

Strength-Based Education for at-Risk and Vulnerable Students: A Framework for Social Justice Education

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Abstract

Vulnerable and at-risk students need educational support that highlights their strengths rather than their limitations. Schools play a crucial role in ensuring that growth opportunities remain accessible, even when families face challenges. This study, based on a multi-case analysis of three public schools, examines how strength-based education is implemented to support vulnerable learners. The findings reveal practical strategies such as comprehensive student assessments, differentiated instruction, and supportive teacher-student relationships, alongside continuous engagement in positivity. At the same time, structural and cultural barriers—including stigma, limited parental involvement, and resource constraints—are identified as challenges to inclusive practice. By presenting both enabling and inhibiting factors, this research offers insights for schools and policymakers to strengthen inclusive, empowering, and social justice education systems.

Keywords: Risk; Vulnerable Student; Strength Perspective; Strength-Based Education

1. Introduction

The role of schools is increasingly important for vulnerable and at-risk students, as personal, social, and structural challenges impact their education. Vulnerability and risk exist on a continuum. Overall, risk factors are situations that contribute to an individual's vulnerability. When risk factors appear in an individual's indicators, the continuum shifts from vulnerability to risk (Withers & Russell, 2001). Risk factors originate from the individual, family, school, community, and society (Chibaya et al., 2022; Ghongkedze, 2018; Kaufman & Bradbury, 1992; R. Lewis & McCann, 2009; Withers & Russell, 2001).

Inclusive education policies continue to evolve, but educational practices that emphasize academic achievement and compliance remain mainstream. Individuals can become victims of the very

institutions designed to support them, including education, health care, and the law (J. A. Lewis et al., 2011). As a result, vulnerable and at-risk students often find themselves in environments that emphasize deficits rather than potential—an approach known as a deficit-oriented perspective. The dominance of this perspective not only lowers students' expectations and fosters feelings of powerlessness but also reinforces negative perceptions among educators.

In response, the strengths perspective offers an alternative framework. This approach encourages the development of positive attributes through non-judgmental practices and helps individuals constructively reframe challenges (Payne, 2021). The strengths perspective emphasizes resilience, talents, relationships, competencies, and environmental support (Gleason, 2007). Its relevance in education is increasingly evident, given the documented impact of poverty, a risk factor for adolescent development, on academic achievement, limited career opportunities, and increased psychological distress (Santrock, 2019). By adopting this lens, educators can shift from problem-based interventions to approaches that view students as active agents in their own development (Lee, 2003).

The strengths perspective asserts that every social environment contains resources and that both individuals and institutions have the collective capacity to enhance well-being (Pulla, 2017). Empirical evidence supports this argument. Family engagement in a strengths-based approach has been shown to transform barriers into educational assets for students from linguistic and cultural minority backgrounds (Alvarez, 2017), while strengths-based classrooms correlate with higher levels of attendance, participation, and academic engagement than traditional classrooms (Cantwell, 2006). Rooted in humanistic philosophy and ecological and empowerment theories, this approach aligns with contemporary demands for more humanizing educational practices (Pulla, 2017). Schools themselves have been recognized as unique and influential contexts in building resilience in at-risk children (Masten, 2018). Positive psychology-based interventions have been shown to improve well-being, learning outcomes, and self-confidence, particularly in minority students and those facing mental health challenges (Chu, 2020; Climie & Mastoras, 2015).

Although strengths-based education is often associated with increased resilience and well-being, the institutional processes that enable schools to operationalize these principles remain poorly understood. Most research focuses on individual interventions and small-group programs (Climie & Mastoras, 2015; Gander et al., 2013; Yip, 2005), or schools with explicit strengths-based curricula (Cantwell, 2006; Fenton et al., 2015; White & Waters, 2015)—often well-resourced private schools. Consequently, understanding how this approach is implemented in public schools, which face structural constraints and diverse student needs, remains limited.

In response to this gap, this article examines the implementation of strengths-based education in three public schools serving students with experiences of poverty and disabilities, conditions associated with increased risk (Abela et al., 2024; Rittle-Johnson et al., 2021; Tereshchenko et al., 2019). More specifically, this research addresses the implementation of strengths-based education principles for vulnerable and at-risk students, as well as supporting and inhibiting factors.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Strengths Perspective

The assertion that individuals will grow better and achieve higher levels of performance when they build on their existing talents compared to when they make the same effort to improve their weaknesses is at the heart of the strengths-based philosophical approach (Clifton & Harter, 2003) in (Louis, 2008). Jane Addams (1902) highlighted the importance of recognizing individual abilities in education (Saleebey, 2008).

Pulla (2017) explains that the strengths perspective emerged as a response to deficit-oriented models in social work and psychology. Developed in the United States in the late 1980s, this approach was influenced by humanistic philosophy, ecosystem theory, and empowerment theory. Its primary goal is to redefine how practitioners view clients by focusing on the potential for growth and transformation, rather than pathology (Pulla, 2017).

2.2 Conceptualizing Strength within the Strengths Perspective

Strength encompasses a variety of capacities, resources, and assets (Saleebey, 2002). This includes knowledge gained through coping with trauma, illness, oppression, and personal mistakes. Personal qualities such as humor, caring, creativity, loyalty, insight, independence, spirituality, moral imagination, and patience are also forms of strength (Wolin & Wolin, 1993), as cited in (Saleebey, 2002).

Strengths also reflect formal knowledge acquired through education and practical wisdom derived from life experiences. Talents provide additional tools for achieving goals while strengthening solidarity and social relationships. Cultural narratives and traditions can be sources of guidance, as can the experience of recovering from adversity, which builds self-esteem. Furthermore, the ability to access community resources and the dimension of spirituality—understood as the search for meaning beyond biological, psychological, social, political, and cultural dimensions—are essential components of strength. Spirituality provides moral direction, resilience to life's stresses, and a transcendental orientation toward a more hopeful future (Saleebey, 2002).

2.3 Principles of the Strengths Perspective in Educational Implementation

This study adopts a synthesized framework of strengths-based educational principles, drawing on the works of (Lopez & Louis, 2009) and (Gardner & Toope, 2011). Four interrelated principles guide the implementation of this perspective. First, the measurement of student and educator characteristics emphasizes the importance of recognizing learners' conditions within their contextual realities. Second, differentiated learning experiences based on individual strengths call for creative and flexible pedagogical approaches that respond to diverse student assets. Third, collaboration with personal supporters who can identify and affirm individual strengths requires the cultivation of democratic and trusting relationships between educators and students. Fourth, the application of individual strengths both inside and outside the classroom involves sustained engagement in positive experiences, including exposure to new environments that foster growth. Together, these principles form a coherent foundation for implementing strengths-based education, particularly in supporting vulnerable and at-risk students.

The results of this synthesis also represent the principles of the strengths perspective as presented by (Saleebey, 2002) who argued that every group, family, and community possesses strengths and resources, and we never know their limits. Therefore, it is important to embrace their aspirations. While individuals' difficult situations may be detrimental, they can also function as challenges and opportunities. Collaboration is the best way to work for and with them, considering the context and the best care for those we assist.



Figure 1: Framework of strengths-based education principles

3. Methods

3.1 Research Design

A multiple case study design was adopted to answer the research question of how schools support vulnerable and at-risk students. Case studies are particularly well-suited to answering “how” questions in real-life contexts. (Yin, 2018), while the use of three cases aligns with the logic of multiple case study research, which aims to strengthen analytical generalizations (Gerring, 2007).

3.2 Unit of Analysis and Research Location

Data were collected from three public schools in Jakarta Province, Indonesia, selected purposively for student vulnerability and risk characteristics. School I is an inclusive referral junior high school designated by the local education authority since 2012. At the time of the study, it served 41 students with special needs, most of whom received educational assistance. Despite resource constraints, including a shortage of special education teachers, the school continued to implement its inclusive mandate, making it a key case study for assessing service delivery under limited conditions. School II is in a densely populated area along a riverbank. Its 644 students, more than half of whom receive government educational assistance, indicate socioeconomic vulnerability. Nevertheless, the school demonstrated outstanding academic and non-academic achievements, indicating institutional capacity to support disadvantaged students. School III is a vocational school focused on agriculture—a field often perceived as less attractive to young people (Mutolib et al., 2022; Oktaviani & Rozci, 2024; Rahmawati et al., 2025). Many students enroll due to accessibility rather than preference, a pattern linked to socioeconomic limitations (Milner et al., 2017). With 418 of the 754 students receiving government educational assistance, this school provides an important context for examining vocational school support strategies for economically vulnerable students.

3.3 Data Collection and Research Participants

Data collected using: (1) document analysis (school curriculum and financial aid records); (2) school social media materials; (3) semi-structured interviews; (4) focus group discussions; (5) observation

of school community interactions; and (6) open-ended questionnaires (Creswell, J.W. & Creswell, 2018; Komalasari et al., 2017; Yin, 2018).

Research participants included the school management team, teachers, school staff, students, parents, and other relevant stakeholders to answer the research questions. Data analysis in this study was based on theoretical propositions related to the principles of strengths-based education. (Yin, 2018).

3.4 Trustworthiness

Triangulation of data sources, theoretical perspectives, and data collection methods was used to ensure data validity and enhance research credibility. Consultation with co-researchers and experienced researchers supported analytical reflexivity. Transferability was strengthened through purposive selection of informants, particularly teachers identified by students as providing meaningful learning experiences. Member checking was used to validate findings, and code–recode procedures ensured consistency in data categorization (Gillham, 2000; Krefting, 1991; Patton, 2002; Yin, 2018).

4. Results

The results explain the form of implementing principles of strength-based education for vulnerable and at-risk students and identify supporting and inhibiting factors.

4.1 Implementation of Strengths-Based Educational Principles for Vulnerable and At-Risk Students



Figure 2: Implementation of Strengths-Based Educational Principles for Vulnerable and At-Risk Students

The results about the implementation of the principles of strength-based education in supporting vulnerable and at-risk students, including: (1) Measuring the characteristics of students and educators within their context (2) Differentiated learning experiences with creative and flexible pedagogy (3) Collaborating with personal supporters through democratic relationships with students (4) Applying individual strengths and continuously engaging in strengths and positivity (Gardner & Toope, 2011; Lopez & Louis, 2009).

The first principle, measurement of the characteristics of students and educators to fully recognize the conditions of students in their context is carried out by schools in the form of: interviews with parents

at the beginning of student admission to map the conditions of students with disabilities, cognitive and non-cognitive diagnostic assessments including the socio-economic background of students, emphasis on process assessment (formative) compared to summative assessment, different media and assessment methods according to student conditions, availability of school policies to provide teachers with creative assessments opportunities.

The second principle, differentiated learning experiences with creative and flexible pedagogy are carried out by schools in the form of: the availability of different learning achievement targets according to student abilities, learning adapted for students with special needs, the provision of special worksheets for students with special needs, fun learning in the form of game-based, project-based, including practical activities, ensuring student engagement, contextual to students' lives, collaboration in learning, guest teachers to provide opportunities for students to learn from experts, the inclusion of technology in learning, the use of certain conventional methods that challenge students to learn, teaching strategies to facilitate the learning process so that students do not feel hopeless. The availability of resource rooms and special accompanying teachers for the pullout system from regular classes for students with special needs. Individual assistance for students who need additional learning services, periodic evaluation of learning methods by the management team and teachers across subjects. The availability of policies at the school level serves as a guideline for learning differentiation practice.

The third principle, collaborating with personal supporters through democratic relationships with students, is carried out by schools through ensuring a safe environment that provides opportunities for students to interact with the school community. Teachers play a very important role in accompanying vulnerable and at-risk students through their personality characteristics and willingness to carry out various tasks as educators outside of work hours, including responsibilities for students' non-academic needs. Teachers' personal strengths, including learning experiences, adverse life experiences, and their past educators, positively influence their efforts to accompany students. Positive views about their students' and teachers' life values were used as a strong foundation for their work. Schools also need excellent internal cooperation among teachers, school staff, management teams, parents, and students. Personal support in the third principle, especially for groups of students with special needs, is important to obtain from friends who motivate and help them learn and parents who accept their children's conditions and facilitate the development of their children's talents.

The fourth principle, Application of individual strengths and continuous involvement in the strengths and positivity carried out by the school through the availability of learning achievement targets outside of academics alone, including the development of soft skills, positive attitudes, and entrepreneurial abilities. Developing basic skills, such as reading, writing, and arithmetic, wearing clothes and shoes, eating, and using sharp objects safely to help themselves, for students with special needs, to be able to interact socially safely so as not to be the target of bullying. Talent development is carried out through various extracurricular activities, and students may participate in more than 1 activity. Routine and structured non-academic activities through habituation activities at school, such as praying and having breakfast together, reading the holy book, and English day. Student empowerment activities include peer tutors, learning companions for friends with special needs, and participation in school-initiated entrepreneurship development activities. Wide-ranging opportunities for teachers' self-development, coupled with external collaboration, not only foster talent development but also reinforce schools' capacity to support students.

4.2 Supporting Factors in the Implementation of Strengths-Based Education for Vulnerable and At-Risk Students

The research findings identified several supporting factors for the implementation of strength-based education principles, including teacher resources with strong professional characteristics, alignment between personal strengths and work responsibilities, facilities for teacher self-development, principals

with positive dispositions toward vulnerable and at-risk students, structured management teams committed to meeting student needs, and external networks that sustain school programs and student support. At School III, a vocational institution in the agricultural sector, extensive land and building facilities significantly contribute to program implementation and serve as resources for both the school and student economic development. Examples include agro-educational tourism initiatives for community members interested in agriculture, collaboration with Special Needs Schools to provide practical agricultural training, and the use of harvests from school land as income sources for both the institution and its students. Furthermore, since adopting BLUD (Local Public Service Agency) financial management in 2023, School III has gained flexibility in financial administration, enabling the effective operation of diverse programs that foster the development of students, teachers, and the broader school environment.

4.3 Inhibiting Factors in the Implementation of Strengths-Based Education for Vulnerable and At-Risk Students

The inhibiting factors encountered by School I in implementing strength-based education for students with special needs include negative stigma, the absence of specific school policies to guide teachers' work, and regional, provincial, and national policies that lack specificity in supporting these students, thereby complicating school efforts. Additional challenges involve policymakers who are unresponsive to school needs, limited facilities and infrastructure, and insufficient resources for special teacher assistants.

At School II, located in a poor urban area, the limited school space and its position within a densely populated residential environment hinder the implementation of activities. Consequently, the school must schedule additional time outside regular hours, which presents risks such as exposure to crime during late extracurricular activities and disruption of students' study and rest time at home.

Across all three schools, common obstacles include limited parental involvement in children's education, constrained teacher resources, and heavy workloads for available teachers. Moreover, the inflexible government financing model restricts schools from adequately meeting educational needs. This is particularly evident in School III, which focuses on vocational agriculture, where financial assistance for students to engage directly in agricultural development areas—predominantly located in rural or peri-urban regions—is not accommodated within the government's educational financing framework.

5. Discussion

The first principle, mapping student characteristics, is operationalized through cognitive and non-cognitive diagnostic assessments that contextualize student conditions. This initial step enables students to identify available resources and provides a foundation for curriculum development (Rapp & Goscha, 2006) in (Pulla, 2017). Furthermore, the implementation of formative and summative evaluation systems allows teachers to monitor student achievement, adjust instructional strategies, and guide the learning process until the final summative assessment (Garrison & Ehringhaus, 2011). Assessment becomes meaningful when it contributes to the overarching goal of education—developing students' capacity to learn independently, effectively, and responsibly (Black, 2015).

The second principle emphasizes differentiated learning experiences supported by creative and flexible pedagogy, which schools realize through the provision of an adaptive curriculum. Strengths-based classroom practices foster positive student experiences by offering personalized learning opportunities, flexibility in academic achievement, and meaningful participation in groups or communities (Jung, 2015). The pursuit of an adaptive curriculum is reflected in learning content that provides tangible benefits for students, aligns with their developmental levels, experiences, and prior knowledge, and highlights the relevance of mastering content for their lives. Teachers attend closely to

differences in students' cognitive processes, perceptions, content preferences, emotional stability, and learning pathways, tailoring instruction accordingly (Mariati et al., 2021). Learning is delivered through diverse approaches such as games, project-based learning, practical activities, varied assessment methods, and contextualized instruction. Project-based learning offers teachers a safe space to evaluate the impact of their teaching on diverse learners, while contextual learning connects curriculum content to students' lived experiences, thereby deepening engagement (Comber & Kamler, 2004).

The third principle of strength-based education emphasizes the establishment of collaboration with personal supporters within democratic relationships. Teachers play the most significant role in students' school lives (Palomer & Paredes, 2010). Even under extreme conditions such as depression, low life satisfaction, suicidal ideation, self-harm, subjective health complaints, frustration, and helplessness (Aggarwal, 2021; Aslan et al., 2020; Wright & Wachs, 2021), These challenges can be alleviated through strong teacher support (Wright & Wachs, 2021). In the context of teacher–student relationships, teachers assume diverse familial and social roles (Peng, 2023).

The research findings highlight teacher characteristics such as patience, care, flexibility, consistency, protectiveness, optimism, availability for students, and support for egalitarian relationships as essential traits that foster hope, representing a crucial component of strength-based education. As explained by (Saleebey, 2008), hope-inducing behaviors can be manifested through teachers' availability when students need to talk, the demonstration of genuine care and kindness, treating all students with respect, radically accepting students regardless of success or failure, engaging and communicating in ways that convey concern and trust, assisting students in achieving their goals, and celebrating their accomplishments and successes.

Teachers who effectively fulfill their roles also contribute to building support systems for students. The roles identified in this study represent positive contributions to student development. Competent teachers foster positive learning outcomes for both students and the school environment, take responsibility for ensuring that academic learning targets are achieved, and provide instruction in social-emotional learning. They assist students in building relationships within the school community, prepare them to participate as global citizens capable of responding to pressing social, economic, and political challenges, and contribute to students' overall well-being, encompassing social, emotional, spiritual, cognitive, and physical dimensions (White & McCallum, 2022).

The major roles that teachers are expected to fulfill, along with their personal characteristics, originate from their individual strengths developed through past learning processes, experiences with former educators, and the difficult life challenges they have successfully overcome. This indicates that the implementation of strength-based education is fundamentally grounded in teachers' belief that their life experiences serve as pathways to creating better lives for their students. As (Saleebey, 2002) explains, strengths represent the qualities, attributes, and personal virtues possessed by individuals. Life experiences, in turn, provide lessons on how to confront difficulties and challenges (Yip, 2005).

School staff also play an important role as personal supporters of students, through responsibilities of service, acting as positive adult role models, and contributing to the formation of students' attitudes and behaviors. Research conducted by Reeves (2022) demonstrates that student well-being is influenced by the well-being of school staff, which necessarily involves educational personnel (Curren et al., 2024). Support and engagement from school staff can positively impact the achievement of inclusive classroom environments (Mulholland & O'Connor, 2016; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 2017, as cited in (Boyle et al., 2020).

Another source of personal support within schools is peer relationships, which serve to motivate, provide care, and assist in the learning process. Research on school connectedness indicates that peer relationships constitute an essential component of social connectedness, which in turn shapes students'

sense of belonging to the school. Collaboration with peers also creates opportunities to strengthen academic connectedness. (Andersen et al., 2019).

Parental involvement as a source of support emerged in the findings of this study, although its presence was not as strong as the roles of teachers, school staff, and peers. Despite the limited parental role, teachers in the research sites demonstrated considerable awareness of parents' constraints. This contrasts with the findings of (Milner et al., 2017), which suggest that when teachers fail to recognize the barriers preventing parents from engaging in their children's education, they may develop negative perceptions of parents living in poverty when those parents do not attend school activities.

The fourth principle involves the application of strengths to continuously engage with positivity. The research findings indicate the presence of non-academic learning targets, which provide opportunities for vulnerable and at-risk students to achieve attainable goals. Access to positive attributes enables adolescents to reach their full potential as productive and engaged adults (Resiliency Initiative, 2011).

Student engagement in the application of strengths and positivity is also facilitated through habituation activities within schools and extracurricular programs. Efforts toward self-development help students cultivate awareness of their own strengths. The findings reveal a positive and significant relationship between strength awareness and sustained school engagement. Awareness of strengths enhances self-awareness and self-confidence, facilitates peer interactions through the development of shared language, and nurtures friendships as well as deeper understanding of others—factors hypothesized to contribute to students' sense of belonging and retention. (Soria & Stubblefield, 2015).

In the identification of extracurricular activities, sports emerge as the most frequently offered and most anticipated programs in schools. The positive impact of sports-based learning lies in its ability to enhance perceptions of autonomy, competence, peer relationships, school motivation, and emotional management among students. The diverse structures within sports education models—such as permanent teams, festive environments during competitions, and fair play—provide opportunities for students to develop empathy and awareness of their own emotions as well as those of peers and competitors. Students engaged in sports education models demonstrate improved emotional regulation and control, yielding positive outcomes even for adolescents in critical developmental phases (Méndez-Giménez et al., 2022). Research further indicates that physical activity can directly or indirectly improve the quality of life of students categorized as vulnerable (Zayed et al., 2024).

Student involvement in empowerment activities—such as peer tutoring, assisting peers with special needs, and participating in school entrepreneurship programs—provides greater opportunities for learning and recognition of competence. Through these activities, students learn that collaboration not only fosters motivation but also enhances the quality of learning experiences. Moreover, students perceive that collaborative learning offers long-term benefits, particularly in relation to future employment opportunities. Cooperative learning practices also strengthen academic connectedness, which constitutes an integral component of students' overall connectedness to school (Andersen et al., 2019).

For vocational students (School III), opportunities to engage in entrepreneurial activities are substantial, and these appear to have a positive impact on the development of self-competence, involvement in more meaningful activities, optimism, resilience, and personal strengths. This aligns with Gibbs' (2014) findings that vocational education is more predictive of students' psychological and mental well-being compared to general education, which is more closely associated with emotional well-being. Psychological well-being is defined in terms of competence, engagement, meaningfulness, optimism, and self-esteem; mental well-being is measured through emotional stability, resilience, and vitality; while emotional well-being pertains to positive emotions, positive relationships, and life satisfaction (Jongbloed, 2018).

The application of strengths through continuous engagement with positivity also extends to educators. Efforts to remain consistently engaged in positivity can be realized through teachers' self-development initiatives. Research demonstrates a positive correlation between well-trained teachers and improvements in student engagement, behavior, and academic performance (Fei & Oyam, 2024; Hafeez, 2021; Ikram et al., 2020; Mevlut, 2016; Ventista & Brown, 2023). Teachers' self-development is also considered to play a crucial role in fostering emotional stability and behavioral consistency among educators. Engaging in continuous professional growth not only enhances instructional competence but also contributes to the cultivation of positive dispositions that support effective teaching and student development. (Siddiqui & Ahamed, 2020).

Supporting factors in the implementation of strength-based education, in addition to the crucial role played by teachers, also include the support of school leadership and management teams. Effective leadership is required—leadership that is committed to social justice (Tracy-Bronson, 2024). A socially just principal fosters a healthy organizational culture, promotes democratic and participatory leadership, enhances staff capacity, creates inclusive environments, and builds school communities—particularly in the context of supporting disadvantaged student groups (Boyle et al., 2020; Gamboa et al., 2022).

The exploration of factors hindering the implementation of strength-based education for vulnerable and at-risk student groups reveals several challenges. These include limited parental involvement, resource constraints such as shortages of teachers, facilities, professional networks, negative environments characterized by stigma toward students with special needs, and unsupportive policies and stakeholders—particularly regarding the implementation of inclusive education.

The limited involvement of parents requires further examination, given that families of vulnerable and at-risk students often experience stressful family lives, lack of parenting support, parents' inability to take time off from work, and negative interactions with schools (Kurian et al., 2021, as cited in (Wehner Hickman, 2024)).

Resource constraints, particularly the shortage of educators, represent a significant barrier. Globally, an additional 44 million primary and secondary school teachers are required to meet Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4—ensuring quality education for all by 2030. Teacher shortages affect both developed and developing countries. Most teachers needed (seven out of ten) are at the secondary level, and more than half are required to replace those leaving the profession. The challenge of teacher shortages is complex, shaped by the interaction of multiple factors such as motivation, recruitment, retention, training, working conditions, and social status. Addressing this issue effectively requires a holistic and systemic approach. Teacher shortages carry wide-ranging consequences, including increased workloads and reduced well-being among teachers, discouragement of prospective educators, perpetuation of educational inequities, and heightened financial burdens on education systems (UNESCO, 2023).

With regard to limitations in facilities, infrastructure, and professional networks, schools need to move closer to asset-based trends in sustainable programs that support vulnerable children. To meet the demands for facilities, infrastructure, and other educational needs, networking is essential for schools. There are seven components of the asset-based trend that schools should adopt in order to provide sustainable educational programs for vulnerable students: (1) community-based participation, requiring an ecosystem perspective to ensure resources are available for educational processes; (2) building and strengthening internal capacity, whereby schools must collect data on assets, capacities, and resources, shift from deficit-based to strength-based perspectives, and allocate budgets for development rather than remediation; (3) mobilizing community resources, recognizing parents, community members, and NGOs as agents of change, and building circles of empowerment; (4) networking and maintaining relationships, including cross-sector collaboration and connecting individuals with resources or service institutions; (5)

advocacy, which involves raising public awareness, openness, inclusivity, and developing comprehensive understanding of supported groups and their communities rather than labeling and stigmatization; (6) leveraging local trust, structures, knowledge, and embedded practices (customs), acknowledging community and individual belief systems and practices, viewing communities and individuals as experts, and recognizing their potential to provide valuable perspectives; and (7) information sharing, engaging as network builders, and fostering connectedness rather than merely transmitting information (Ebersöhn & Eloff, 2006).

Concerning stigma, previous research has highlighted the vulnerability of students with special needs to negative stigma and the interactions they experience within schools (Dua & Dua, 2017; Kausik & Hussain, 2023). Regarding inclusive education policies, one of the key issues is the lack of mechanisms to ensure the effective implementation of declared legislation on inclusive education (Kurowski et al., 2022). In line with the conditions of inclusive education in Indonesia, national guidelines on adequate accommodations for students with disabilities in inclusive schools are not available, and supervisory systems remain insufficient, leaving many inclusive schools unsupervised. The essence of inclusive education is transdisciplinary; however, challenges in collaboration across diverse professional identities remain significant. Ambiguities in the terminology of inclusive education are reflected in global pedagogical challenges. Moreover, the lack of material, technical, and training support for pedagogical staff worldwide has resulted in educators feeling inadequately prepared to work in inclusive classrooms. (Hata et al., 2021).

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study demonstrates that the three schools possess distinct institutional characteristics, yet all are equally committed to providing educational services for vulnerable and at-risk students through a strength-based approach. The implementation of this approach is reflected in comprehensive assessments of student characteristics, differentiated instruction, supportive teacher–student relationships, and continuous engagement in the application of strengths and positivity. These practices affirm that recognizing individual potential—rather than focusing on limitations—can foster more inclusive and empowering learning environments, while simultaneously supporting students’ academic and socio-emotional well-being.

The findings also indicate that students’ services strongly influenced by an integrated school ecosystem. Visionary leadership, teachers’ professional commitment, curriculum flexibility, as well as peer and family support contribute to strengthening student resilience. In addition, partnerships with external stakeholders and the utilization of institutional resources expand opportunities for contextual learning that are relevant to students’ future needs. Thus, strength-based education functions not only as a pedagogical strategy but also as an organizational framework that connects internal and external assets to holistically support student development.

Nevertheless, this study also reveals several structural and cultural challenges. Stigma toward students with special needs, suboptimal parental involvement, limited program funding, and misalignment between policies and schools’ service capacities remain obstacles to the implementation of inclusive education. In addition, teachers’ workloads and resource constraints affect the sustainability of differentiated instructional practices. These conditions underscore that the transformation toward strength-oriented education requires systemic support that goes beyond the individual efforts of educators.

Based on these findings, schools are advised to strengthen inclusive cultures through continuous teacher capacity development, particularly in student condition mapping assessments to prepare contextually appropriate instruction, differentiated learning, and fair evaluation practices. Strengthening partnerships with families should be pursued through more intensive communication and parent

empowerment programs, ensuring consistent student support both at home and at school. Furthermore, optimizing networks with communities, businesses, and other educational institutions can serve as an effective strategy to expand resource access and provide authentic learning experiences. Asset-based approaches should become the operational framework of schools, especially when government support is unavailable or difficult to access.

At the policy level, more adaptive regulations are needed regarding financing, criteria for inclusive services, and professional support for schools serving vulnerable and at-risk students. Governments and educational stakeholders are expected to create policy frameworks aligned with the principles of social justice, ensuring that every student could develop according to their potential. With responsive policies and multi-stakeholder collaboration, strength-based approaches have the potential to serve as a strategic foundation for building a more inclusive, resilient, and student well-being-oriented education system.

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