar 8 Banjarmasin, is a locally-based research setting that has not been widely explored in the literature. This study comprehensively examines the components of methods, techniques, media, and assessment in reading and writing learning for CWD in inclusive first grade.

Banua Anyar 8 Public Elementary School (SDN) is one of the oldest inclusive schools in Banjarmasin, South Kalimantan Province, having been established more than 15 years ago. Every year, this school accepts students with special needs from different backgrounds, ranging from mild to severe. In the 2024/2025 academic year, SDN Benua Anyar 8 has five students with special needs in grade 1 who have mild to severe autism. Of course, with the differences in autism among students, classroom teachers, and each CWD assistant also have different strategies, methods, media, and reading and writing evaluations for each CWD.

Previous studies on literacy strategies for children with special needs mostly focus on special schools or higher education, while research on early reading and writing learning in inclusive elementary schools remains limited. Several previous studies have only discussed general literacy strategies, such as writing and drawing skills in special education schools (Annisa, 2024; Pratama et al., 2025), ABA methods for reading (Suratmi, 2022), or general reading and writing difficulties (Nurfadhillah et al., 2022; Sukma, 2021; Supena & Munajah, 2021). However, international literature indicates that while there are numerous studies on reading interventions for children with disabilities, very few focus on writing, and almost none examine literacy interventions in inclusive elementary schools. For example, Bakken et al., (2021) and Reichow et al. (2019) found that reading interventions are effective for children with intellectual disabilities, but the effects on writing are very limited. Therefore, research on early reading and writing in the context of inclusive elementary schools for children with special needs remains a gap that needs to be filled. This study addresses that gap by providing a clear picture of early reading and writing instruction for children with special needs in inclusive schools. The study

specifically aims to examine the process of teaching reading and writing to first-grade students with disabilities at SDN Banua Anyar 8, Banjarmasin, focusing on exploring the strategies used by teachers and identifying effective approaches, appropriate teaching media and materials, and evaluation.

## METHODS

The research method used in this study is a naturalistic qualitative approach with a descriptive research design. The aim of this study is to provide an in-depth understanding of the teaching of reading and writing for children with special needs (CWD) in the first-grade inclusive class at SDN Banua Anyar 8 Banjarmasin. The research was conducted in an inclusive class involving five children with various conditions, such as intellectual disabilities and autism. A qualitative approach was chosen as it allows for a deeper exploration of the teaching practices applied by teachers and the learning environment in the classroom.

The research procedure began with an initial observation to identify the teaching practices in place. Data was then collected through interviews with classroom teachers, special education assistants, and the school principal. The purpose of the interviews was to gain insights into the strategies, media, and evaluations used in the teaching of reading and writing for CWD. Additionally, documentation of teaching materials and student progress reports was carried out to complement the data collected from observations and interviews. The data collection process spanned several weeks to ensure that various teaching sessions were observed.

Data collection techniques used in this study included observation, interviews, and documentation. Observations were conducted during teaching sessions, focusing on the teaching strategies, use of media, and the interaction between teachers and CWD. In-depth interviews were conducted with teachers and support staff to gather information about their approaches to teaching. Documentation included lesson plans, student progress reports, and teaching materials used during the learning process. These three techniques were employed to gather comprehensive data and ensure triangulation, thus enhancing the validity of the findings.

The research instruments used were observation guides, interview protocols, and a document analysis checklist. The observation guide was designed to record key elements of the lessons, such as the teaching strategies, media used, and evaluation methods. The interview protocol was structured to explore teachers' perspectives on their teaching strategies and the challenges they face in teaching CWD. The document analysis checklist was used to review lesson plans and student records to verify the alignment with the observed teaching practices. All these instruments were designed to ensure that the data collected would provide a clear picture of reading and writing instruction practices in the inclusive classroom.

In data analysis, the researcher used the interactive model of data analysis developed by Miles and Huberman, which involves three main stages: data reduction, data presentation, and

conclusion drawing. In the first stage, the collected data was reduced and categorized based on its relevance to the research questions. The selected data was then presented in the form of narratives and tables to facilitate understanding. Finally, the researcher drew conclusions based on the findings from the processed data. The analysis process was iterative, with continuous comparisons between different data points to ensure accuracy and depth in the analysis. By using this technique, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how teachers teach reading and writing to CWD in an inclusive classroom.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The assistant teacher observed each CWD to identify preferences, discomforts, sources of joy, fears, and emotional triggers, and then the classroom and assistant teachers determined appropriate strategies, media, and assessments tailored to each student's condition and abilities. Teachers need to understand the unique characteristics of each CWD and apply individualized learning approaches, accompanied by appropriate educational resources and adaptations to ensure equal access to quality education. The main objective is to increase the participation and learning achievements of all students, including those with disabilities (Haryadi & Cludia, 2021). To realize effective and equitable learning, teachers are also required to be able to adapt the curriculum and use appropriate teaching strategies (Vargas, 2024). In addition, close collaboration between classroom teachers and assistant teachers is an important factor in accommodating students' needs, enabling them to access the curriculum while obtaining the support and resources they need in an inclusive learning context (Surender, 2023).

**Table 1. Description of CWD in First-Grade at SDN Benua Anyar 8 Banjarmasin**

CWD Code	Type of Disability	Academic ability	Characteristics / Emotional Challenges	Needs & support strategies
CWD 1	Mild Autism	Able to learn like regular students, likes to count, has difficulty distinguishing between similar numbers and letters such as 9 and g, b, and d, or 5 and s, and has difficulty reading words containing the letter "ng".	Easily irritated in noisy environments, dislikes reading/writing lessons	Learn in a quiet environment, focus on math lessons, simplify reading/writing lessons according to ability, sit next to a wall covered with posters of letters and numbers, as well as educational pictures.

CWD 2	Mild Autism & OCD	Able to read and write	Has difficulty speaking (watches too many foreign cartoons), and becomes emotional easily when things do not go as expected.	Requires full assistance, avoid triggers that cause emotional distress, and explain when there are changes in activities.
CWD 3	Mild Autism	Able to read and write.	Demure, lacks attention from family, and wants more attention from teachers.	Teachers give special attention during study and break times, and personal guidance to make them feel valued.
CWD 4	Severe Autism	Able to recognize letters and numbers	Physically dependent, emotionally unstable	Sit at the back, use visual aids, a firm teacher's voice, and allow them to watch educational videos when bored.
CWD 5	Severe Autism	Able to recognize letters and numbers	Does not like sitting still for long periods of time, often emotional.	seating in a corner with a round table, learning with interesting media, a firm voice, and activities are often varied.

### Reading learning Strategies

Learning strategies are teacher approaches to help children understand content and achieve learning objectives (Kusnadi, 2018). Meanwhile, reading is the process of understanding written symbols through active observation and interpretation (Ruslan, 2023, pp. 29). CWD uses different reading strategies. Three students (CWD 1, 4, and 5) apply the TEACCH method (Treatment and Education of Autistic and Related Communication-handicapped Children) with visual aids such as posters, pictures, and letter cards. This strategy is applied because these three CWD need visual aids to understand letters and numbers. The other two students (CWD 2 and 3), who are already able to read, follow strategies similar to regular students but with emotional support and simplified material through cooperative learning, games, and storytelling.

The TEACCH method, designed for children with autism, emphasizes structured teaching that focuses on daily routines, visual information, and written communication to enhance language skills (Schopler et al., 1995). This method tailored to the needs and abilities of the students, helping them through environmental adaptation, intervention, and visual-based communication strategies (Ningrum et al., 2021; Sa'adah et al., 2022). At SDN Banua Anyar 8, teachers have implemented four TEACCH principles: environmental organization (seating arrangements and structured schedules), visual information (media such as pictures, posters, word cards, puzzles, and videos), special interests as reinforcers (using students' personal interests or pleasures as motivation), and meaningful communication (Firdaus & Pradipta, 2019). Meaningful communication is fostered through frequent conversation, paying attention, adjusting intonation and tone of voice, and supportive interaction, as in the case of CWD 5, where the assistant teacher uses a firm voice, without forcing or scolding, to maintain focus. Such strategies build engagement, motivation, and participation, improving the overall learning experiences for CWD (Pakpahan et al., 2024).

The results of the study show that reading-learning strategies are tailored to students' levels of autism. Students with mild autism use game-based, cooperative, and storytelling strategies, while students with severe autism use the TEACCH method with an emphasis on the visualization of letters and numbers. These strategies help children focus and reduce learning anxiety. These findings confirm and extend previous research on literacy instruction for CWD in inclusive classroom. Consistent with Ningrum et al., (2021) and Sa'adah et al., (2022), this study demonstrates that the TEACCH method effective in supporting reading and writing instruction for students with severe autism through structured teaching and strong visual support. The use of environmental organization, visual media, and meaningful communication was shown to reduce anxiety and increase student engagement. The results of this study also expand on previous research by showing that in mild autism, teachers can apply cooperative strategies in inclusive classrooms with emotional support.

### Learning Media for Reading

The media used in reading activities are differentiated according to CWD competence. CWD 1, 2, and 3 use visual media (posters, pictures) and audio media (teacher explanations). Meanwhile, CWD 4 and 5 use visual and audio-visual media (pictures, puzzles, letter cards, and videos). These media help introduce letters, numbers, colors, and other objects in a fun way that is appropriate for each child's comprehension level. The teacher assisting the fifth CWD stated:

*“Because the fifth CWD is not yet able to speak much, only a few words or sentences containing 2-3 words, the media used for the fifth CWD is not much different from the fourth CWD. The media used are posters, pictures, puzzles, smartphones, letter cards, and number cards. With these media, I will introduce letters, numbers, colors, modes of transportation, and so on. However, if the CWD becomes bored with these*

*media, I will use educational videos from my phone to encourage the CWD to learn again. If the CWD still refuses to use these media, I will give the CWD time to calm down."*

The media used by teachers varies, including posters, letter cards, puzzles, and educational videos. Visual media tends to be used to help students recognize letters, numbers, and symbols, while audio-visual media supports children who are easily bored. For example, CWD 5 responds better to learning when videos are used rather than just letter cards. This reinforces the view that learning media guide children's thinking processes (Septy, 2021). The findings align with Turner-Brown & Hume's (2020), who emphasize the importance of visual and audiovisual media in improving focus or attention, communication, and comprehension among students with autism.

### Evaluation of Reading

Learning evaluation is the process of collecting, reviewing, and providing data that has been analyzed to measure lesson effectiveness against set objectives (Divayana, 2018). At SDN Banua Anyar 8 Banjarmasin, reading evaluations for first-grade CWD are tailored to the material studied and adapted to each child's emotional, mental, and ability background (Selian, 2023).

**Table 2. Evaluation of reading learning for students with disabilities**

CWD Code	Type of Evaluation	Comparison with Regular Children	Adjustments
CWD 2 & CWD 3	Same as regular children, but simplified	Regular children read 6 paragraphs.	CWD 2 & 3 read 3 paragraphs; if they are only able to read 2 paragraphs, their score is the same as regular children who read 4 paragraphs
CWD 1	Same as CWD 2 & 3, but simplified	Follows the ability level	If CWD 2 & 3 read 4 paragraphs, CWD 1 reads 2 paragraphs; if only able to read 1 paragraph, the score is the same as CWD 2 & 3, who read 2 paragraphs.
CWD 4 & CWD 5	Adjusted to the ability and learning material	Does not follow the paragraph reading format	Evaluation involves distinguishing and identifying letters, numbers, colors, and transportation that have been learned.

Adjusting assessments to the abilities of CWD ensures valid and fair assessments and provides learning opportunities (Tai, 2023). Flexibility may include changes in format, additional time, or alternative test locations, as well as support such as providing a scribe for CWD with

dysgraphia (Razmjoe et al., 2023). Key considerations include social skills and teacher-parent (Sucuoglu et al., 2024), identifying unmet needs of CWD by asking for their opinions (Morgenthaler et al., 2023), flexible policies on assessment systems that accommodate the special needs of students (Davies et al., 2018), and the specific needs of CWD and subject matter (Razmjoe et al., 2023). Such adaptive assessment not only aligns with students' abilities but also increases their motivation to learn.

### Writing Learning Strategies

The study showed that teachers adapt writing strategies to the specific needs of each CWD. For CWD 1 with mild autism and fine motor difficulties, a combination of interactive writing and guided writing strategies is used with visual aids such as posters and letter or number cards placed near the student to help distinguish similar symbols like 'b' and 'd' or '5' and 's'. In contrast, CWD 2 and 3, who already have good writing skills, learn without aids but still required strategies suited to their individual conditions. CWD 2, who has OCD (obsessive-compulsive disorder), benefits from interactive writing with structured schedules to maintain emotional stability, while CWD 3, despite having fairly good writing skills, needs more emotional attention due to a mental health issue and irregular attendance, which the assistant teacher addresses through direct interaction, conversation, and personal attention.

Interactive writing strategies for CWD with mild autism are effective in increasing student engagement, while also providing them with the opportunity to practice writing independently with teacher support. These findings are in line with research (Hall, 2018) showing that interactive writing helps students explore writing activities. This also confirms the findings (Williams, 2018) that interactive writing helps children with literacy difficulties because it makes learning easier and clearer through collaboration with teachers, thereby increasing students' understanding and independence.

The fourth and fifth CWDs both have severe autism, learned through guided writing supported by teaching aids. CWD 4, who had speech difficulties and often experienced emotional outbursts, was seated separately and used letter tracing books, pictures, and cards to aid learning. Similarly, CWD 5, who spoke only a few words and struggled to sit still, was placed at a special table in the corner with the same types of aids. For both, teachers applied step-by-step instruction such as thickening letters, completing broken writing, or copying examples aligned with guided writing strategies proven effective for developing CWD skill (Zakiyah & Alvina (2019). These gradual activities reflect Vygotsky's social constructivist theory, particularly the concept of the *Zone of Proximal Development* (ZPD), which states that children will learn more effectively if they are given gradual support until they are able to work independently. The use of guided writing, step by step instruction, and continuous teacher assistance illustrates how students develop higher-level literacy skills through scaffolding before achieving independent

performance. Overall, the findings of this study reinforce the opinion that writing learning strategies for CWD requires an individualized, structured, and collaborative approach.

### **Writing learning Media**

The media used in writing instruction included letter-tracing books, letter cards, pictures, posters, and other visual aids. CWD 4 and 5, who had severe autism, were guided with multisensory media such as tracing books, broken sentence books, posters, pictures, and letter cards, and eacher explanations. When CWD 4's emotions become unstable, activities were shifted to lighter games, and if they become uncontrollable, the session was repeated. CWD 5 had similar challenges, requiring a firmer approach to manage emotions. Meanwhile, mild CWDs used simpler media, which consisted of pencils, paper, and teacher instructions supported by visual stimuli like pictures or posters to sustain interest in writing. The use of visual and audiovisual media in writing instruction underscores the importance of a multisensory approach for CWD, as they respond very well to learning when engaged through a multisensory approach (Bariyyah, 2018; Nurjanah et al., 2024).

The study highlights the effectiveness of using various media, particularly multisensory approaches, for children with severe disabilities, aligning with research that supports multisensory methods in improving learning and writing skills. For example, studies show that multisensory programs significantly enhance handwriting legibility and letter-sound recognition for children with intellectual disabilities (Cuajao et al., 2023; Schlesinger & Gray, 2017). However, the study also found that simpler media like pencils and paper were sufficient for children with milder disabilities, suggesting that not all children need intensive multisensory input. This finding supports the idea that while multisensory approaches are generally beneficial, they must be adapted to the individual's needs, with excessive sensory input not always necessary (Faruga et al., 2023). Ultimately, the study underscores the importance of selecting appropriate media based on the severity of the disability and the student's specific needs, thereby enhancing learning outcomes in inclusive classrooms.

### **Writing assessment**

Assessments for CWD students in grade one at SDN Banua Anyar 8 are tailored to each student's learning methods and abilities. Two CWD students (2 and 3) are given assessments like those given to regular students, but simplified. For example, if a regular student writes four sentences, then two sentences from a CWD student are considered equivalent to a regular student. The first CWD student was also given a similar but simpler evaluation—writing one sentence was considered equivalent to two sentences written by the second and third CWD students. Meanwhile, the fourth and fifth CWD students received evaluations that were fully tailored to their abilities. The evaluations were conducted through activities such as underlining, completing broken sentences, or writing letters/numbers mentioned by the teacher. If necessary, visual aids such as posters, pictures, or cards were used to support the evaluation

process. In essence, each evaluation was individually tailored to accommodate the needs and abilities of each CWD.

These findings align with previous research, which emphasizes the need for flexible and individualized assessments in inclusive classrooms. According to Rasooli et al. (2021), fair and needs-based assessments are crucial for providing equal educational opportunities for all students, including CWDs. The research highlights that CWD students' success cannot be solely measured by traditional academic achievements, such as writing results. Rather, assessment must consider cognitive, motor, and emotional factors. This approach echoes the previous studies on inclusive education, which stress the importance of adjusting assessment methods based on the diverse needs of students (Davidova, 2024b). These findings are consistent with Davies et al., (2018), who stress that flexible, individualized, and needs-based assessments are essential for ensuring fairness in inclusive classroom. This study reinforces the view that assessment adjustment reflect pedagogical equity rather than lowered academic standard.

The differentiated strategies, media, and assessment practices observed in this study reflect the principles of *Universal Design for Learning* (UDL), which advocate flexible approaches to content representation, student engagement, and expression of learning outcome (Rose & Meyer, 2007). Teachers actively adapted instructional methods by varying learning strategies, selecting appropriate visual and multisensory media, and modifying assessment formats to match each child's abilities, emotional conditions, and learning pace. For example, students with severe autism received structured, visually supported instruction through the TEACCH approach, while students with mild autism participated in cooperative learning and storytelling activities with emotional scaffolding. These practices demonstrate how UDL principles can be operationalized in inclusive classrooms to remove learning barriers and promote equitable access to literacy instruction. By offering multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression, teachers enabled children with disabilities to actively participate in learning according to their strengths rather than being constrained by their limitations. This finding reinforces the relevance of UDL as a practical and effective framework for inclusive education, particularly in early literacy learning for children with autism spectrum disorders.

## CONCLUSION

This study emphasizes the importance of individualized, flexible strategies in early literacy instruction for children with disabilities (CWD) in inclusive settings. It highlights the need for teachers to adapt teaching methods, learning media, and assessment tools based on the specific needs and abilities of each student. The findings suggest that a combination of visual, auditory, and multisensory approaches, along with emotional support, can significantly enhance learning outcomes for CWD. These results contribute to the growing body of literature on inclusive education, reinforcing the idea that effective literacy practices should be responsive to

the diverse cognitive, emotional, and sensory needs of students. This approach not only supports academic achievement but also fosters greater emotional and social inclusion, making education more equitable for all students, including those with disabilities.

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