

LOCAL CULTURE-BASED BIBLIOTHERAPY AS AN INCLUSIVE LITERACY INNOVATION FOR CHILDRENS WITH DISABILITIES IN LIBRARIES

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Abstract: *Inclusive literacy in special education settings continues to face challenges, particularly in providing reading materials that are cognitively, affectively, and culturally appropriate for children with disabilities. This study aims to explore the implementation of culturally grounded bibliotherapy as an innovative strategy to enhance reading interest, emotional engagement, and cultural identity among students with disabilities at the State Special School (SLB) 1 Padang, Indonesia. Employing a descriptive qualitative method, data were collected through participatory observation, in-depth interviews with librarians, special education teachers, and students, as well as document analysis. The findings reveal that the integration of Minangkabau folktales into bibliotherapy sessions significantly strengthens students' sense of cultural belonging and enhances their emotional responsiveness to reading materials. The bibliotherapy sessions were designed to be adaptive and interactive, involving relaxation activities, guided reading, discussion, coloring, and narrative reflection. Moreover, the digitization of local stories into accessible formats such as audiobooks and interactive media further supported inclusive literacy practices. The roles of teachers and librarians as emotional literacy facilitators were found to be essential, particularly when supported by training in bibliotherapy techniques, child development psychology, and empathetic communication. This study concludes that culturally based bibliotherapy is an effective and contextually relevant approach to promoting inclusive literacy in special school libraries. The findings offer a foundation for developing inclusive library service models in Indonesia that integrate local culture, accessible technology, and psychosocial intervention.*

Keywords: *bibliotherapy, local culture, inclusive literacy, children with disabilities, special school library*

Introduction

Inclusive education has become a vital part of the national education system, ensuring the right of every child, including those with disabilities, to access meaningful and equitable learning opportunities (Jardinez & Natividad, 2024). In this context, literacy plays a fundamental role in developing the cognitive, emotional, and social abilities of children with disabilities, empowering them to actively participate in society (Parween & Ahmad, 2025). However, in reality, access to reading materials that are relevant, engaging, and easy to understand remains a significant challenge for students with special needs (Sheehy, Budiyanto, & Kaye, 2024). One of the innovative approaches that can address these challenges is bibliotherapy. Bibliotherapy is a method of utilising reading materials to help children recognise, express, and overcome emotional or social problems they face (Rubin, 2010). When linked to inclusive education, bibliotherapy has great potential in supporting the psychological development of children with disabilities through narratives that resonate with their life experiences (Skočić Mihić et al., 2017). To make bibliotherapy more effective, it is essential to adapt it to the local cultural context. A culturally-based approach can enhance emotional connection and content relevance, allowing children to feel more engaged and better understand the moral messages within stories (Zahro, et al., 2024). In communities like the Minangkabau, which are rich in oral traditions and folklore, culturally grounded bibliotherapy holds great potential to bridge literacy development and the strengthening of cultural identity for children with disabilities.

SLB Negeri 1 Padang is a special education institution that is active in developing inclusive literacy activities. The school library has become a centre for reading, storytelling and therapeutic activities through stories. However, based on initial observations and interviews with librarians and teachers, it was found that the reading collection available is still dominantly from outside the region and does not reflect local Minangkabau cultural values. This has an impact on students' lack of interest and active involvement in literacy activities (Rahman et al., 2021). Studies that link bibliotherapy practices with adaptive collection management approaches in the context of inclusive education in Indonesia remain scarce, particularly those utilizing culturally based content. Most existing research still focuses on the psychological effectiveness of bibliotherapy alone, without integrating a collection management approach that is responsive to the local needs of children with disabilities. A study by (Andriani & Effendy, n.d.) at SMPN 1 Sungai Raya highlighted the importance of integrating local wisdom into inclusive education. Cultural values such as cooperation (*gotong-royong*) and tolerance can strengthen the concept of inclusion in schools. Earlier, Brothers (2024) emphasized the importance of developing adaptive library collections to support bibliotherapy in educational settings. Six implementation stages, including the procurement of relevant materials and human resource development, were identified as key to the success of disability-friendly bibliotherapy services.

Therefore, this research offers a novelty by proposing the integration of bibliotherapy and adaptive collection management based on local culture as an integrated approach in inclusive education. This approach is expected to increase the emotional and cognitive engagement of students with disabilities through culturally relevant and adaptively managed reading materials. The focus of this research is twofold: Firstly, the adaptive collection management approach in providing local culture-based reading materials for children with disabilities, which has not

been widely applied in special schools. Secondly, the integration of bibliotherapy as an inclusive literacy strategy that is not only therapeutic, but also strengthens local wisdom values and builds students' cultural identity. By exploring local culture-based bibliotherapy practices at SLB Negeri 1 Padang, this research aims to identify how librarians and teachers manage adaptive collections that suit students' needs. In addition, this research seeks to provide an alternative model for inclusive collection development based on cultural communities that can be replicated in other educational institutions. Through this study, it is hoped that theoretical and practical contributions can be made in the development of inclusive literacy based on local culture through the role of school librarians as the main facilitators in the bibliotherapy process. This study also strengthens the position of school libraries as disability-friendly, contextualised literacy spaces rooted in the local culture of the community.

Literature Review

Bibliotherapy in Inclusive Education Contexts

Bibliotherapy is an intervention approach that uses reading materials to help individuals overcome emotional, social or psychological problems. In the context of inclusive education, bibliotherapy has been shown to be effective in improving resilience and problem-solving skills in children with special needs. (Kahveci & Serin, 2025) found that bibliotherapy can strengthen children's internal mechanisms in dealing with psychological and social challenges and improve their ability to solve interpersonal problems. In addition, (Hull et al., 2025) showed that culturally tailored bibliotherapy can enhance resilience in children, emphasising the importance of cultural representations in reading materials to strengthen students' identity and emotional attachment to the materials. (Kaymaz & Bayhan, 2025) also highlighted that developmental bibliotherapy can help students with learning disabilities manage emotions, such as anger, through active engagement with relevant characters and storylines. Furthermore, (Redman, et al., 2024) in their systematic review stated that creative bibliotherapy interventions in schools have significant potential in improving the mental well-being of children and adolescents, although more research is needed to understand the most effective mechanisms and contexts.

Inclusive and Culturally Responsive Literacy

Inclusive literacy emphasises the importance of equal access to reading materials for all students, including those with disabilities. This approach includes the use of teaching strategies that are responsive to students' cultural and linguistic needs. (Rivera et al., 2022) highlighted that culturally responsive planning and instruction can increase the participation and academic achievement of students with significant disabilities. (Guiberson, 2024b) emphasised that culturally responsive literacy interventions can create inclusive and supportive learning environments for students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. According to guidance from the Clarkson (2025), systemic family engagement can strengthen the impact of culturally responsive inclusive education practices. In the context of SLB Negeri 1 Padang, involving parents and the community in the development and implementation of the local culture-based bibliotherapy programme can increase the relevance and effectiveness of the programme.

Local Culture Integration in Bibliotherapy

Integrating local culture in bibliotherapy can strengthen students' identity and emotional attachment to reading materials. (Guiberson, 2024a) emphasises that culturally responsive literacy interventions can create an inclusive and supportive learning environment for students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Research at SLB Negeri 1 Padang showed

that the use of Minangkabau folktales in bibliotherapy sessions increased the engagement of students with disabilities. This is in line with the findings of (Khaeruman, et al., 2024) who showed that the integration of local wisdom in the curriculum has a significant positive impact on students' understanding of local cultural literacy, increasing learning motivation, and strengthening students' cultural identity. Furthermore, the integration of local cultural values in literacy programmes also plays an important role in strengthening students' understanding of their local culture. In the context of bibliotherapy, this can help students with disabilities to better understand and appreciate their own culture, as well as increase their confidence and engagement in the learning process.

Disability Representation in Children's Literature

Inclusive and positive representations of disability in children's literature can increase empathy and social understanding among students. (Ucar & Friesen, 2024) found that stories that positively portray characters with disabilities can reinforce a sense of belonging and inclusion among students. Another study by (Redman et al., 2024) showed that creative bibliotherapy interventions in schools have significant potential in improving the mental wellbeing of children and adolescents. Authentic and positive representations of characters with disabilities in children's literature can help students with disabilities feel valued and accepted and encourage other students to understand and appreciate differences.

Method

This research uses a qualitative method with a descriptive approach. The research object was Sekolah Luar Biasa (SLB) Negeri 1 Padang, West Sumatra. The informants were purposively selected, including the librarian, special education teacher, and five students with disabilities at the SMPLB and SMALB levels who actively participated in bibliotherapy sessions. Data were collected through direct observation during the reading and bibliotherapy sessions, in-depth interviews with informants, and document analysis of the collection of reading materials used. The data collected was analysed thematically, focusing on the level of children's involvement, the relevance of local cultural content in the reading materials, and the role of facilitators in facilitating the activities.

Result and Discussion

Local culture-based bibliotherapy as an inclusive literacy strategy for children with disabilities in SLB Negeri 1 Padang shows interesting dynamics that reflect the relationship between literacy approaches, cultural identity and student empowerment. The findings reveal how the presence of local folklore, students' emotional engagement and the role of facilitators helped shape a more contextualised and meaningful literacy process. The discussion thematically illustrates how the intervention was implemented and what implications it has for the literacy engagement of children with disabilities, linking the field results to relevant theories and recent studies. In an effort to understand how local culture-based bibliotherapy is implemented as an inclusive literacy innovation, this research presents qualitative findings from observations, interviews and documentation in SLB Negeri 1 Padang. The main focus is on the implementation of the programme, the responses of students with disabilities to the local culture-based materials and the strategic role of facilitators in supporting the success of bibliotherapy. The findings not only reflect empirical practice in the field but also enrich the theoretical discourse on the integration of cultural values in inclusive literacy approaches. The discussion is organised thematically according to the focus of the problem formulation and is linked to the latest theories and findings from various relevant studies.

Bibliotherapy Implementation Based on Local Culture in SLB Negeri 1 Padang

The implementation of bibliotherapy at SLB Negeri 1 Padang is done regularly one to two times a week and is an integral part of the school's inclusive literacy programme. Based on field observations in March 2025, bibliotherapy activities are carried out in the school reading room which has been physically and visually adapted to the needs of children with disabilities. These activities are not only limited to reading but also include relaxation sessions, guided discussions and expressive activities such as drawing and colouring. Teachers and librarians act as the main facilitators who design the flow of activities adaptively to the characteristics of students. Reading materials are selected contextually, based on students' daily issues, such as conflict with friends, fear, or loss, with a culturally responsive approach through Minangkabau folktales such as *Malin Kundang*, *Si Umbuik Mudo*, and *Kaba Cindua Mato*. This strengthens children's emotional and cognitive connection with the literacy materials they consume. According to the librarian in SLB Negeri 1 Padang said:

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(Nurmasni, Librarian at SLB Negeri 1 Padang)

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“We choose stories that are close to children's lives. If the characters use Minang names and the story is about the village, they understand and are more interested.”

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This supports the findings of (Guiberson, M, 2024) and (Khaeruman, at al., 2024) that the integration of local culture in literacy materials can strengthen the sense of belonging and deepen students' emotional involvement in the learning process. According to librarian, *“We choose stories that are close to children's lives. If the characters use Minang names and the story is about the village, they understand and are more interested.”* (Nurmasni, Librarian at SLB Negeri 1 Padang).

This approach demonstrates the success of contextualised and inclusive literacy strategies. This finding is in line with Guiberson's study (2024) and Khaeruman et al. (2024), who state that the integration of local cultural values in literacy materials promotes a sense of belonging and increases students' emotional engagement in the learning process. This is also in line with the culturally relevant pedagogy approach developed by Ladson-Billings (2023), which emphasises that learning will be more effective if students can see their cultural identity reflected in the material presented. In the context of inclusive literacy, the combination of bibliotherapy and

local cultural approaches creates an environment that supports the affective and cognitive needs of children with disabilities.

However, the implementation of bibliotherapy is not yet fully supported by an adequate information system. Based on observations, data management of activities, selection of reading materials, and monitoring of student development are still done manually. Within the framework of library and information science, this indicates the need to strengthen the information system of inclusive bibliotherapy. This system can be in the form of a simple digital platform based on local digital libraries, a thematic reading catalogue based on students' psychosocial needs, and a documentation system for evaluating student development. According to Pal et al. (2021) an effective information system can improve accessibility, personalisation of services, and accuracy in tracking results. In addition, information technology support such as local story repositories and post-reading student reflection databases can assist librarians and teachers in strategising sustainable and measurable literacy interventions. Therefore, there is a need for collaboration between librarians, special education teachers and information system developers to design user-centric systems that are inclusive and adaptive to the needs of children with disabilities.

To expand the reach of local culture-based bibliotherapy, content digitisation is a strategic step that addresses the need for inclusive literacy access, especially for children with disabilities. Formats such as audio books, digital picture books and interactive media based on Minangkabau folklore can be a bridge to inclusive and down-to-earth literacy, in line with the universal design for learning (UDL) approach which emphasises the importance of providing various ways of representing materials to reach diverse abilities and learning styles (Gayatri et al., 2023). The digitisation process not only involves technical aspects but is also sensitive to the local cultural values contained in Minangkabau folklore. The involvement of local creator communities, such as illustrators, narrators, and special schoolteachers, is crucial to ensure that the content produced is not only culturally representative, but also disability friendly. An interview with teacher at a state special school in Padang, revealed:

“The visually impaired children at our school were very enthusiastic when listening to the audio version of Minang fairy tales. They feel closer to their own culture. If it is available in an interactive form or can be accessed via mobile phones, it would be even better.”

(Yanti, Teacher at SLB Negeri 1 Padang)

This opinion reinforces the findings of (Rivera, at al., 2020), which showed that the use of local cultural materials in accessible formats significantly increased the motivation and engagement of children with disabilities in literacy activities. In addition, Guiberson's study (2024) emphasises that culturally responsive bibliotherapy has a strong influence in strengthening cultural identity while supporting the emotional needs of children with special needs. (IFLA, 2021.) in the Guidelines for Library Services to Persons with Dyslexia also suggests the importance of libraries providing reading materials in various accessible formats, including audio and digital, tailored to the needs of users. In the Indonesian context, research by Sheehy, Budiyanto, & Kaye (2024) confirms the importance of developing inclusive learning media, such as Sign Supported Big Books, which are tailored to the needs of children with special needs in Indonesia. As such, libraries should not only act as providers of physical books, but also as facilitators of digital-based inclusive content production rooted in local culture. Cross-

sector collaboration between libraries, local creator communities and special education institutions is strongly recommended as part of an inclusive bibliotherapy service model.

The Bibliotherapy Impact on Students' Reading Interest and Wellbeing

Bibliotherapy clearly contributes to increasing the reading interest of children with disabilities. Based on observations at SLB Negeri Kota Padang, children with disabilities showed high enthusiasm when given picture books with bright colours and simple text. Silvia and Khairani, two SLB students (2024), said that they preferred reading picture storybooks because they were easier to understand and fun. They admitted that they feel comfortable because the content of the story is in line with their daily experiences. This is in line with the studies of (Hull et al., 2025) and (Kaymaz, & Bayhan, 2024), who emphasised the importance of selecting reading materials that are appropriate to students' backgrounds, cognitive abilities and social contexts in the success of bibliotherapy. Bibliotherapy also plays a role in strengthening the social-emotional aspects of children with disabilities. Through shared reading activities and directed discussions, students are invited to identify the feelings of the characters in the story and relate them to their personal experiences. A teacher at SLB Kota Padang stated, *"The children became more open to expressing emotions after the reading session. They are also more courageous in expressing their opinions during discussions."* (Yanti, Teacher at SLB Negeri 1 Padang). This is reinforced by the findings of (Redman et al., 2024) who stated that bibliotherapy appropriately integrated in the school environment can improve children's psychosocial well-being, especially if the materials and methods are delivered by considering cognitive, affective aspects,

In the context of inclusion, it is important to implement a standardised Inclusive Bibliotherapy Service Model that considers the accessibility of library materials, active student participation, and the role of the facilitator. According to research by Lodge (2022), an inclusive bibliotherapy service model should include the following stages: assessment of children's needs, selection of locally based reading materials, participatory reading activities, reflective discussions, and evaluation of success. The standardisation also emphasises the importance of training librarians and teachers as inclusive and empathetic emotional literacy facilitators. With this approach, bibliotherapy services not only increase reading interest but also empower students to manage their emotions and build a positive self-identity. Observations in the inclusive school library showed that students involved in the inclusive bibliotherapy programme experienced improvements in basic literacy and social skills. 5th level student, who was previously reluctant to interact, began to actively discuss after attending bibliotherapy sessions with Minangkabau folk stories adapted into picture books. *"I like the story, because the character is like me, brave and likes to help friends"* (Andi, student at SLB Negeri 1 Padang).

This shows that the selection of reading materials that reflect local culture and values can strengthen emotional appeal and increase students' connection with the material. Thus, the implementation of inclusive bibliotherapy services requires a standardised yet flexible framework, based on students' needs and potential. The involvement of librarians as facilitators is crucial as they have a strategic role in providing appropriate reading materials, creating an inclusive atmosphere and guiding students through the emotional literacy process. Bibliotherapy is not just a reading activity, but an interactive process that supports the psychosocial and literacy development of children with disabilities simultaneously.

The Role of Teachers and Librarians in the Implementation of Bibliotherapy

Librarians and teachers in SLB play a major role in the implementation of inclusive bibliotherapy. They not only act as providers of reading materials, but also as facilitators who organise the flow of adaptive activities by considering students' physical, cognitive and emotional conditions. At SLB Negeri 1 Padang, the bibliotherapy process is systematically designed. The school librarian, explains that bibliotherapy sessions start with relaxation activities, followed by reading books together, and end with light discussions or art activities such as colouring in story characters. *"Children are more relaxed when invited to read after hearing soft music, then we discuss the story slowly"* (Nurmasni, Librarian at SLB Negeri 1 Padang).

Bibliotherapy in practice also acts as a medium for informal counselling. The SLB teacher, said that story reading is often used as a bridge to start conversations with students about their personal feelings and experiences. *"Sometimes children find it difficult to talk directly about their problems, but after reading the story, they start to open up"* (Fitri Haryani, teacher at SLB Negeri 1 Padang). This suggests that bibliotherapy is not just a tool to improve literacy, but also a pedagogical approach that supports psychosocial recovery and strengthens relationships between students and educators. This finding is consistent with the study by (Rivera, et al., 2020), which mentioned that bibliotherapy helps create an inclusive and emotionally safe learning environment for children with special needs. To maximise this role, librarians and teachers in special schools need to receive specialised training as literacy therapists. At SLB Negeri 1 Padang, basic training has been conducted through a programme initiated in collaboration with the education office and local NGOs. The training covers understanding the developmental psychology of children with disabilities, narrative and visual-based bibliotherapy techniques, and empathy-based interactive communication. One of the librarians said, *"After participating in the training, I understand better how to choose the right books and guide children while reading patiently"* (Arwin, Librarian at SLB Negeri 1 Padang). According to Guiberson (2024), training like this is important so that librarians can respond appropriately to the unique needs of children with disabilities.

Strengthening librarians' competencies also requires cross-professional collaboration. At SLB Negeri 1 Padang, collaborative practices with educational psychologists are implemented through monthly supervision and consultation sessions. Psychologists help evaluate students' emotional readiness and provide input on appropriate storytelling approaches. This collaboration is considered effective by the principal, because *"teachers and librarians don't have to interpret students' conditions alone; there is professional guidance."* (Reni Marlina, Principal of SLB Negeri 1 Padang). This supports the idea from (Zins, et al., 2022) that strengthening the capacity of educators in an inclusive setting requires a cross-disciplinary approach to integrate academic and psychosocial aspects. Observations show that after structured training and implementation of bibliotherapy, there was an improvement in students' literacy and affective aspects. Children became more enthusiastic about coming to the library, more often asked for books to be read to them and began to show the courage to express their feelings. A student with mild intellectual disability said, *"I like going to the library because I can talk about books and my friends"* (Reza, Student at SLB Negeri 1 Padang).

This indicates that the success of the bibliotherapy approach is not only measured by academic aspects, but also by students' emotional and social involvement. Literacy becomes a bridge for recovery and empowerment. Theoretically, strengthening the role of librarians and teachers as bibliotherapy facilitators reflects a transformative literacy pedagogy approach, where literacy

is not only a tool for reading and writing but also a means of identity formation, trauma recovery, and social participation (Freire, 2005; Vygotsky1978). In the Indonesian context, the development of this model in special needs schools like SLB Negeri 1 Padang becomes an important case study on how school libraries can carry out a therapeutic function through contextual, collaborative, and locally based strategies. Continuous implementation supported by inclusive education policies is key to its success.

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that the implementation of bibliotherapy based on local culture at SLB Negeri 1 Padang is a strategic innovation in supporting inclusive literacy for children with disabilities. The use of Minangkabau folktales in bibliotherapy sessions was proven to increase students' reading interest, emotional engagement, and understanding of their social and cultural values. Connecting reading materials with children's cultural identity provides a space for them to feel acknowledged and valued in the learning process. The role of librarians and teachers as facilitators was also crucial in designing bibliotherapy activities that were adaptive, communicative, and empathetic. This finding affirms that integrating local culture into literacy programs not only strengthens the meaningfulness of reading but also expands the function of the school library as an inclusive space that supports children's holistic development. Based on the research findings, it is recommended that special needs school libraries actively develop bibliotherapy collections that feature local cultural narratives to be more contextual with the lives of children with disabilities. Librarians and teachers should also be involved in training on the design and implementation of culturally rooted bibliotherapy to be able to facilitate adaptive and empathetic literacy activities. Furthermore, collaboration with cultural communities, local artists, and parents can enrich reading materials and strengthen students' sense of social involvement. For further development, subsequent research is needed to examine the long-term effectiveness of this approach and its application in various other inclusive education contexts in Indonesia.

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