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Integration of the Montessori Approach in Inclusive Education as an Effort to Achieve Social Sustainability: A Study at SIT AI Uswah Pamekasan

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the integration of the Montessori approach into inclusive education practices as a strategy to achieve social sustainability at SIT AI Uswah Pamekasan. Amid increasing issues of intolerance, the marginalization of children with special needs, and a growing empathy crisis in primary education, schools are required to develop a learning ecosystem that is equitable, participatory, and sustainable. The Montessori approach, developed by Maria Montessori, emphasizes child-centered learning, respect for diversity, and the development of independence and social responsibility. This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive design to explore the practice of integrating Montessori pedagogy within an inclusive setting, including learning strategies, school culture, and the dynamics of students' social interactions. Data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis, and were analyzed thematically. The findings indicate that the integration of Montessori principles into inclusive education contributes to strengthening social cohesion, enhancing students' empathy, and fostering a supportive and non-discriminatory learning environment. These findings suggest that the synergy between Montessori pedagogy and inclusive education can serve as a strategic model for fostering social sustainability at the primary education level.

[Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis integrasi pendekatan Montessori dalam praktik pendidikan inklusif sebagai strategi mewujudkan keberlanjutan sosial di SIT AI Uswah Pamekasan. Di tengah meningkatnya fenomena intoleransi, marginalisasi anak berkebutuhan khusus, serta krisis empati dalam pendidikan dasar, sekolah dituntut untuk membangun ekosistem pembelajaran yang adil, partisipatif, dan berkelanjutan. Pendekatan Montessori yang dikembangkan oleh Maria Montessori menekankan pembelajaran yang berpusat pada anak, penghargaan terhadap keberagaman, serta pengembangan kemandirian dan tanggung jawab sosial peserta didik. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain deskriptif untuk mengeksplorasi praktik integrasi pedagogi Montessori dalam lingkungan pendidikan inklusif, meliputi strategi pembelajaran, budaya sekolah, dan dinamika interaksi sosial siswa. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi, wawancara mendalam, dan analisis dokumen, kemudian dianalisis menggunakan teknik analisis tematik. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa integrasi prinsip-prinsip Montessori dalam pendidikan inklusif berkontribusi terhadap penguatan kohesi sosial, peningkatan empati siswa, serta terciptanya lingkungan belajar yang suportif dan bebas diskriminasi. Temuan ini mengindikasikan bahwa sinergi antara pedagogi Montessori dan pendidikan inklusif dapat menjadi model strategis dalam mendukung keberlanjutan sosial pada jenjang pendidikan dasar.] © The Authors.

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1. Introduction

Inclusive education has increasingly become a global concern as an effort to ensure that every child obtains equal educational rights without discrimination.[1] In the context of sustainable development, inclusive education plays an important role in realizing social sustainability, namely the creation of a society that is just, inclusive, and socially sustainable.[2].

However, in practice, the implementation of inclusive education in various educational institutions still faces numerous challenges, such as the limited availability of learning methods that can accommodate the diverse abilities of students, among others.[3] This phenomenon indicates that inclusive education requires not only supportive policies but also learning approaches that are capable of effectively facilitating individual differences.[4].

From a juridical perspective, the implementation of inclusive education in Indonesia has a strong legal foundation. This is reflected in Law Number 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System, which affirms that every citizen has equal rights to education. The implementation of inclusive education is further strengthened by the Regulation of the Minister of National Education Number 70 of 2009 on Inclusive Education, which provides an operational framework for schools in delivering educational services to students with special needs [5].

From a juridical perspective, the implementation of inclusive education in Indonesia has a strong legal foundation. This is reflected in Law Number 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System, which affirms that every citizen has equal rights to education. The implementation of inclusive education is further strengthened by the Regulation of the Minister of National Education Number 70 of 2009 on Inclusive Education, which provides an operational framework for schools in delivering educational services to students with special need[6].

In the context of Islamic education, the integration of the Montessori approach into inclusive education has also begun to be adopted by several integrated Islamic educational institutions. One example is Sekolah Islam Terpadu (SIT) Al Uswah Pamekasan, which strives to develop a learning model that is responsive to student diversity.

This institution not only integrates Islamic values into the learning process but also adopts pedagogical approaches that encourage independence, exploration, and respect for differences in students' abilities. Therefore, this phenomenon is interesting to study, as it reflects an effort to integrate the Montessori approach with inclusive education practices within the context of Islamic educational institutions.

Previous studies on Montessori education have been widely conducted. Among them are: first, research by Setyowahyudi on the implementation of Maria Montessori's educational philosophy in early childhood education [7]; and second, a study on the implementation of inclusive education in a Montessori school in Depok, which found that Montessori education can support the development of students with special needs, although it also presents challenges, such as less conducive classroom conditions. [8].

Based on this background, the research gap addressed in this study is to analyze how the integration of the Montessori approach is implemented in inclusive education practices and how this approach contributes to achieving social sustainability in the educational environment of SIT Al Uswah Pamekasan.

2. Method

This study employs a qualitative research design using a case study approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the integration of the Montessori approach in inclusive education and its contribution to the development of social sustainability within the school environment. The case study approach was selected because the research focuses on a specific educational institution, namely SIT Al Uswah Pamekasan, allowing the researcher to explore the phenomenon contextually within a real institutional setting.

Research informants were selected based on their roles and involvement in the implementation of inclusive education. The study involved four informants, including the foundation management, the head of the Al Uswah Kids unit who is responsible for educational services and developmental screening, and representatives of formal teachers from kindergarten to elementary school levels who are directly involved in the teaching process and the implementation of the Montessori approach in the classroom. In addition, the researcher also participated as a shadow teacher in the TKIT Al Uswah unit to support the observation process and gain a deeper understanding of inclusive learning practices.

The data sources in this study consist of primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained through direct observation of learning activities in inclusive classrooms. Meanwhile, secondary data were collected from institutional documents such as school profiles, curriculum, inclusive education programs, and student development reports.

The collected data were analyzed through the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. This process aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how the Montessori approach is integrated into inclusive education and how this practice contributes to the development of social sustainability within the educational environment.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 The Concept of Integrating the Montessori Approach in Inclusive at SIT Al Uswah Pamekasan

The Montessori approach is rooted in the educational philosophy developed by Maria Montessori, an Italian physician and educator who emphasized the importance of respecting each child's natural potential [9]. In her *London Lectures (1946)*, she stated that “we must look to the children as the vehicle for bringing change to humanity”[10]. This statement implies that children are the agents of transformation for humanity.

Each child has a unique developmental rhythm, interests, and learning style. Therefore, the educational process should provide opportunities for children to explore their environment independently [11]. This principle places the child at the center of learning (child-centered learning), while the teacher acts as a facilitator who provides a learning environment that supports children's cognitive, social, and emotional development.

Referring to *The Philosophy of Child Education* written by Fahrudin Faiz, several key points related to the philosophy of child education from the perspective of Maria Montessori can be identified as follows:

Figure 1. Phylosophy of Child Education from the Perspective of Maria Montessori



Respect for Children refers to valuing each child by recognizing their unique individually. It includes giving children the freedom to choose, move, correct their own mistakes, and work according to their own style and place. *Absorbent Mind* refers to the stage in which children naturally

absorb information from their environment. Between the ages of 0–6 years, children are often compared to sponges that continuously absorb stimuli from their surroundings. *Sensitive Periods* are critical phases in a child's learning process, characterized by intense focus, repetition, commitment to tasks, and prolonged concentration.

Educating the Whole Child emphasizes nurturing all aspects of a child's development by providing learning experiences that support intellectual, physical, social, and emotional growth [12]. *Individualised Learning*, refers to personalized learning tailored to each child's developmental stage, interests, and unique needs. *Freedom of Movement and Choice* highlights that children learn best when they are free to move, choose activities, and follow their interests. *Prepared Environment*, refers to a carefully designed learning environment that supports children in developing logical thinking and independence.

Intrinsic Motivation, emphasizes fostering children's internal desire to learn, based on the belief that learning itself is rewarding. *Independence*, reflects the idea that education fundamentally aims to build autonomy by providing appropriate environments and stimulation. *Auto education*, suggests that children are capable of learning independently when provided with engaging and meaningful learning stimuli.

Inclusive education is an educational approach that emphasizes that all learners have equal rights to access quality education without discrimination. This principle is affirmed by UNESCO, which defines inclusive education as a system capable of accommodating diverse needs, abilities, social backgrounds, and physical and psychological conditions of learners [13].

According to UNESCO, inclusive education does not merely involve placing students with special needs in regular classrooms, but also ensuring their active participation in the learning process [14]. This requires a paradigm shift from an exclusive education system to one that is responsive to diversity. Schools are expected to eliminate barriers to learning arising from differences in abilities, social backgrounds, and individual characteristics.

The integration of the Montessori approach with inclusive education can be understood as an effort to create a learning environment that respects the diversity of students' abilities [11]. In practice, this integration is realized through flexible learning environments, adaptive teaching methods, and opportunities for students to learn according to their developmental pace and needs.

The concept of the *prepared environment* in Montessori education allows students to choose learning activities based on their interests and abilities. A systematically designed environment helps all learners, including those with special needs, to develop their potential optimally without feeling marginalized in the learning process [15]. This concept is also evident in the learning practices at SIT Al Uswah Pamekasan.

During the research process, the researcher conducted participant observation by directly engaging in classroom activities as a shadow teacher. In this role, the researcher facilitated students' learning activities using Montessori materials, allowing for direct observation of how a Montessori-based learning environment is implemented.

During observations in inclusive classrooms, particularly at TKIT Al Uswah Pamekasan, learning activities began with teachers preparing Montessori materials placed on low shelves or arranged on the floor, making them easily accessible to students. They were then given the freedom to choose activities according to their interests and abilities. Some students selected fine motor skill activities such as stacking blocks or matching shapes, while others engaged in literacy and numeracy activities using Montessori materials.

In this setting, the teacher did not act as the center of instruction at the front of the classroom but instead moved around the room to observe and assist when needed. Students with special needs participated in the same activities as other students, although in some cases they were accompanied by shadow teachers. Interactions among students occurred naturally, with regular students often helping peers who experienced difficulties.

Figure 2. Table of Changes in Montessori Educational Culture at SIT Al Uswah Pamekasan based on Observation Results

Patterns of Change in Montessori Educational Culture at SIT Al Uswah Pamekasan Based on Observational Findings.

Observed Aspect	Observation Findings in the Inclusive Classroom	Educational Culture Patterns
Teacher's role in the learning process	The teacher does not dominate the explanation in front of the class but primarily facilitates and assists students when they use Montessori materials	There is a shift in the teacher's role from instructor to learning facilitator.
Students' learning activities	Students independently choose their learning activities using the Montessori materials available in the classroom.	Students demonstrate learning independence and the freedom to choose activities according to their abilities.
Interaction among students	Regular students and students with special needs work together using the same learning materials.	Inclusive social interaction is developed during the learning process
Classroom environment	Montessori materials are arranged on low shelves and are easily accessible to students.	The learning environment is designed to be child-friendly and to support independent exploration.
Responses of students with special needs	Students with special needs are able to participate in classroom activities with the guidance of the teacher	Learning becomes more adaptive to the diverse needs of students.

by: nurul qamariyah

Based on these observations, there has been a significant shift in the educational culture within inclusive classrooms at PAUD IT Al Uswah Pamekasan. Teachers function more as facilitators rather than central figures, while students are given autonomy in their learning. Interaction between regular students and those with special needs becomes more natural due to shared learning experiences. This indicates that a Montessori-based learning environment fosters a more inclusive, participatory, and adaptive learning culture that accommodates diverse student needs.

The integration of the Montessori approach in inclusive education at SIT Al Uswah Pamekasan also reflects strong humanitarian values in the learning process. The learning environment is designed not only to develop students' cognitive abilities, but also to cultivate empathy, mutual respect, and social sensitivity among students. Through collaborative activities and inclusive classroom interactions, students are encouraged to appreciate differences and support one another regardless of their backgrounds and abilities. This condition creates a more humane, egalitarian, and socially sustainable educational atmosphere.

Furthermore, the Montessori-based inclusive learning process contributes to the strengthening of social sustainability values. Students are accustomed to practicing compassion, Tolerance and non-discriminatory attitudes in everyday learning activities. The presence of children with diverse characteristics in the same learning environment becomes an important medium for developing humanity consciousness and social responsibility from an early age. Thus, the integration of the Montessori approach not only supports academic development, but also reinforces character formation and inclusive social values in students.

One key value is independence, which includes not only academic abilities but also self-management, decision-making, and problem-solving in daily life [16]. Another important value is respect for differences. Inclusive learning environments enable students to interact with peers from diverse backgrounds and abilities, helping them understand that diversity is a natural part of social life[17]. These values form a foundation for building an inclusive and harmonious society.

In addition, Montessori education emphasizes responsible freedom, where students are free to choose activities but within a framework of rules and social responsibility [8]. Through this, children learn that freedom involves making wise decisions and considering their impact on others. Thus, the integration of the Montessori approach in inclusive education represents a strategic step toward creating a more humanistic and responsive educational system.[11]. Through such educational practices, schools can become learning spaces that not only develop students' academic abilities but also cultivate social values that are essential for creating an inclusive and sustainable society.

3.2 AI Uswah Kids: A Specialized Unit for Inclusively Education

The implementation of inclusive education within educational institutions requires a structured support system to optimally accommodate the diverse learning needs of students. One such effort is realized through the establishment of a specialized service unit focused on providing assistance and developmental stimulation for children.

Within the environment of SIT AI Uswah Pamekasan, this initiative is implemented through the establishment of AI Uswah Kids (AI Kids), a specialized unit that functions as a center for inclusive education services for children with special needs as well as those experiencing developmental delays. This unit serves as an integral part of the school's educational system, aiming to ensure that every child receives educational services tailored to their developmental needs.

AI Uswah Kids serves as a developmental stimulation space for students who require additional support in the learning process. The services provided are not limited to academic aspects but also include the development of cognitive, motor, language, social, and emotional skills. The existence of this unit reflects the institution's commitment to implementing inclusive education principles that ensure equal learning opportunities for all students.

As part of its inclusive education system, SIT AI Uswah Pamekasan conducts developmental screening prior to the beginning of each academic year. This process aims to identify students' developmental conditions so that appropriate educational services can be provided based on individual needs. The screening is conducted by teachers within the AI Uswah Kids unit using developmental assessment instruments such as the Pre-Screening Development Questionnaire (KPSP), adjusted to the child's chronological age.

Students receiving services from AI Uswah Kids come from various educational levels within SIT AI Uswah Pamekasan, ranging from daycare (TPA), kindergarten, to elementary school up to grade six. These students present a wide range of special needs and developmental delays, including Cerebral Palsy (CP), Autism, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) accompanied by speech delay, Down Syndrome, slow learners, and communication disorders such as mutism. This diversity indicates that the implementation of inclusive education at the school encompasses a broad spectrum of developmental conditions rather than being limited to a single category of special needs.

During the learning process, teachers act as facilitators who provide equal attention and guidance to both regular students and students with special needs according to their individual learning characteristics. Classroom interactions are built through collaborative activities, peer assistance, and participatory learning experiences that encourage students to communicate, cooperate, and respect one another. This interaction process creates a supportive and non-discriminatory learning environment where every student is given equal opportunities to participate actively in classroom activities. Such practices reflect the implementation of inclusive education values that emphasize empathy, equality, and mutual respect within the educational process.

In practice, the inclusive education system at SIT AI Uswah Pamekasan is supported by assistance mechanisms tailored to the level of each student's needs. For students requiring intensive support in formal classroom learning, AI Uswah Kids provides shadow teachers who directly accompany students throughout the learning process. This assistance helps students understand instructions, maintain focus, and receive the necessary stimulation to actively participate in classroom activities. Meanwhile, for students with less intensive support needs, the school provides integration teachers who offer periodic developmental stimulation without full-time assistance during classroom activities.

In addition to classroom support, AI Uswah Kids also provides specialized therapy sessions aimed at optimizing children's development according to their individual needs. Therapy sessions for kindergarten students are generally conducted starting at 08:30 a.m. until completion, while for elementary students they begin around 10:00 a.m., depending on the formal class schedule. The therapy programs include various developmental interventions such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, and sensory integration therapy [18]. These therapies are designed to enhance communication skills, motor coordination, and sensory regulation, all of which are crucial for successful learning.

To ensure that each child receives appropriate educational services, AI Uswah Kids also implements an Individual Learning Program (ILP). This program is developed based on initial observations of the child's developmental condition and the level of delay compared to age-appropriate developmental standards.

The ILP includes key components such as developmental targets, stimulation strategies, required therapy interventions, and methods for periodic evaluation of the child's progress. Through

this individualized program, the educational process can be tailored to each student's characteristics, allowing for more systematic monitoring of development [19].

The implementation of programs within AI Uswah Kids involves collaboration among a multidisciplinary team consisting of professionals with expertise in special needs education. This team includes shadow teachers, classroom teachers, and psychologists who are responsible for conducting developmental assessments and providing appropriate intervention recommendations. Such collaboration is essential to ensure that educational services are delivered in an integrated and sustainable manner.

From a pedagogical perspective, the approach implemented in AI Uswah Kids aligns with the educational philosophy developed by Maria Montessori. Montessori emphasizes the importance of a learning environment that supports natural child development and provides opportunities for children to learn according to their developmental pace [15]. This principle is reflected in the learning practices at AI Uswah Kids, where developmental stimulation is provided through structured activities while still considering individual needs. By creating an adaptive learning environment and providing appropriate support, the unit strives to deliver a more inclusive and humanistic learning experience.

Furthermore, the presence of AI Uswah Kids contributes to strengthening social sustainability values within the educational environment. Inclusive education implemented through this unit enables students to learn in an environment that respects diversity in abilities and individual conditions. Interaction between students with special needs and their peers fosters empathy, tolerance, and respect for differences. Those values are essential for building an inclusive and sustainable society in the future.

Since becoming actively operational in 2022, AI Uswah Kids has provided educational services to more than fifty students with diverse developmental needs. This number reflects the growing necessity of inclusive service units within modern educational systems. Through structured program management, professional support, and adaptive learning approaches, AI Uswah Kids not only functions as a center for inclusive education services at SIT AI Uswah Pamekasan but also serves as a model of educational practice that integrates humanistic pedagogical principles with efforts to create an inclusive and sustainable learning environment.

3.3 The Contribution of the Montessori Approach to Strengthening Social Sustainability in Inclusive Education

In the context of inclusive education, Montessori principles which emphasize respect for individual uniqueness, responsible freedom in learning, and experiential learning serve as an important foundation for building an educational system that values diversity. One of the main contributions of the Montessori approach to social sustainability is the strengthening of values such as tolerance, empathy, and respect for diversity.

In the context of inclusive education at SIT AI Uswah Pamekasan, the role of teachers becomes a determining factor in the successful integration of the Montessori approach. Teachers are not merely facilitators of learning materials, but act as adaptive pedagogical agents who continuously adjust learning strategies to accommodate diverse student needs, including those with special needs. Through individualized instruction, careful observation, and the use of Montessori learning media, teachers create a flexible and supportive learning environment that allows each student to learn according to their own pace and potential.

Moreover, teachers play a crucial role in fostering social interaction and mutual respect among students, which reflects the principles of inclusivity and contributes to the realization of social sustainability. This finding indicates that the effectiveness of Montessori-based inclusive education is highly dependent on teachers' competencies in differentiation, classroom management, and inclusive pedagogical practices.

In Montessori classrooms, children learn together in environments that facilitate interaction among individuals with different abilities, backgrounds, and characteristics. A non-competitive learning system that emphasizes individual development helps children understand that each person has a unique way of learning [20].

This condition indirectly fosters mutual respect and acceptance of differences. Students not only learn together physically but also develop healthy and supportive social relationships [21]. This phenomenon aligns with the social development theory proposed by Lev Vygotsky, which emphasizes that learning occurs effectively through social interaction and collaboration among individuals [22].

Such practices cultivate an awareness that success in learning is not solely the result of individual ability but is also influenced by harmonious social relationships within the learning community. In the context of inclusive education, these experiences help students understand the

conditions of peers with different learning needs, thereby fostering stronger empathy and social awareness [23]. Furthermore, the Montessori approach contributes to the formation of inclusive and sustainable learning communities. The Montessori learning environment, known as the *prepared environment*, is designed to enable each child to learn independently while still being part of a learning community.

Students learn not only from teachers but also through interactions with their peers. These interactions create positive social dynamics in which each individual feels valued and has a role within the community. Such an environment forms a crucial foundation for building inclusive and sustainable educational communities, where diversity is not seen as a barrier but as a valuable source of social learning [24]. Moreover, the Montessori approach provides opportunities for the development of individualized learning. The principle of *individualised learning* allows teachers to adapt instructional strategies to each child's abilities and needs. This is highly relevant in inclusive education, which requires differentiated instruction to accommodate diverse student backgrounds and needs.

The contribution of the Montessori approach to social sustainability is also reflected in efforts to foster independence and social responsibility in children. In Montessori philosophy, children are viewed as individuals capable of developing themselves through independent learning processes [25]. Through learning activities that provide freedom of choice and responsibility for selected tasks, children develop self-discipline, responsibility, and decision-making skills. These values are essential in shaping individuals who can actively participate in sustainable social life.

In a broader context, the implementation of inclusive education supported by the Montessori approach is aligned with the global development agenda promoted by the United Nations through the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). One of the main objectives of the SDGs is to ensure inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all, as stated in SDG 4, which highlights education as a means to build a more just and sustainable society [26].

Inclusive and sustainable education also plays a significant role in shaping a more tolerant and democratic society. When children are accustomed from an early age to learning in environments that respect differences, they develop stronger social skills to navigate diversity in society. Thus, the Montessori approach contributes not only to pedagogical aspects of learning but also to the broader development of social values that support societal sustainability. The integration of the Montessori approach in inclusive education helps create learning environments that respect diversity, foster empathy, and strengthen positive social interactions among students.

4. Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that the integration of the Montessori approach in inclusive education at SIT Al Uswah Pamekasan creates a learning environment that is more inclusive, participatory, and adaptive to the diverse learning needs of students. The implementation of the prepared environment principle, the use of Montessori materials, and the teacher's role as a facilitator foster a learning dynamic that provides opportunities for each student to learn according to their abilities and developmental pace. The findings of this study indicate that Montessori education is not only a teaching method but also a pedagogical strategy that supports the realization of social sustainability within the educational environment. This is reflected in a learning environment that values diversity and promotes students' independence in learning. Therefore, this study contributes to enriching the discourse on Montessori education in inclusive settings and may serve as a reference for policymakers, particularly educational authorities, in formulating policies for educational institutions, especially inclusive schools, integrating Montessori-based approaches.

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