



Early Reading Assessment for Children with Special Needs: A Basis for Program Recommendations in Inclusive Primary Schools

Agni Nurfadilah^{1*}; Dira Rosalia Nurkholifah²; Naurah Rahadatul 'Aisy³;
Endang Rochyadi⁴; Herlina⁵

^{1,2,3,4,5}Department of Special Education, Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Indonesia

^{1*}Corresponding Email: agninurfadilah@upi.edu, Phone Number : 0831 xxxx xxxx

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Abstract: This study aims to develop and implement an early reading assessment specifically designed for children with special needs in inclusive elementary schools. Its primary goal is to provide an adaptive foundation for designing individualized learning programs tailored to each student's unique learning profile. The research uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical method and was conducted in Class 3A of SDN 138 Gegerkalong Girang, Bandung. The study involved 24 students, focusing on one student, JN, who exhibited characteristics consistent with dyslexia. Data were collected through structured observations, teacher interviews, as well as academic and developmental assessments. The results indicate that JN experiences significant difficulties in phonological awareness, syllable recognition, and auditory discrimination, with a reading score of only 45.5%, placing him at a frustration level. However, strengths were found in visual perception and memory, highlighting the need for targeted interventions. The study recommends multisensory instructional approaches such as the Fernald Method, Orton-Gillingham, and Glass Analysis to enhance early reading skills. The implications suggest that adaptive and contextual early assessments are crucial in inclusive education, enabling teachers to design interventions that are not only effective but also humane and responsive to each child's unique needs.

Abstrak: Penelitian ini bertujuan mengembangkan dan menerapkan asesmen membaca permulaan bagi anak berkebutuhan khusus di sekolah dasar inklusi. Fokus utamanya adalah menyediakan dasar adaptif untuk perancangan program pembelajaran individual sesuai profil belajar tiap siswa. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode deskriptif-analitik dan dilakukan di kelas 3A SDN 138 Gegerkalong Girang, Kota Bandung. Subjek terdiri dari 24 siswa, dengan fokus pada satu siswa, JN, yang menunjukkan ciri disleksia. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi terstruktur, wawancara guru, serta asesmen akademik dan perkembangan anak. Hasil menunjukkan JN mengalami kesulitan serius dalam kesadaran fonologis, pengenalan suku kata, dan diskriminasi auditori, dengan skor membaca 45,5% yang menempatkannya pada tingkat frustrasi. Namun, persepsi dan memori visualnya tergolong kuat, mengindikasikan kebutuhan intervensi yang tepat sasaran. Penelitian merekomendasikan pendekatan pembelajaran multisensori seperti metode Fernald, Orton-Gillingham, dan Glass Analysis. Implikasinya, asesmen awal yang adaptif dan kontekstual sangat penting dalam pendidikan inklusif agar guru dapat merancang intervensi yang efektif, humanis, dan sesuai dengan kebutuhan unik setiap anak.

A. Introduction

Education is a humanizing process that seeks to explore and develop each individual's potential so they can function optimally in life. The way individuals receive and respond to education is not uniform, as each person possesses unique characteristics in terms of needs, abilities, and learning styles (Nadhiroh & Ahmad, 2024). Consequently, inclusive education emerges as a concrete manifestation of fulfilling every child's right to equitable educational opportunities.

Inclusive education has become a central approach in both global and national education policies, emphasizing the importance of ensuring equal rights and opportunities for all learners, including children with special needs (CWSN), to study in mainstream school environments. This aligns with the view of Yunus et al (2023), who advocate for non-segregated learning spaces that accommodate both typically developing children and those with disabilities. However, in practice, implementing inclusive education continues to face numerous challenges—particularly in addressing basic academic needs such as early reading skills.

Early reading ability is a foundational skill that supports the mastery of other subjects in primary education. At the initial stage, reading instruction focuses on helping students recognize and understand letters, differentiate and categorize them, then blend these letters into syllables, words, and eventually simple sentences (Nurani et al., 2021; Yuliana, 2017). Without adequate reading skills, students struggle to grasp subject matter, participate in classroom activities, and develop academically and socially. These challenges are even more complex for CWSN, whose developmental profiles often include specific learning barriers.

Field observations reveal that many inclusive primary schools in Indonesia still lack specific and adaptive early reading assessment systems tailored to the needs of CWSN. For instance, at SD Negeri 138 Gegerkalong Girang in Bandung, observations showed no assessment procedures dedicated to students with disabilities, with most assessments referring to general standards that overlook the unique characteristics of these learners. Interviews with third-grade teachers revealed frequent difficulties in identifying CWSN, particularly in foundational literacy, due to the absence of relevant assessment tools and limited training on interpreting assessment results for effective intervention planning. Teachers tend to rely on informal and subjective observations without standardized instruments, which often results in learners with reading difficulties not receiving the support they need to realize their full potential. Vargas et al (2024) emphasize that without early intervention based on accurate assessments, the literacy gap between typically developing students and those with special needs will continue to widen over time.

This concern is also supported by previous research. Storey et al (2020) found that early reading assessments that are insensitive to the needs of students with dyslexia and language impairments fail to support effective instructional planning. Conversely, Gökbulut & Güneyli (2019) showed that appropriate assessments can significantly improve reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition among CWSN. Therefore, the urgency

to develop early reading assessment systems that are sensitive and responsive to the needs of children with disabilities is critical.

his study offers a solution by developing and implementing a contextual and needs-based early reading assessment to serve as the foundation for designing instructional programs for CWSN in inclusive primary schools. In this context, assessment is not only a measurement tool but also a crucial component in preparing individualized education programs (IEPs).

Unlike previous studies that focused on the effectiveness of technology-based interventions or specialized curricula, this study presents a more fundamental approach through the development of the assessment system itself. For example, Panopoulos & Drossinou (2024) explored students' reading comprehension and vocabulary using electronic texts, while Saragih et al (2024) highlighted the importance of identification and assessment for slow learners without providing effective instructional recommendations for inclusive classrooms. This study contributes a novel perspective by designing an assessment model integrated with inclusive classroom contexts, one that is practical for teachers to use and capable of producing actionable learning recommendations. The model also takes a comprehensive view of child development, making it adaptable for various CWSN profiles.

Overall, this study addresses the urgent need for inclusive, valid, and practical assessment systems, particularly in Indonesia's primary education context. With the right assessment tools, teachers can obtain a holistic understanding of students' early literacy abilities and design interventions that are not only remedial but also promote the full development of each child's potential. Furthermore, this research contributes to the formulation of more data-driven and human-centered inclusive education policies.

Based on the background and problem analysis, the general objective of this research is to develop and implement an early reading assessment tool specifically intended for CWSN in inclusive primary schools as a foundation for designing more adaptive and individualized learning programs. The specific objectives include identifying relevant indicators of early reading skills for CWSN, developing a valid assessment instrument, implementing the validated tool, and formulating instructional recommendations based on classroom assessment findings.

B. Method

This study employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytic method. The qualitative design was chosen to allow the researchers to deeply understand the experiences, perspectives, and challenges faced by children during the early reading learning process. This approach enabled a more holistic exploration of the realities encountered by learners within their actual learning context (Susetyo, 2022). In this framework, the researchers played an active role in interpreting data to uncover meanings, patterns, and relationships among observed events in the field.

The procedure of this study will be presented by the researcher in the form of a diagram, as follows:

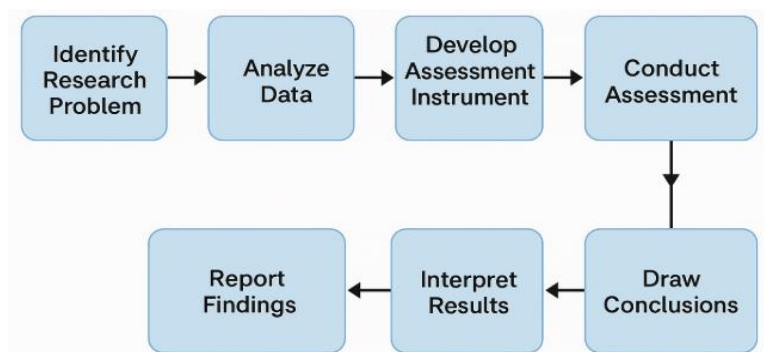


Figure 1. Research Flow

The research subjects consisted of 24 third-grade students, including one student formally diagnosed with dyslexia and one classroom teacher. The study was conducted at SD Negeri 138 Gegerkalong Girang, located at Jl. Geger Arum No.11B, Isola, Sukasari District, Bandung City. Data collection techniques included structured observations and interviews. The observation process involved a thorough classroom identification to detect students with reading difficulties (particularly dyslexia) and examined the instructional strategies used by the teacher during learning sessions. Interviews were conducted with the classroom teacher to gather information on instructional strategies, media used, teaching practices, and the types of assessments applied. Individual assessments were also carried out with students to identify those with special needs, with a focus on the dyslexic student as the primary subject for developing appropriate learning recommendations.

The research instruments included early reading identification tools for Grades 1 to 3 aligned with the national 2013 curriculum, interview guidelines, a developed early reading assessment instrument, and developmental milestone checklists tailored to children's stages of growth. All assessments were administered directly to the subjects to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the collected data. Throughout the testing process, the researchers observed how the child responded to and interacted with various types of reading materials. These assessment results were not interpreted in isolation but were triangulated with observation and interview findings to construct a comprehensive and contextualized profile of the reading abilities of the child with dyslexia.

C. Result and Discussion

Result

The child's objective condition was analyzed through a case identification phase aimed at constructing the subject's learning profile to assess individual educational needs. This step was designed to determine which academic aspects required optimization as the foundation for developing an individualized learning program. As an initial step,

interviews were conducted with the classroom teacher to gather preliminary insights before conducting a classical academic testing process.

Based on the interview with the third-grade teacher at SDN 138 Gegerkalong Girang, the class consisted of 24 students. Among them, the teacher identified three students suspected of having special educational needs – one with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), and two others who demonstrated learning difficulties, particularly in reading and arithmetic.

The interview findings were further verified through a more detailed identification process involving assessments in three core academic areas aligned with third-grade learning objectives: early reading, early writing, and basic arithmetic. These three domains were matched with the core competencies outlined in the 2013 Curriculum implemented in Class 3A. The results of these assessments provided valuable data for determining the learning profile and specific support needs of each student, particularly focusing on the case subject.

Table 1. Identification Result

No	Name	Presentage		
		Reading	Writing	Arithmetic
1	ASN	72,7%	91,2%	90,5%
2	ANI	100%	100%	95,2%
3	AZW	81,8%	100%	95,2%
4	APK	100%	91,2%	100%
5	CC	63,6%	95,8%	100%
6	DK	81,8%	87,5%	61,9%
7	HA	90,9%	95,8%	90,5%
8	HAT	81,8%	75%	85,7%
9	IFJ	81,8%	83,3%	90,5%
10	JN	45,5%	54,1%	61,9%
11	JR	63,6%	75%	66,6%
12	KTR	100%	100%	95,2%
13	MFA	81,8%	100%	90,5%
14	MAA	81,8%	100%	80,9%
15	NKZ	81,8%	91,2%	76,1%
16	QAR	100%	100%	76,1%
17	RRN	81,8%	83,3%	85,7%
18	RA	90,9%	79,2%	76,1%
19	RF	81,8%	87,5%	100%
20	RZ	81,8%	100%	71,4%
21	SNAS	100%	100%	90,5%
22	WSA	100%	91,2%	95,2%
23	WA	90,9%	91,2%	90,5%
24	ZK	72,7%	62,5%	19%

Based on the results of the academic skills identification test, two students were found to be at the frustration level, JN scored 45,5% in reading and ZK score 19% in arithmetic. These results indicate that JN's reading ability is equivalent to a first-grade level,

which means he is still in the early reading stage. Based on this finding, the researcher decided to focus the study further on JN as the main subject.

From the observations and identification conducted, the initial hypothesis formed is that JN experiences a learning barrier in the form of dyslexia (difficulty in reading ability). Therefore, a more detailed assessment was carried out specifically on the reading aspect to build a complete profile of JN, which includes his potential, obstacles, and learning needs. This profile will serve as the basis for designing an individualized instructional program tailored to JN's condition. Below is a comparison table of JN's reading ability versus the rest of the students in Class 3A, to highlight the academic gap in more detail:

Table 2. Reading Ability Gap Between JN and Other Students in Class 3A

Indicator	JN (subject)	Class Average	Gap
Reading Score (%)	45,5%	78,2%	-32,7%

Following the initial identification process, the next step involved conducting an in-depth assessment of the subject suspected of having reading difficulties. The assessment utilized instruments developed in alignment with the official school curriculum and child development benchmarks. Data collection was carried out through written tests and direct practical tasks to obtain a comprehensive picture of the subject's academic profile, with a particular focus on basic reading skills and cognitive processing abilities.

Table 3. Academic Assessment Results – Early Reading Skills of Subject JN

Scope	Score	Max Score	Percentage (%)	Category
1. Understanding of vowel language symbols	12	12	100%	Independent level
2. Understanding of consonant language symbols	9	12	75%	Independen level
3. Reading syllables (pattern-based)	0	27	0%	Frustration level
4. Reading words	0	12	0%	Frustration level
5. Reading sentences	0	6	0%	Frustration level
Total	21	69	42,6%	Frustration level

As a follow-up to the academic assessment results presented in Table 3, which indicated that JN's reading ability remained at a frustration level, a developmental assessment was conducted to identify additional supporting or inhibiting factors. This phase aimed to explore underlying aspects that might contribute to or hinder the subject's reading acquisition process

Table 4. Developmental Assessment of Subject JN

Indicator	Score	Max Score	Percentage (%)	Category
Visual Perception				
Visual-Spatial Perception	2	3	66,6%	Fair

Indicator	Score	Max Score	Percentage (%)	Category
Visual Discrimination	9	9	100%	Excellent
Visual figure ground perception	2	3	66,6%	Fair
Visual closure	2	3	66,6%	Fair
Visual Form Constancy	3	3	100%	Excellent
Visual Memory /Visual Sequential Memory	3	3	100%	Excellent
Total	21	24	87,5%	Excellent
Auditory Perception				
Phonological Awareness	13	22	59,1%	Poor
Auditory Discrimination	4	15	26,6%	Very Poor
Auditory Memory	4	6	66,6%	Fair
Auditory Sequencing	9	9	100%	Category
Auditory Blending	3	3	100%	Category
Total	33	55	65,4%	Poor

Based on the results of the assessment, a comprehensive profile of the subject, JN, was established. It indicated that JN demonstrated emerging abilities in reading and writing vowel letters, capital letters, and accurately spelling alphabetic symbols. He was also able to write his own name and visually distinguish between positions (top-bottom), shapes, colors, sizes, and objects. However, JN continued to face difficulties in reading several consonant letters, completing the full alphabet sequence in writing, and differentiating left-right orientation.

In the auditory domain, JN showed significant challenges in distinguishing final vowel sounds, identifying musical instrument tones, and recognizing variations in sound intensity and distance (e.g., loud-soft, near-far). He was also unable to perceive changes in sounds within words. Therefore, JN requires learning interventions that focus on comprehensive letter recognition, basic reading and writing exercises, spatial direction understanding, and audio-visual-based auditory instruction to enhance his ability to identify and represent sounds more accurately.

The assessment results clearly indicate that the subject, JN, exhibits specific learning difficulties consistent with dyslexia. JN's reading ability is limited to letter recognition, which places him at the early reading stage. To progress to more advanced reading levels, mastery of the four fundamental domains of early reading-letter recognition, syllable decoding, word reading, and sentence comprehension is essential. According to Johnson, dyslexia is a primary learning disorder related to written language, manifested as difficulties in reading, writing, spelling, and, in some cases, numerical understanding. This condition is typically caused by complex neurological impairments involving structural and functional anomalies in the brain (Irdamurni et al., 2018; Maghfiroh & Bahrodin, 2022).

Abdurrahman (as cited in Faizin, 2020) further describes several characteristics commonly observed in children with dyslexia, including difficulty recognizing and spelling

words, reading errors such as omissions, insertions, or substitutions, trouble remembering and identifying letters, confusion with phonetically similar words, slow writing ability, and poor concentration. JN demonstrates six out of these seven indicators, strongly supporting a diagnosis of dyslexia and highlighting the need for individualized educational planning and targeted support.

Table 5. Characteristics of Children with Dyslexia:

Aspect	Assessment		Description
	Yes	No	
1. Difficulty remembering letters	✓		When the subject was asked to read the alphabet letter symbols from A to Z, they were able to read them correctly. However, when asked to write the alphabet in sequence, the subject was only able to write up to the letter D.
2. Letter recognition errors	✓		When reading the lowercase printed consonant letter "l," the subject read it as "i."
3. Difficulty in reading and spelling	✓		The subject experienced difficulty in reading and spelling, as observed when reading consonant digraphs – the subject was only able to read them letter by letter, such as reading "ny" as /en/ /ye/. Similarly, when reading words or sentences, the subject could only read them one letter at a time.
4. Errors in word recognition (omission, insertion, substitution)	✓		The subject was still unable to recognize words because their ability was limited to letter recognition. When asked to read syllables, the subject could only read them letter by letter.
5. Difficulty distinguishing words with similar, nearly similar, or different sounds	✓		The subject made errors in distinguishing words with similar sounds. For example, when asked to identify the final consonant-vowel sound (be) in the words "Cabe, Meja, Kucing," the subject answered "Meja."
6. Difficulty concentrating		✓	The subject did not show any difficulty in concentrating, as observed during the assessment. The subject remained focused on the tasks being performed.
7. Slow writing ability	✓		During the identification phase, in the area of dictation writing, the subject wrote slowly due to only being able to identify individual letters.

An analysis was also conducted to assess whether the subject's condition aligned with the characteristics of a slow learner. According to Jeferson (as cited in Annisa et al., 2023), slow learners are students who possess approximately 85% of the expected learning ability for their age group, typically performing about 15% below average, with an IQ ranging between 70 and 85. Sukma (2021) said that slow learners generally exhibit consistent underachievement across all academic subjects. Referring to these definitions, the subject in this study does not fall under the category of a slow learner for several reasons.

1. There is a significant discrepancy between the subject's reading ability and their writing and arithmetic skills. Based on the assessment results, the subject scored 45.5% in reading, 54.1% in writing, and 61.9% in arithmetic. While writing and arithmetic fall within the instructional level, reading remains at a frustration level. This contrasts with Sukma (2021) observation that slow learners exhibit uniformly low performance across all subjects.
2. The subject's learning ability is significantly lower compared to peers in the same classroom. This is evident when comparing the subject's scores to the average percentages of students in Class 3A, which were 84% in reading, 89% in writing, and 82.7% in arithmetic. In contrast, the subject scored 72.7% in reading, 62.5% in writing, and only 19% in arithmetic. The following table illustrates the gap in academic performance between the subject and other students in Class 3A.

Based on the identified discrepancies, it can be concluded that the subject's abilities are inconsistent across different domains, with differences in reading, writing, and arithmetic exceeding 15%. Therefore, the subject does not align with the perspective of Jeferson (as cited in Chusna & Harsiwi, 2024), who stated that slow learners typically perform about 15% below their peers, nor with Sukma (2021) assertion that slow learners generally show uniformly slow progress across all subjects.

In addressing students' learning challenges, Hargio (as cited in Udhiyanasari, 2019), emphasizes that teaching should be adapted to how children with dyslexia learn, as they often perceive letters in a reversed or disoriented manner unlike typical children who have grasped the correct concept of letters. Consequently, children with dyslexia learn more effectively through visual methods. The following are several strategies that can be applied:

1. Use Engaging and Effective Learning Media
2. Boost Self-Confidence and Motivation
3. Avoid Blaming the Child for Their Condition
4. Provide Specialized Remedial Reading Programs

According to Jamaris (as cited in Primasari & Supena, 2021), reading difficulties can also be addressed by enhancing the ability to comprehend reading content, commonly referred to as *emergent reading skills*. Several strategies can be employed to support this development, including storytelling, cognitive strategies, language-based strategies, and the application of the KWL technique (*Know, Want to Know, Learned*). Furthermore, Faruq & Pratisti (2022) identified several instructional methods that can be effective for teaching reading to children with dyslexia, particularly through multisensory approaches. These methods include:

1. Fernald Method (VAKT Approach)

The Fernald Method is a multisensory teaching approach known by the acronym VAKT, which stands for *Visual, Auditory, Kinesthetic, and Tactile*. According to Hasanah et al (2024) his method aims to teach reading, writing, and spelling by actively engaging all the senses. Instructional activities include, Looking at illustrated letter cards

(Visual), Listening to the teacher pronounce the letters (Auditory), Tracing letters with fingers (Tactile), and Copying letters by hand (Kinesthetic). This method aligns with the findings of Megawangi et al (as cited in [Nainggolan et al., 2017](#)), who state that involving all senses helps children better understand the material and increases their engagement in the learning process. The learning begins with letter recognition and phonetic awareness, followed by letter tracing and simple word or sentence formation. Eventually, children are expected to read and write independently, relying on visual recognition without needing to trace letters. This method has proven effective in improving children's reading engagement and comprehension.

2. Gillingham Method (Orton-Gillingham Approach)

The Gillingham Method, also known as the Orton-Gillingham Approach, is a structured, multisensory method with a focus on synthetic phonics—the relationship between sounds and letters. The method teaches children to break down words into small units before reconstructing them into whole words. Key instructional steps include, Introducing sounds and letters using visual aids, Tracing letters or words with visual guidelines, and Pronouncing sounds while copying them. This method is particularly beneficial for children who require a systematic, step-by-step approach to reading instruction, offering clarity and predictability in the learning process ([Astutik & Minarsih, 2024](#); [Rahma et al., 2023](#)).

3. Glass Analysis Method

The Glass Analysis Method helps students identify letter clusters within words while maintaining awareness of the whole word structure. According to Janet W. Lerner (in [Khoiriyah et al., 2024](#)) "*Glass analysis is a method for teaching reading through the decoding of letter clusters within words.*"

According to [Sarajar & Pratiwi \(2024\)](#), explain that the method emphasizes both visual and auditory analysis of letter combinations. Students are encouraged to Break words into syllables or letter groups, Read aloud from word cards, Spell out the words, and Reconstruct the words by rewriting and pronouncing them. This approach is considered effective in improving reading accuracy, memory retention, and concentration. It combines phonetic analysis, repetition, and visual reinforcement to support early literacy skills.

While each method has its own unique features, they all share a common foundation: the use of multisensory learning to strengthen early reading skills in children with special educational needs. These methods are particularly valuable in inclusive educational settings, where individualized instruction plays a critical role in supporting diverse learners.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that the early reading assessment developed was successful in uncovering a detailed learning profile of students with specific reading difficulties (dyslexia). The subject, JN, demonstrated challenges in phonological awareness and auditory discrimination, while maintaining strong abilities in visual perception and memory. These findings align with the theoretical understanding of dyslexia as a neurological-based learning disorder, not one stemming from low intelligence (Irdamurni et al., 2018). Within the context of inclusive education, this result underscores the importance of individualized and needs-based assessment, as general assessment approaches have proven insufficient in identifying the specific learning needs of students like JN.

Furthermore, this study shares a strong connection with previous research findings. Saragih et al (2024) emphasized that early assessment plays a critical role in identifying learning barriers, particularly in reading, and serves as the foundation for designing appropriate instructional interventions. Another study by Hasanah et al (2024) highlighted that the use of culturally contextualized and individualized instructional methods such as visual and auditory-based strategies in dyslexia classes can significantly enhance student learning outcomes. This supports the view that assessment is not merely a measurement tool but a gateway to understanding the strengths and challenges in a child's learning process. In the context of inclusive education, adaptive and contextual assessment becomes a crucial requirement to ensure that interventions provided genuinely impact the reading development of children with special needs.

The connection between this study's results and existing theories and research also reflects a strong alignment in educational thinking. Empirical studies have confirmed the effectiveness of multisensory approaches such as the Fernald and Orton-Gillingham methods in improving reading skills in children with dyslexia (Faruq & Pratisti, 2022; Primasari & Supena, 2021). This study similarly recommends these approaches, reinforcing their relevance in Indonesia's inclusive classroom context. From theoretical perspectives to practical outcomes and proposed interventions, there is clear consistency with both national and global literature. No significant contradictions were found, which further supports the validity of the findings.

Given that students like JN possess unique learning profiles and cannot be equated with general slow learners, educational approaches must be more flexible, empathetic, and data driven. This reflects the true spirit of inclusive education not merely sharing the same physical classroom but ensuring that each child experiences learning in a way that aligns with how they learn best.

D. Conclusion

This study reveals that student JN experiences significant difficulties in early reading, displaying clear symptoms of dyslexia based on six out of seven major indicators. With a reading score of 45.5%, which falls within the frustration level, JN faces serious challenges in phonological awareness and auditory discrimination. Nevertheless, JN's cognitive potential remains strong in visual domains such as perception and visual memory.

These findings confirm that JN's difficulties are not evenly distributed across academic areas, indicating that they are not a slow learner but instead have a specific learning disability that requires a specialized teaching approach.

Intensive training is needed for teachers in inclusive schools to enhance their ability to identify and understand reading difficulties in children with special needs. Teachers should be encouraged to use adaptive and sensitive assessment tools tailored to the individual needs of students. Furthermore, it is crucial for schools to provide collaborative support among classroom teachers, special education support teachers, and educational psychologists to ensure a comprehensive and integrated assessment and intervention process.

This study recommends implementing multisensory-based learning approaches such as the Fernald Method, Orton-Gillingham, and Glass Analysis in early reading instruction, especially for students identified with dyslexia. Governments and educational institutions should promote the development of more responsive inclusive education policies based on initial assessment data. Additionally, early reading assessments should be established as mandatory instruments at the beginning of the learning process in inclusive elementary schools to ensure that every child receives educational services aligned with their strengths and needs.

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