

P-ISSN: 2338-8617

E-ISSN: 2443-2067

Jurnal Ilmiah

PEURADEUN

Vol. 13, No. 2, May 2025



JIP
The Indonesian Journal of the Social Sciences
www.journal.scadindependent.org
DOI Prefix Number: 10.26811

INDEX  COPERNICUS
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 **sinta** **1**
Science and Technology Index
Accredited "Sinta 1" by Decree No. 72/E/KPT/2024
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**“Humanizing Humans” in Inclusive Pesantren: The Role of Peer Support
in Promoting Self-Efficacy and Independence**

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Article in Jurnal Ilmiah Peuradeun

Available at : <https://journal.scadindependent.org/index.php/jipeuradeun/article/view/1876>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.26811/peuradeun.v13i2.1876>

How to Cite this Article

APA : Azizah, N., Yusrina, J.A., Nugraini, E.D., & Zulfa, L.N. (2025). “Humanizing Humans” in Inclusive Pesantren: The Role of Peer Support in Promoting Self-Efficacy and Independence. *Jurnal Ilmiah Peuradeun*, 13(2), 987-1020. <https://doi.org/10.26811/peuradeun.v13i2.1876>

Others Visit : <https://journal.scadindependent.org/index.php/jipeuradeun>

Jurnal Ilmiah Peuradeun (JIP), *the Indonesian Journal of the Social Sciences*, is a leading peer-reviewed and open-access journal, which publishes scholarly works, and specializes in the Social Sciences that emphasize contemporary Asian issues with interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches. JIP is published by SCAD Independent and published 3 times a year (January, May, and September) with p-ISSN: 2338-8617 and e-ISSN: 2443-2067. JIP has become a CrossRef member. Therefore, all articles published will have a unique DOI number. JIP has been accredited Rank 1 (Sinta 1) by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, the Republic of Indonesia, through the Decree of the Director-General of Higher Education, Research, and Technology No. 72/E/KPT/2024, dated April 1, 2024. This accreditation is valid until the May 2027 edition.

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JIP indexed/included in Web of Science, Scopus, Sinta, MAS, Index Copernicus International, Erih Plus, Garuda, Moraref, Scilit, Sherpa/Romeo, Google Scholar, OAJI, PKP, Index, Crossref, BASE, ROAD, GIF, Advanced Science Index, JournalTOCs, ISI, SIS, ESJI, SSRN, ResearchGate, Mendeley and [others](#).



“HUMANIZING HUMANS” IN INCLUSIVE PESANTREN: THE ROLE OF PEER SUPPORT IN PROMOTING SELF-EFFICACY AND INDEPENDENCE

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Received: August 30, 2024	Accepted: April 11, 2025	Published: May 30, 2025
Article Url: https://journal.scadindependent.org/index.php/jipeuradeun/article/view/1876		

Abstract

Students with special needs in inclusive education settings, including Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), often face significant challenges related to low self-efficacy and limited independence. These difficulties are frequently rooted in feelings of alienation, low self-confidence, social withdrawal, and experiences of bullying. Peer support plays a vital role in fostering both self-efficacy and independence among these students. This study investigates how peer support contributes to the development of these attributes in inclusive Islamic boarding schools. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis, and were analyzed thematically using Quirkos software. The findings indicate that emotional, instrumental, and informational support from peers—especially when accompanied by unconditional positive regard and emotional availability—significantly enhances students' self-efficacy and independence. The integration of Islamic values and the cultural context of pesantren nurtures a peer environment rooted in the philosophy of “humanizing humans”, which promotes inclusivity and challenges hierarchical perceptions of disability. This study provides valuable insights for inclusive education practitioners aiming to foster supportive peer relationships and inclusive school cultures.

Keywords: *Peer Support; Self-Efficacy; Independence; Special Needs Students; Inclusive Pesantren.*



A. Introduction

Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia, commonly known as *pesantren*, have undergone significant transformations in various aspects, including curriculum (Fatmawati, 2021; Ilyasin, 2020; Suparjo & Azizah, 2022), management (Afista & Abu Bakar, 2021; Suradi, 2018), institutions and life skills development programs (Suardi Wekke, 2012; Baharudin et al., 2023; Tambak et al., 2025). One of the recent developments is inclusive *pesantren*, which allows students with special needs, such as those with physical, intellectual, and social-emotional difficulties, to learn in the same environment as other students in general (Rafif & Hasan, 2019; Syahbudi et al., 2024). *Pesantren* has immense potential to deliver inclusive education based on the ideas of openness, loyalty, deliberation, and the strength of social and government ties (Huda, 2018; Hanif et al., 2024; Fathorrahman et al., 2024; Misdah et al., 2025).

The existence of inclusive Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) aligns with the Law of the Republic of Indonesia Number 8 of 2016 concerning persons with disabilities (RI, 2016). Inclusive *pesantren* aim to provide non-discriminatory education by integrating all students, including those with special needs, into regular daily learning activities (Hallahan, 2009; Saifullah & Nurjanah, 2024; Hasbiyallah et al., 2024). However, the implementation of inclusive education within *pesantren* presents several challenges. One of the most common issues faced by children with special needs is a lack of independence, which encompasses emotional, intellectual, social, and economic dimensions (Darmawati & Indriawati, 2021). Their limitations often lead to a reliance on others for daily functioning. Yet, independence is a fundamental societal value and a key determinant of future quality of life (Spiegel, 1985). It enhances an individual's potential and abilities, enabling them to carry out daily activities using their own capacities and available resources (Oktaviani, 2019).

Independence involves not only a child's development in accordance with age but also their ability to solve everyday problems (Setiawati et al., 2021). According to Sudrajat and Rosida (2013), the

dimensions of independence for children with special needs include self-care, communication, socialization and adaptation, self-help, life skills, and use of leisure time. Independence reflects a child's ability to think and act autonomously to meet their needs, thereby reducing dependence on others and fostering personal growth (Sa'diyah, 2017).

On the other hand, the position of children with special needs within an inclusive environment can lead to feelings of alienation, low self-confidence, social withdrawal, and even experiences of bullying (Nugraini et al., 2023). These conditions can negatively impact children's self-efficacy, or their belief in their own abilities (Susanti, 2021). Self-efficacy plays a crucial role in human developmental tasks, as it involves psychological processes that influence human functioning, including cognitive, motivational, affective, and selective processes (Bandura, 1994). Moreover, self-efficacy encourages individuals to persevere in overcoming obstacles and to actively seek broader information (Susanti, 2021). According to Bandura (1977), self-efficacy consists of three dimensions: the perceived difficulty of a task (magnitude), the strength of belief in one's capabilities (strength), and the belief in the ability to apply these capabilities across various tasks (generality). Several studies have demonstrated a positive and significant relationship between self-efficacy and independence: the higher the level of self-efficacy, the greater the level of a child's independence (Triwiratman et al., 2023).

One of the factors that promote the development of self-efficacy and independence in children with special needs is a supportive and responsive environments (Susanti, 2021), whether from parents, family members, society, or peers who interact with them frequently (Triwiratman et al., 2023). Peer support is defined as mutual and social-emotional support that is psychologically beneficial to achieve the desired social or personal changes (Gartner A & Riessman, 1982). It encompasses acts such as showing empathy toward friends, offering support, and helping one another. Effective peer support is built on reciprocal compassion, respect, comfort, and the freedom to express emotions—including anger, fear, anxiety, and confusion (Cowie & Wallace, 2000). Importantly, peer support



benefits both the recipients and the providers by fostering feelings of being valued and needed (Penney, 2018). It also encourages children to take responsibility for themselves and for their peers, and to actively participate in their daily lives (MacConville & Rae, 2006).

The role of peer support has been shown to significantly impact various aspects of children's development, including self-efficacy, problem-solving abilities, independence, optimism, and stress reduction (Chudzicka-Czupała & Zalewska-Łunkiewicz, 2020). It also contributes to self-development, adaptation, achievement success (Altermatt, 2019), strengthened self-esteem (Chang et al., 2018) and career development (Zhang, Huafeng; Huang, 2018), and the provision of social, moral, and emotional support. Peer support is particularly effective because peers typically share similar ages, experiences, and challenges, which creates a mutually reinforcing dynamic and serves as a powerful source of social support without generational barriers. This similarity fosters optimism, motivation, and enthusiasm, enhances self-confidence in problem-solving, and reduces feelings of laziness and despair (Sadiyah & Hidayati, 2020). Through peer support, children develop greater confidence in their abilities, allowing them to grow optimally (Susanti, 2021), cultivate an independent personality, and integrate more effectively into their social environments (Syahlan et al., 2019). However, fostering such supportive peer relationships presents a significant challenge for inclusive education institutions, including the Inclusive Pesantren of Nurul Maksum Semarang.

The Inclusive Pesantren of Nurul Maksum Semarang is the first inclusive Islamic boarding school in Central Java, Indonesia. Although students with special needs constitute a minority—8 out of 37 students—they are able to socialize effectively with regular students. Regular students demonstrate an understanding of their peers' limitations and display a willingness to provide support in various situations, indicating the presence of peer support. Peer support has been shown to significantly enhance self-efficacy (Chudzicka-Czupała & Zalewska-Łunkiewicz, 2020) and

independence (Schwei et al., 2020). However, it is important to note that in some cases, peer support can have negative effects when it fosters dependence and inhibits the development of self-reliance (Bracke et al., 2008). At Nurul Maksum, however, students with special needs generally exhibit strong characteristics of self-independence, particularly in emotional and social domains. This is evidenced by their ability to manage emotions effectively and interact socially without significant difficulties. To maintain this dynamic, Nurul Maksum applies specific eligibility criteria, admitting only special needs students who demonstrate proficient self-development skills.

A supportive environment, particularly among peers, also plays a crucial role in fostering positive self-efficacy. Support from friends motivates students to persevere in learning, even when they face challenges such as difficulties in memorizing or understanding lessons during Qur'anic recitation. Given these dynamics, this study seeks to explore more deeply the role of peer support in enhancing the self-efficacy and independence of students with special needs at Nurul Maksum Semarang.

Although many studies have examined the role of peer support in relation to self-efficacy and independence, as well as research on inclusive *pesantren*, few have specifically explored how peer support fosters both self-efficacy and independence among students with special needs in inclusive *pesantren* settings. Previous research has demonstrated that peer support significantly influences self-efficacy (Burke et al., 2019; Chudzicka-Czupala & Zalewska-Łunkiewicz, 2020), self-development, environmental adjustment (Altermatt, 2019), reduced depression (Chang et al., 2018) and career development (Zhang, Huafeng; Huang, 2018). Meanwhile, research on the independence of students has largely focused on promoting independence through life skills education (Suparjo, Nurul Azizah, 2023), peer counselling (Sadiyah & Hidayati, 2020), and habituation strategies (Wallace, 2021).

Research on the role of peer support in fostering self-efficacy and independence has not yet been specifically conducted within the context of inclusive *pesantren*. Previous studies have largely focused on regular students in mainstream schools or traditional *pesantren*. Furthermore,



research on inclusive *pesantren* itself remains relatively limited. Therefore, this study offers a novel contribution by examining a different subject group and research setting—specifically exploring the role of peer support in enhancing the self-efficacy and independence of students with special needs in an inclusive *pesantren* environment.

B. Method

This study employed a qualitative research design using a case study approach to gain an in-depth understanding of a specific educational setting (Miles et al., 2014; Tomaszewski et al., 2020). The research focused on exploring the role of peer support in fostering self-efficacy and independence among students with special needs at the Inclusive Pesantren Nurul Maksum in Semarang, Central Java.

Purposive sampling was used to select information-rich cases that directly aligned with the research objectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The primary data sources were the students themselves, including eight students with special needs—two with hearing impairments, two with speech impairments, three with intellectual disabilities (ID), and one with autism—and twenty-nine regular students (RG) as shown in Table 1. Additional data were obtained from key informants such as the *Kiai* (Islamic leader), *bu Nyai* (female Islamic teacher), (*ustadzah*) female teachers, as well as from documentation and observations.

Table 1. List of research subjects

No.	Name	Gender	Age (yo)	Disabilities
1.	AU1	Female	12	Autism
2.	TR1	Female	12	Deaf
3.	TR2	Male	15	Deaf
4.	TW1	Male	16	Mute
5.	TW2	Male	17	Mute
6.	TG1	Female	19	Intellectual disability
7.	TG2	Male	17	Intellectual disability
8.	TG3	Male	16	Intellectual disability

Data were collected using three primary techniques: in-depth interviews, direct observation, and document analysis. The interviews were conducted in

a semi-structured format with open-ended questions, allowing for flexible and natural dialogue (Yin, 2017). These interviews focused understanding how peer support influenced the development of self-efficacy and independence among students.

Direct observations were guided by an observation checklist that focused on peer interactions, supportive behaviors, and students' independent functioning. Observations took place during daily routines, religious practices, and extracurricular activities. Document analysis included a review of students' personal data, psychological assessments, and photos or records of boarding school activities. These data sources were used to triangulate the findings and provide contextual support (Walidin et al., 2015).

To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, both source triangulation and technique triangulation were employed (Christina, 2017). Source triangulation was achieved by comparing responses from different participants, while method triangulation involved cross-checking data gathered through interviews, observations, and document analysis. The data were analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. The analysis was facilitated by Quirkos software, which supported rigorous coding and the visualization of emerging themes.

This methodological framework offered a comprehensive and credible approach to exploring the dynamics of peer support and its influence on self-efficacy and independence within the unique context of an inclusive Islamic boarding school.

C. Results and Discussion

This section presents the main findings of the study conducted at the Inclusive Islamic Boarding School of Nurul Maksum, Semarang, focusing on the role of peer support in fostering self-efficacy and independence among students with special needs. The results highlight the emotional, instrumental, and informational support provided by peers, along with the psychological and behavioral outcomes associated with such



support. These findings are then critically examined to explore how the *pesantren* environment and Islamic values contribute to the overall inclusive educational experience.

1. Results

The daily lives of students with special needs at the Inclusive *Pesantren* Nurul Maksum are characterized by structured and routine activities. All students—regardless of physical or intellectual challenges—participate equally in the boarding school's educational and social programs. The *pesantren* imposes no activity restrictions on students with disabilities. Instead, it cultivates a spirit of inclusion grounded in the core principle that all students should learn and grow together, recognizing and celebrating their differences rather than being limited by them.

“Indeed, we made the design (of the boarding school) like that. So that we can explore and appreciate the potential that exists in each student. Students have different capacities, right? So, they are all the same. We emphasize the concept of humanizing humans”. (Interview with Kiai).

This inclusive approach enables students with special needs to experience school life on equal terms with their peers. They are not segregated or marginalized but are immersed in a culture that emphasizes empathy, understanding, and the recognition of each student's unique abilities. The school community upholds the philosophy of “*humanizing humans*”, fostering emotional sensitivity and mutual support among all students. Notably, this approach also removes the pressure to meet uniform academic standards, creating space for authentic peer support to flourish—both among regular students and those with special needs.

At Nurul Maksum, peer support takes three primary forms—emotional, instrumental, and informational—each playing a vital role in enhancing the well-being and development of students with special needs.

a. Emotional support

Emotional support within the *pesantren* environment fosters interpersonal growth by promoting compassion, attentiveness, empathy,

mutual respect, and the unconditional acceptance of each student's uniqueness. Students with special needs often require additional time to learn and complete tasks. This reality nurtures a natural culture of assistance and sensitivity among their peers, gradually cultivating mutual compassion and deeper understanding.

"Kiai said all humans are the same. Nobody wants (to have deficiencies) like that. So, I help because I feel bad for them". (Interview with RG)

In addition to providing emotional comfort, peer support is also demonstrated through the trust and responsibilities entrusted to students with special needs. These students are not only included in various group activities but are also given equal opportunities to take on leadership roles—such as leading the *Asmaul Husna* recitation, actively participating in the *rebana* musical group, or serving in coordination roles, like TG1, who was assigned to monitor student discipline. These opportunities are not merely symbolic; they affirm the capabilities of students with special needs, strengthen their sense of agency, and build self-confidence. Rather than offering direct assistance, peers often choose to guide and coach them through challenges with patience and respect.

This emotional bond is further reinforced through expressions of appreciation. The pesantren fosters a culture of mutual respect and equality among students, where every effort—especially by a peer with special needs—is acknowledged through praise, applause, or encouraging gestures. These affirmations strengthen students' sense of belonging and recognition. It is common for students to praise each other's achievements, whether in academics, sports, or the arts. For example, when students play soccer in the schoolyard or practice *rebana*, those with special needs who perform well are warmly acknowledged by their peers. As TG3 once said to TG2, *"You excel at playing the rebana."*

These expressions of appreciation not only boost the morale of students with special needs but also help cultivate a harmonious and inclusive social environment within the pesantren. Informal interactions

among students—ranging from casual storytelling to offering comfort—reflect a deeply rooted culture of emotional interconnectedness.

b. Instrumental support

Instrumental support refers to direct, practical assistance with daily activities. At Nurul Maksum, this type of support is evident in actions such as helping peers cross the road, sharing stationery, or simply being present to offer a listening ear. Often, it includes demonstrating tasks to students with special needs and patiently repeating the instructions until they are fully understood and internalized.

“Telling them must be repeated. They don’t always understand so we tell them again. They often forget too”. (Interview with RG)

For instance, during *barzanji* prayers on Friday evenings, if a special needs student forgets their prayer book, other students will share their own copies without hesitation. Similarly, if a student runs out of money to buy snacks, a peer may willingly lend them some. These acts are not driven by obligation but stem from a sincere desire to help and build connection. While instrumental support is often situational, it reflects a strong ethic of mutual responsibility.

One of the most meaningful forms of instrumental support is simply being emotionally and physically present. The presence of a supportive peer can profoundly affect a student’s sense of comfort and security. For instance, TG3 shared that the most comforting aspect of living in the boarding school was having someone to talk to each night, which helped alleviate feelings of loneliness.

“I am closest to my roommate. Usually before going to bed we talk a lot. Then if tomorrow I can’t wake up at dawn, I will also be woken up”. (Interview with TG3)

This illustrates how instrumental support extends beyond physical assistance—it also fosters emotional connection and strengthens social resilience.

c. Informational support

Informational support involves offering advice, guidance, and problem-solving strategies. At Nurul Maksum, students with special needs often express concerns such as homesickness, fatigue, or difficulty adjusting to the early wake-up schedule. In response, their peers listen patiently and provide moral encouragement, helping them feel less isolated and more assured in facing daily challenges.

Moreover, regular students often support their peers with special needs in developing personal routines—such as maintaining cleanliness, wearing appropriate clothing, and practicing self-discipline. Although progress can be gradual, their commitment remains consistent. This dedication is guided by the advice of the Kiai, who emphasizes the importance of patience and empathy in assisting students with special needs.

Peers offer consistent reminders and practical demonstrations—such as distinguishing between clean and dirty clothes or correcting clothing worn inside out. This repeated guidance plays a crucial role in the learning process of students with special needs.

Academic challenges also create opportunities for informational support. Students with intellectual disabilities receive informal tutoring from their peers, who patiently re-explain classroom material until it is understood. While these peer tutors may not use formal pedagogical methods, their persistence and peer-to-peer rapport often prove highly effective.

To further support students, visual symbols are displayed on the walls of the *pesantren*. These visuals assist students with special needs—especially those with cognitive challenges—in better understanding and retaining information. As noted by Korikana (2020), visual-based instruction is particularly effective tool for slow learners and individuals with intellectual disabilities.

1) *Self-efficacy of students with special needs*

Despite the various challenges faced by special needs students at Nurul Maksum—such as intellectual delays, communication barriers, and emotional instability—many demonstrate a strong sense of self-efficacy. For example, TG2 is 17 years old and still learning *Iqra'* 5 due to intellectual disabilities, while TR1 and TW1 face communication challenges as deaf and mute students. AU1, who is on the autism spectrum, struggles with emotional regulation, particularly after returning from school holidays. Nevertheless, these difficulties do not necessarily undermine their belief in their own abilities.

According to Bandura (1977), self-efficacy consists of three dimensions: magnitude, strength, and generality. In terms of magnitude, special needs students at Nurul Maksum often encounter difficulties in completing complex tasks such as Qur'anic recitation, memorizing prayers, or performing household chores. Nevertheless, they remain committed and motivated, demonstrating resilience and a lack of feelings of inferiority.

"He does not need to be told. The child is attentive in studying the Quran". (Interview with the ustadzah)

Each student has unique preferences and limitations. For example, AU1 favors *barjanji* activities over Quran recitation, as he enjoys playing the *rebana*. TG3 finds it difficult to participate in dawn prayers due to a strong dislike of early mornings, while TG1 excels in leadership roles and actively seeks out responsibilities.

"We told him to wake up the others. Basically, the one who wakes up at dawn, who reminds them of activities, is him. He's a good kid". (Interview with Kyai)

In terms of strength, students demonstrate resilience and a consistently positive attitude toward routine learning. The pesantren fosters this by emphasizing the learning process over outcomes, encouraging students to progress at their own pace and prioritize personal growth rather than competition.

"We never give pressure oh you have to be able to do this, be able to do that. That is not it. It does not work like that". (Interview with Nyai)

Regarding generality, students often struggle to transfer learned skills to unfamiliar contexts. For example, while they may competently manage personal belongings, tasks involving electricity—such as ironing—are perceived as intimidating and are generally avoided due to safety concerns.

2) Independence of students with special needs

The *pesantren* selectively admits special needs students who show potential for self-development and can be educated in basic academic areas such as reading, writing, and arithmetic (Desiningrum, 2016). However, despite this initial screening, these students still require continuous mentoring to foster greater independence, especially when faced more complex tasks.

Nonetheless, many students demonstrate significant progress. They are able to eat independently, use utensils, and maintain personal hygiene, including bathing and washing their clothes. These routines are introduced early and reinforced through consistent daily scheduling.

They are also adept at dressing appropriately for various occasions and consistently follow established routines, such as changing out of their uniforms after school. Over time, these habits become second nature. Additionally, they learn basic grooming practices to maintain a neat and presentable appearance.

Students also demonstrate situational awareness. For instance, during unexpected events such as power outages, they know to light candles or operate light switches. While they are not allowed to use electronic devices like irons without supervision, their peers consistently teach and remind them how to manage such tasks safely.

"We often tell them. Sometimes they do not understand, so we tell them again. They often forget too". (Interview with RG)

They also demonstrate growing independence in life skills and communication. Many are able to plant vegetables, feed fish, and manage simple financial transactions, such as purchasing snacks or toiletries from nearby stalls.

“Buy snacks usually at the stall there. (Buy) alone”. (Interview with AU1)

The local community surrounding the pesantren also plays a supportive role. Students with special needs engage positively with neighbors, and some even feel comfortable visiting their homes. These interactions help reinforce a sense of belonging that extends beyond the school environment.

Perhaps most remarkable is the students’ religious independence. They consistently participate in congregational prayers and associated rituals, such as *wirid*. Through repeated practice, they develop the discipline to perform ablution and respond promptly to the *adhan* without needing reminders. This demonstrates a high level of self-regulation—an especially notable achievement among students with special needs.

2. Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that peer support—encompassing emotional, instrumental, and informational dimensions (Solomon, 2004)—plays a significant role in shaping the psychological development of students with special needs, particularly in fostering self-efficacy and independence. This supports Bandura’s theory (1994), which emphasizes the importance of social interactions and environmental reinforcement in the development of self-efficacy. Moreover, this study extends the existing understanding of peer support by highlighting the influence of cultural context and Islamic values within the setting of an Islamic boarding school—an aspect that has been largely overlooked in previous research.



Figure 1. Peer support coding map through quirkos

First, emotional support from peers—encompassing empathy, unconditional positive regard, and appreciation—significantly boosts the confidence of students with special needs in facing challenges. It helps them feel valued and accepted within their environment. This aligns with the findings of Shefer et al. (2018), which suggest that relationships grounded in unconditional positive regard contribute to improved self-esteem, psychological and emotional well-being, and overall self-development (Murphy et al., 2020). Similarly, peer-provided positive affirmations foster the development of optimistic mindsets and enhance self-efficacy (Medyasari et al., 2021). Acts of appreciation and recognition of individual efforts further reinforce self-confidence and promote a sense of efficacy.

Students with special needs often encounter limitations that hinder their ability to complete complex tasks (A. Muchsin et al., 2022). The findings of this study reveal that, in terms of task difficulty (*magnitude*), the subjects are generally capable of performing only simple tasks. In the *generality* dimension, they struggle to transfer their abilities across a wider range of contexts. However, it is essential to recognize that self-efficacy is not solely determined by the complexity or variety of tasks (A. Muchsin et al., 2022). Rather, it is fundamentally rooted in an individual's perceived ability to plan and carry out the actions required to achieve a goal

(Bandura, 1977; Code, 2020). This underscores the importance of motivational and self-affective factors in the development of self-efficacy (Code, 2020; Qudsyi et al., 2020). This study further highlights how peer support contributes meaningfully to that process, serving as a key social mechanism in strengthening motivation and self-belief among students with special needs.

The Inclusive Pesantren of Nurul Maksum fosters an ecosystem grounded in the value of “*humanizing humans*”, which emphasizes respect for individual differences and nurtures non-discriminatory, supportive relationships among students. This inclusive approach plays a crucial role in enhancing the self-efficacy of students with special needs. Previous research has shown that emotional support from peers can reduce burnout and increase learning motivation (Kusuma et al., 2022; Azhari et al., 2024), as well as promote resilience and self-confidence (Mastrocola & Flynn, 2017) in individuals with special needs. These findings are consistent with the results of this study, which underscore the importance of a supportive peer environment in fostering self-efficacy.

In the context of independence, research by Schwei et al. (2020) highlights that peer support can significantly enhance the ability of individuals with special needs to make daily decisions independently. Positive social interactions with peers contribute to greater self-confidence and a stronger sense of competence in completing tasks without assistance. This dynamic is evident at the Inclusive *Pesantren* of Nurul Maksum, where students with special needs are actively involved in a range of activities—including taking on coordination roles, leading prayers, and serving as part of the core team for *rebana* performances. These opportunities not only promote functional independence but also reinforce their sense of agency and belonging.

Second, instrumental support—encompassing physical assistance, mentoring, and the repetition of instructions—not only facilitates daily activities but also fosters independence through habituation. This finding reinforces Spiegel’s (1985) assertion that independence is cultivated through

consistent practice and tangible environmental support. Similarly, Schwei et al. (2020) emphasize that instrumental peer support enhances independence by promoting a sense of empowerment. This aligns closely with the strategies employed by regular students at Nurul Maksum, who actively assist their peers with special needs in acquiring essential life skills.

Peer support is reflected in the physical and emotional presence of fellow students during times of need—such as serving as conversation partners, assisting with Qur'an recitation, and guiding the completion of daily tasks. The presence of supportive friends during critical moments helps fulfill psychosocial needs and contributes to improved mental health (Mastrocola & Flynn, 2017). It fosters a sense of safety (Nugraini et al., 2023) and emotional comfort, while also generating enthusiasm through reliable peer relationships (Hapasari & Primastuti, 2014). These conditions encourage self-exploration (Hardiyanti, 2017; Susanti, 2021), promote independent learning without disrupting others, and support smoother environmental adaptation (Syahlan et al., 2019). This is clearly demonstrated in the ability of students with special needs at the pesantren to engage meaningfully not only with their peers but also with the surrounding local community.

Third, informational support—provided through guidance, motivation, and the use of visual symbols—plays a vital role in helping students with special needs adapt to the routines of Islamic boarding school life. This aligns with Korikana's (2020) findings, which emphasize that visual-based instruction is particularly effective for children with cognitive disabilities. In parallel, Altermatt's (2019) study on regular students demonstrated that peer-provided informational support enhances academic self-efficacy. These findings are consistent with the results of this study, which show that motivational support from peers helps students with special needs maintain persistence and engagement despite facing learning difficulties.

The results of this study are distinctive in their integration of Islamic values and the cultural context of Islamic boarding schools in shaping peer support. The concept of *"humanizing humans"* embedded in Nurul Maksum



fosters an inclusive environment that rejects hierarchical distinctions based on disability. A culture of mutual respect promotes independence, as reflected in practices such as delegating leadership roles to students like TG1. This approach contributes to the global discourse on inclusive education by highlighting the importance of local cultural and religious values—an area that remains underexplored in international literature (Fatmawati, 2021; Ilyasin, 2020).

However, this study has limitations, including a small sample size of eight students with special needs and a focus on “educable” disabilities. Future research should investigate a broader range of disabilities and the context of Islamic boarding schools with more diverse populations. Furthermore, while peer support is deemed effective, it is essential to conduct long-term evaluations to ascertain that such support does not impede independence upon students' reintegration into society. Bracke et al. (2008) observed that peer support may, in certain instances, result in excessive dependence, thereby obstructing the cultivation of individual independence. It is essential to balance support provision with strategies that promote long-term independence, such as offering progressively challenging tasks to enhance the independent capabilities of students with special needs.

These findings point to an inclusive education model that integrates religious values and peer support, offering relevance for countries with community-based education systems, such as Indonesia. Inclusive education policies should incorporate structured peer support training, as recommended by Penney (2018), while maintaining a careful balance between providing assistance and fostering self-empowerment. Moreover, embedding cultural values within inclusive education—such as *Ubuntu* in Africa or *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* in Indonesia—can serve as powerful frameworks for promoting social cohesion and enhancing self-efficacy among students with special needs on a global scale.

Thus, this study not only reinforces existing theories of self-efficacy and independence within a new cultural and educational context but also

contributes to the development of a more holistic and sustainable model of inclusive education.

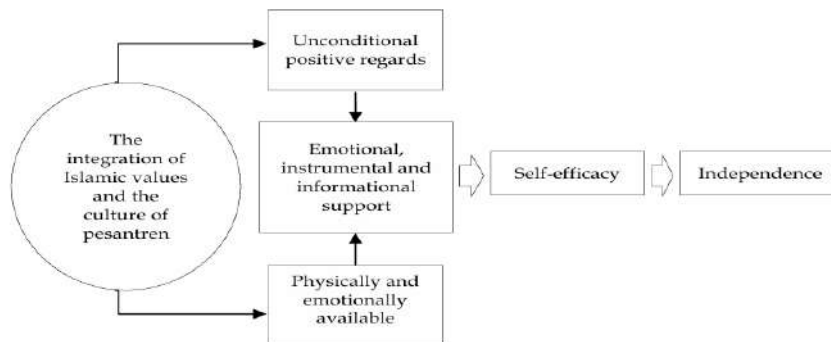


Figure 2. Peer support in fostering self-efficacy and independence in special needs students in the Nurul Maksum Islamic Boarding School

The findings of this study highlight the significant role of peer support—encompassing emotional, instrumental, and informational dimensions—in shaping the psychological and behavioral development of students with special needs. These forms of support, which emerge organically within the inclusive environment of the Nurul Maksum Islamic boarding school, contribute meaningfully to the enhancement of self-efficacy and independence among students with disabilities. This aligns with Bandura's theory (1994), which emphasizes the crucial influence of social interactions and environmental conditions in the development of self-efficacy.

What distinguishes the findings of this research is not merely the relevance of peer support, but the way it is deeply embedded within the pesantren's cultural and religious framework. The philosophy of *"humanizing humans"*, rooted in Islamic values, is expressed through shared empathy, mutual respect, and the equal status granted to all students. This fosters a nurturing environment that goes beyond conventional models of academic inclusion by actively cultivating a social and moral ecosystem in which students with special needs are genuinely valued, supported, and empowered (Tabrani et al., 2024).

Emotional support from peers plays a foundational role in fostering self-confidence and a sense of belonging among students with special needs.

Acts of empathy, understanding, and nonjudgmental acceptance help create a psychological environment that affirms these students' self-worth. This finding is consistent with the work of Shefer et al. (2018), who argue that environments grounded in unconditional positive regard contribute to elevated self-esteem and emotional well-being. Similarly, Murphy et al., (2020) emphasize that such affirming interactions are integral to building psychological resilience and supporting identity formation.

Moreover, consistent appreciation and positive reinforcement from peers—observed during activities such as *rebana* practice or group prayers—serve to enhance students' motivation and self-efficacy. Encouraging feedback from peers fosters a sense of capability, reinforcing students' belief in their ability to complete tasks and increasing their willingness to engage and persist. This finding aligns with the work of Medyasari et al. (2021) and Meletta (2024), both of whom emphasize that positive affirmations play a crucial role in cultivating growth mindsets and strengthening self-efficacy.

Although students with special needs at Nurul Maksum may demonstrate lower capabilities in terms of task complexity (*magnitude*) and generalization (the ability to apply skills across various domains), they exhibit notable persistence and intrinsic motivation—reflecting high levels of *strength* in their self-efficacy. This supports Bandura's assertion that self-efficacy is not solely determined by task execution but also by internalized beliefs regarding personal capacity (Bandura, 1977; Code, 2020). In this context, peer support contributes significantly to building the motivational and affective dimensions of self-efficacy.

The findings also demonstrate that the inclusive pesantren environment effectively internalizes Islamic values of equality and mutual aid, thereby reinforcing students' sense of agency. A consistent emphasis on the learning process rather than outcomes—such as the avoidance of academic pressure or judgment—allows students to engage with both educational and religious practices at their own pace (Azizah et al., 2024). This approach promotes emotional well-being and supports continuous

self-improvement, aligning with principles often advocated in inclusive education theory but rarely implemented in practice (Kafaa, 2021).

In the realm of independence, instrumental support empowers students to engage with and gradually master daily tasks—often through repetition, modeling, and peer assistance. These findings are consistent with Spiegel's (1985) assertion that independence is cultivated through concrete experiences, sustained practice, and supportive environments. At Nurul Maksum, peer mentoring and routine-based reinforcement not only enhance students' ability to perform practical tasks but also contribute to the development of emotional self-regulation and situational awareness.

This perspective is further supported by Schwei et al., (2020), who emphasize that peer support enhances individual autonomy through empowerment and role modeling. At Nurul Maksum, this is reflected in students' ability to manage daily routines, take initiative in religious activities, and make personal decisions—such as shopping independently or socializing with neighbors. This form of empowerment does not emerge from formal instruction, but rather from the communal life of the pesantren, where peer interaction functions as an organic and culturally embedded mechanism for skill development.

The presence of peers—especially during moments of emotional vulnerability—fulfills essential psychosocial needs and contributes to mental health stabilization (Mastrocola & Flynn, 2017; Azizah et al., 2024). Students report feeling safer, calmer, and more secure when accompanied by empathetic and dependable peers (Nugraini et al., 2023; Kafaa, 2021). In this context, the boarding school environment functions as a space for both formal and informal learning, where values, habits, and independence are not only taught but also internalized through daily communal interactions.

Informational support also plays a vital role in helping students adapt to the routines and expectations of boarding school life. Consistent guidance, verbal instructions, and visual cues—such as symbolic reminders displayed on walls—assist students with cognitive impairments in internalizing expectations and performing daily routines



independently. This finding aligns with Korikana's (2020) research, which highlights the effectiveness of visual instructional tools for learners with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Such approaches reflect the broader ethos of *pesantren* education, which integrates religious instruction with practical life skills (As'ad & Hakim, 2022).

In academic contexts, peer explanations serve as a crucial form of support for special needs students, enabling them to engage with learning materials even in the absence of formal special education strategies. The consistent willingness of regular students to re-explain concepts fosters the development of academic self-efficacy. This is consistent with Altermatt (2019) findings, which show that peer guidance significantly enhances academic confidence and engagement among students. This resonates with the collaborative ethos found in *pesantren*, where shared responsibility and mutual care are essential aspects of learning and character formation (Burga & Damopolii, 2022).

What makes the Nurul Maksum experience particularly distinctive is the integration of Islamic values and *pesantren* culture into the design and practice of peer support mechanisms. The principle of "humanizing humans" is not merely a slogan, but a lived and embodied reality. Students do not perceive disabilities through a hierarchical or deficit-based lens; rather, differences are normalized, and every individual is recognized as a valuable and integral part of the community. This stands in contrast to many inclusive education settings that, while inclusive in policy, often struggle to fully realize these values in everyday interactions and relationships (Muhtar, 2023; Hasbiyallah et al., 2024). This inclusive spirit is deeply rooted in the *pesantren's* ability to merge Islamic values with local cultural authenticity, reflecting broader patterns of cultural religiosity found in traditional Islamic settings (Baharudin, Junaidi, & Ariadi, 2023).

The boarding school's emphasis on character-building activities, the habituation of religious routines, and consistent engagement in communal tasks further contributes to the development of independence among students with special needs. Their active participation in key

responsibilities—such as leading prayers or managing peer discipline—reflects a level of autonomy that is seldom documented in comparable educational settings. This suggests that culturally grounded, values-based approaches can play a critical role in fostering meaningful inclusion and self-reliance (Dewi & Ansori, 2023; Awaluddin et al., 2024).

These findings underscore the importance of embedding inclusive education within a robust cultural and ethical framework. As demonstrated in this study, such integration ensures that inclusion is not merely structural or policy-driven, but truly transformative. The *pesantren* model illustrates how community-based values—such as *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* in Indonesia or *Ubuntu* in Africa—can be effectively mobilized to foster self-efficacy, independence, and a deep sense of belonging among students with special needs (Tambak et al., 2025; Amalia et al., 2024).

However, this study also acknowledges several limitations. The sample was limited to eight students with special needs from a single *pesantren*, all of whom had moderate, “educable” disabilities. As a result, the findings may not fully capture the experiences of students with more severe or diverse forms of disability. Future research should consider a broader spectrum of disabilities and include comparative studies across multiple *pesantren* in different regions, taking into account varying socio-cultural contexts to enrich the understanding of inclusive practices in Islamic boarding schools (Misdah et al., 2025; Putri et al., 2023).

Moreover, while peer support has proven effective within the structured environment of the *pesantren*, further longitudinal studies are necessary to evaluate whether this support fosters sustainable independence in broader, less controlled social contexts. Bracke et al. (2008) caution that peer support, if not carefully managed, may lead to overdependence—particularly when it substitutes rather than supplements personal initiative. Therefore, it is essential to implement balanced strategies, such as progressively increasing task complexity and promoting self-reliance, to ensure that the benefits of peer support translate into long-term autonomy beyond the school setting. This aligns



with the call for inclusive pedagogy that empowers rather than limits, as seen in innovations such as Qur'anic translation into sign language for deaf students (Saifullah & Nurjanah, 2024).

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on inclusive education by providing an in-depth exploration of how religious and cultural frameworks can enrich peer support dynamics. Its insights are particularly relevant for educational institutions operating within societies that uphold strong communal traditions. By emphasizing structured peer engagement and the integration of local values, this research presents a contextually grounded yet potentially replicable model of inclusive education—one that bridges global principles with locally embedded practices (Khasanah et al., 2023; Fathorrahman et al., 2024).

These findings also open a broader space for reflection on the importance of developing inclusive education models that are not only rooted in global principles but also derived from local values embedded in the daily life of communities. In a global context, inclusive *pesantren* like Nurul Maksum can serve as an alternative model that is both relevant and applicable for countries with strong communal and religious foundations. For instance, the principle of “humanizing humans,” which underpins inclusive practices at this *pesantren*, aligns with communitarian values such as *Ubuntu* in Africa or the principle of collective solidarity within Muslim communities in South Asia and the Middle East (Hanif et al., 2024; Athoillah et al., 2024).

Thus, this study not only offers a theoretical contribution to strengthening the affective and social dimensions of inclusive education but also presents a culturally grounded praxis model that can be replicated and adapted across different parts of the world. The integration of religious values, community-based togetherness, and organically formed peer support strategies can offer fresh inspiration for policymakers and inclusive education practitioners in designing approaches that are more humane, contextual, and sustainable on a global scale (Zulkarnain et al., 2024; Syahbudi et al., 2024; Irsad et al., 2024).

D. Conclusion

This study concludes that peer support plays a significant role in fostering self-efficacy and independence among students with special needs at the Inclusive Pesantren of Nurul Maksum. Emotional, instrumental, and informational support—offered organically by peers—assist students not only in completing daily tasks but also in developing psychological resilience, self-confidence, and social integration. These forms of support are deeply embedded in the pesantren's culture, where the philosophy of "humanizing humans" is consistently practiced through everyday interactions and educational routines.

Emotional support—expressed through empathy, appreciation, and encouragement—strengthens students' self-belief and cultivates a sense of belonging. Instrumental support, provided through concrete assistance and consistent mentoring, enhances students' capacity to manage daily tasks independently. Informational support, delivered through guidance, advice, and visual aids, facilitates students' adaptation to academic routines and the broader context of boarding school life. Collectively, these forms of peer support have been shown to effectively influence both the cognitive and affective dimensions of self-efficacy.

Furthermore, this study demonstrates that inclusive education can be meaningfully enriched by embedding religious and cultural values into daily practice. The pesantren model provides a unique and contextually grounded example of how Islamic principles can support inclusive learning by normalizing differences and fostering equal participation. Within this framework, students with special needs are not merely accommodated—they are actively empowered to assume leadership roles, take on responsibilities, and cultivate independence.

Nevertheless, this study has several limitations. The small sample size and the focus on students with "educable" disabilities limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research should aim to include a more diverse population of students with varying types and levels of disability, and explore the long-term impacts of peer support beyond the



structured environment of the boarding school. It is also important to address the potential risk of overdependence by implementing strategies that gradually increase task complexity and intentionally foster self-reliance.

Ultimately, this study offers valuable insights into how peer support—when grounded in local cultural and religious frameworks—can serve as a sustainable and transformative model for inclusive education. It encourages educational institutions, particularly those in culturally rooted communities, to adopt peer-based approaches that balance assistance with empowerment. In doing so, such models can promote not only academic achievement but also character development and meaningful inclusion for students with special needs.

Acknowledgment

The author would like to thank the Ministry of Education, Science & Technology for providing research funding through research grants based on decree 023/LL6/PB/AL.04/2024.

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