

The Concept of Normalization in Inclusive Early Childhood Education: An Examination of Bengt Nirje's Thoughts

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis konsep normalisasi dalam pemikiran Bengt Nirje serta relevansinya dalam pendidikan anak usia dini inklusif. Latar belakang penelitian ini didasarkan pada masih terbatasnya pemahaman konseptual terhadap inklusi yang sering direduksi pada aspek administratif, bukan sebagai paradigma filosofis. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan jenis penelitian pustaka, melalui analisis terhadap sumber primer dan sekunder yang relevan. Teknik analisis data dilakukan dengan content analysis yang dipadukan dengan interpretasi kritis untuk menghasilkan pemahaman yang komprehensif. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa normalisasi menekankan pada penyediaan kondisi hidup yang layak, partisipatif, dan bermakna bagi individu dengan disabilitas, bukan penyeragaman individu. Dalam konteks PAUD inklusif, konsep ini relevan untuk mendorong lingkungan belajar yang lebih humanistik, fleksibel, dan responsif terhadap keberagaman. Namun, implementasinya menghadapi berbagai tantangan, seperti asumsi tentang normalitas, risiko asimilasi, serta keterbatasan struktural dan kultural. Penelitian ini menegaskan bahwa normalisasi tetap memiliki nilai strategis sebagai kerangka reflektif dalam pengembangan pendidikan inklusif, selama dipahami secara kritis, kontekstual, dan dialogis dengan pendekatan kontemporer.

Kata Kunci: Normalisasi, Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini, Inklusif, Bengt Nirje

Abstract

This study aims to analyze the concept of normalization in the thought of Bengt Nirje and its relevance to inclusive early childhood education. The background of this study is grounded in the limited conceptual understanding of inclusion, which is often reduced to administrative aspects rather than being treated as a philosophical paradigm. This research employs a qualitative approach with a library research design, analyzing both primary and secondary sources relevant to the topic. Data analysis is conducted through content analysis combined with critical interpretation to generate a comprehensive understanding. The findings indicate that normalization emphasizes the provision of dignified, participatory, and meaningful living conditions for individuals with disabilities, rather than the standardization of individuals. In the context of inclusive early childhood education, this concept is relevant in promoting a more humanistic, flexible, and responsive learning environment that accommodates diversity. However, its implementation faces several challenges, including assumptions about normality, the risk of assimilation, as well as structural and cultural constraints. This study concludes that normalization retains its strategic value as a reflective framework in the development of inclusive education, provided that it is understood critically, contextually, and dialogically alongside contemporary approaches.

Keywords: Normalization, Early Childhood Education, Inclusive, Bengt Nirje

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive early childhood education is gaining increasing attention in contemporary educational discourse, as global awareness of children's rights, including those with special needs, grows. In this context, inclusion is understood not simply as placing children in the same learning space, but as a systematic effort to ensure meaningful participation, social acceptance, and respect for diversity (Lamere, 2025). However, in practice, inclusive education at the early

childhood level still faces a number of fundamental issues, ranging from an incomplete paradigm shift to educators' limited conceptual understanding. This situation suggests that inclusion is often reduced to an administrative aspect, rather than a philosophical commitment rooted in humanitarian values.

Amidst these dynamics, Bengt Nirje's thoughts on the concept of normalization are relevant and warrant critical reexamination. Nirje developed the idea of normalization as a response to the practice of marginalizing individuals with disabilities, particularly within social systems that tend to be exclusive and segregative. Normalization, in this framework, is not intended to homogenize individuals, but rather to ensure that they have access to decent, equal, and meaningful living conditions like everyone else in society. This perspective challenges traditional approaches that often position children with special needs as objects of medical intervention, rather than as subjects with rights and potential.

In the context of early childhood education, the concept of normalization opens up broader reflection on how learning environments are designed and operated. Education in early childhood is not only about the transfer of knowledge, but also about shaping early social experiences that will influence the development of children's identities and relationships in the future (Wisudaningsih et al., 2025). When children with special needs are placed in separate environments or treated significantly differently, these experiences have the potential to reinforce stigma and exclusion from an early age. Therefore, an approach that emphasizes normal daily life, natural social interactions, and active participation is crucial in designing inclusive educational practices.

However, the adoption of the concept of normalization in education cannot be done simplistically. There is a tendency to interpret normalization as an effort to "make children normal" according to majority standards, which in turn has the potential to ignore individual uniqueness and needs. This is where the epistemological problem lies that needs to be critiqued (Fauzi & Hamami, 2022). Normalization should be understood as a strategy to eliminate social and structural barriers, not as a mechanism for standardizing identities. In early childhood education practice, this demands a high level of pedagogical sensitivity, with teachers acting not only as learning facilitators but also as agents of social transformation capable of creating authentic, inclusive spaces (Fauzi et al., 2025; Utami et al., 2025).

Furthermore, the local context plays a crucial role in determining how the concept of normalization can be implemented. In many cases, the Indonesian education system remains influenced by a dualistic paradigm between general education and special education. This division is reflected not only in policy but also in daily practices in educational institutions. As a result, inclusion is often viewed as the exception, rather than the norm. In such situations, the idea of normalization offers an alternative perspective that can encourage the reconstruction of educational paradigms, particularly at the early childhood level, which serves as the foundation for subsequent development.

Furthermore, the development of modern inclusive education theory also demonstrates a shift from a deficit-based approach to a strengths- and diversity-based approach (Lumbu et al., 2026). This perspective aligns with the spirit of normalization, which emphasizes quality of life and social participation. However, the integration of these two approaches still requires in-depth conceptual study to avoid overlap or even contradiction in implementation. Without a strong theoretical foundation, inclusive practices risk becoming mere rhetoric that has no significant impact on children's learning experiences.

Based on this background, an examination of the concept of normalization in Bengt Nirje's thinking is crucial, particularly in relation to inclusive early childhood education. This research seeks to explore in depth how the concept was formulated and its relevance in the contemporary educational context. The primary focus is not only on a description of the

concept but also on a critical analysis of its possible applications and implications in educational practice.

Furthermore, this research aims to reconstruct the understanding of normalization so that it can be integrated more contextually into early childhood education. This includes efforts to bridge the philosophical and pedagogical dimensions, so that the resulting concept is not limited to theoretical but also has practical utility. With this approach, it is hoped that the research will contribute to strengthening the conceptual framework of inclusive education, while also offering an alternative perspective that is more humanistic and equitable.

The question that underlies this study is how the concept of normalization in Bengt Nirje's thinking can be understood comprehensively, and to what extent the concept is relevant to addressing the current challenges of inclusive early childhood education. This question is important not only for academic purposes but also to encourage changes in educational practices that are more responsive to the needs of all children.

METHODS

This research uses a qualitative approach with library research, focusing on in-depth exploration and analysis of conceptual ideas in the literature. This approach was chosen because the object of study is not an empirical phenomenon directly observed in the field, but rather a construct of thought developed in scientific works. In this context, the research aims to comprehensively understand the concept of normalization as formulated by Bengt Nirje and examine its relevance within the framework of inclusive early childhood education.

The data sources in this study are divided into two main categories: primary sources and secondary sources. Primary sources include original works containing Bengt Nirje's thoughts on normalization, whether in the form of articles, reports, or documents that explicitly discuss the principles he developed. Meanwhile, secondary sources include books, journal articles, and other scientific publications relevant to the research topic, such as studies on inclusive education, early childhood education, and theories related to disability and social justice. Sources were selected selectively, considering their credibility, relevance, and contribution to strengthening the analysis.

Data collection techniques were conducted through documentation studies, namely by searching, reading, and reviewing various literature related to the research focus. This process was not only descriptive but also involved efforts to identify patterns, key concepts, and arguments developed in various sources. During this stage, the researcher also categorized the data based on specific themes, such as the principle of normalization, the characteristics of inclusive education, and its pedagogical implications. This categorization was important to maintain the order of the analysis and facilitate the synthesis of ideas.

The data analysis technique used a content analysis approach combined with critical interpretation. Content analysis was used to systematically uncover the meaning contained in the text by identifying units of meaning relevant to the research focus. Meanwhile, critical interpretation was conducted to assess, compare, and reconstruct the concepts discovered, resulting in a deeper and more contextual understanding. This approach enabled the researcher not only to reproduce existing thinking but also to develop new perspectives that were more relevant to the current educational context.

To maintain the validity and credibility of the findings, this study employed source triangulation techniques, namely by comparing various references covering similar topics. This method allows researchers to identify both consistencies and differences in perspectives, ensuring that the resulting analysis is not one-sided. Furthermore, the reading process is carried out repeatedly and in-depth to ensure that the resulting interpretations truly reflect the substance of the thoughts being studied, not merely superficial impressions.

With this methodological design, the research is expected to provide a comprehensive picture of the concept of normalization in Bengt Nirje's thought, while also offering a critical and reflective analysis of its relevance to inclusive early childhood education. This approach also allows for a dialogue between classical theory and developments in contemporary educational discourse, ensuring that the research results are not merely descriptive but also possess strong argumentative value.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Concept of Normalization in Bengt Nirje's Thought

The concept of normalization, introduced by Bengt Nirje, arose from a sharp critique of social and institutional practices that marginalized individuals with disabilities (Nirje, 1996). In the European context of the mid-20th century, individuals with special needs were often placed in closed institutions that isolated them from society (Winzer, 2022). This situation not only limited access to social experiences but also shaped alienated identities. Nirje saw that the primary problem lay not in individual limitations per se, but in social structures that failed to provide decent and equal living conditions (Perrin, 1999). From this perspective, normalization was defined as a systematic effort to create living conditions that were as close as possible to the patterns of life in general society.

Normalization cannot be understood superficially as a process of adjusting individuals to conform to majority standards. Such an interpretation contradicts the original spirit of the idea. Nirje emphasized that it was living conditions, not individuals, that needed to be normalized. This meant that society and the social system had a responsibility to remove barriers that contributed to alienation. Within this framework, normalization served as a critique of the dominant medical approach of the time, which tended to view disability as an individual problem to be fixed. This approach often ignores the social, cultural, and political dimensions that shape the lived experiences of individuals with disabilities.

One of Nirje's key contributions is his emphasis on the rhythms of everyday life. He argues that every individual, including children with special needs, has the right to experience normal patterns of life, such as daily routines, weekly activities, and seasonal experiences that are part of social life (Nirje, 1999). These rhythms are not simply a matter of time, but also relate to opportunities to engage in meaningful activities. When children are placed in environments that are isolated or significantly different from mainstream life, they lose the opportunity to build authentic social relationships (Almeida et al., 2021; Leventhal & Morishita, 2024). In this context, normalization becomes the basis for designing environments that allow for natural social interactions.

However, this concept is not free from interpretive problems. In practice, there is a tendency to simplify normalization as an attempt to equate the experiences of all individuals without considering differences in needs. This is where the tension between the principles of equality and the recognition of diversity arises. If normalization is understood normatively without critical reflection, it has the potential to turn into a tool of standardization that suppresses individual identity. Therefore, it is important to place this concept within a broader framework, namely as part of the struggle for social justice, not simply a standard of behavior or specific conditions.

Nirje's thinking also highlights the importance of individual choice and control over their own lives. In many cases, individuals with disabilities lack the space to determine their activities, relationships, or even routines (Chuangchai & Pothisiri, 2025; Saran et al., 2023). Normalization demands a radical change in this regard, by providing space for individuals to participate in decision-making. This principle has significant implications for education,

particularly in early childhood, where early experiences significantly influence the development of autonomy and self-confidence. When children are given the opportunity to choose and engage, they become not only objects of education but also active subjects.

Furthermore, normalization cannot be separated from the concept of social integration. Nirje rejects the separation between individuals with disabilities and the general public, as such separation actually reinforces stigma. Integration goes beyond physical presence in the same space, but involves meaningful and respectful interactions. In this context, normalization serves as a bridge between individuals and society, with the goal of creating more equal relationships. This requires change not only at the individual level, but also within broader social structures, including the education system.

Despite its strong normative basis, the concept of normalization still requires critical examination in the contemporary context. One frequent criticism is the concept's tendency to assume the existence of a "normal" and universal standard of living. In an increasingly pluralistic society, this assumption becomes problematic. What is considered normal in one cultural context may not be relevant in another. Therefore, the application of normalization must take into account diverse cultural and social dimensions. Without sensitivity to context, the concept risks losing its relevance.

Furthermore, developments in modern disability theory offer new perspectives that both enrich and challenge the concept of normalization. Rights-based approaches and the social model of disability, for example, emphasize that the primary obstacle lies in a non-inclusive environment (Browne & Dorris, 2022). In this regard, normalization can be seen as a starting point that paved the way for the development of such theories. However, the integration of classical concepts and contemporary approaches requires a critical rereading to avoid simplification or even distortion of meaning (Fauzi & Usman, 2024).

Within the framework of early childhood education, the concept of normalization offers a strong foundation for reflecting on existing practices. It encourages a shift from an approach focused on limitations to one that emphasizes potential and participation. However, translating this concept into pedagogical practice is not always smooth. It requires a deep understanding and a commitment to changing entrenched perspectives. Without this, normalization will remain mere jargon without real impact.

Finally, the concept of normalization in Bengt Nirje's thought is relevant not only as a theoretical framework but also as a tool for criticizing social and educational practices that remain exclusive. He reminds us that inclusion cannot be achieved solely through formal policies but requires fundamental changes in how we view people, differences, and life together. In this context, normalization is not an end in itself, but rather a process that continues to evolve as society and our understanding of justice change.

The Relevance of the Concept of Normalization in Inclusive Early Childhood Education

The relevance of the concept of normalization in inclusive early childhood education cannot be separated from the fundamental issue of how the learning environment is defined and implemented. Practically, inclusion is often understood as merely physical integration, namely placing children with special needs in the same classroom as other children without significant changes to the pedagogical approach (Jakandar et al., 2026). In such situations, the concept of normalization becomes crucial as a reflective framework that demands more than mere access. It directs attention to the quality of children's lived experiences within the educational environment, including how they interact, feel accepted, and participate meaningfully.

From this perspective, normalization encourages the reconstruction of the early childhood education environment to approximate the lifestyles of children in general, without

neglecting individual needs. The learning environment is no longer positioned as a sterile and uniform space, but rather as a dynamic social space where children can experience normal routines, build relationships, and explore the world around them (Syahfrillina et al., 2025). Practices such as collaborative play, group activities, and spontaneous interactions become an integral part of the learning process. For children with special needs, these experiences are particularly valuable because they open up opportunities for authentic social engagement from an early age.

However, implementing this principle is not simple. One of the main challenges lies in the education system's tendency to maintain rigid normative standards. In many cases, curricula are designed based on the assumption of homogeneity in child development, so that children who fall outside these standards are considered deviants who need to be "catch up". In this context, normalization can serve as a critique of the dominant logic of standardization. It reminds us that a "normal" life is not synonymous with uniformity of achievement, but rather with a diversity of experiences that are recognized and equitably facilitated.

Furthermore, the concept of normalization has direct implications for pedagogical practices in inclusive early childhood education (ECE). Teachers are not only required to master differentiated learning strategies but also to develop sensitivity to the social dynamics in the classroom (Iryani et al., 2024). Interactions between children are a crucial focus, as this is where the value of inclusion is truly tested. Normalization presupposes an equal relationship, where children with special needs are not positioned as recipients of assistance, but as part of a mutually contributing learning community. This requires a fundamental shift in perspective, especially in an educational context still rife with hierarchies of ability.

Furthermore, normalization also emphasizes the importance of continuity between experiences in school and life outside of school. Early childhood education does not occur in a vacuum, but is connected to the family and community. Therefore, inclusive practices based on normalization need to consider the broader social context. Parental involvement, for example, is a crucial factor in ensuring that inclusive values do not stop in the classroom. When children experience consistency between the school and home environments, the internalization of values is strengthened.

While offering a promising framework, the concept of normalization still faces several criticisms when applied in the context of inclusive early childhood education. One prominent criticism is the potential reduction of the complexity of children's needs. In an effort to provide a "normal" experience, there is a risk that children's specific needs are overlooked. For example, in certain situations, children with special needs require significantly different approaches, both in terms of methods and intensity of support. If normalization is understood rigidly, these differences can be viewed as deviations to be minimized, rather than as realities to be accommodated.

Another criticism relates to the cultural dimension of the concept of normalization. What is considered a normal life is heavily influenced by the values and norms of local communities. In Indonesia's pluralistic context, there is no single, universally applicable definition of "normality." Therefore, the relevance of normalization in inclusive early childhood education (PAUD) depends heavily on the ability to interpret the concept contextually. A sensitive approach to local culture is key to preventing normalization from degenerating into a new form of dominant values.

In the development of inclusive education discourse, the concept of normalization also needs to be positioned dialogically with other approaches, such as the social model of disability and the rights-based perspective. These approaches emphasize that the main obstacles lie in inaccessible environments and discriminatory social attitudes. In this regard, normalization can be understood as one of the initial steps leading to such change. However, without critical

integration, there is the potential for overlap or even contradiction in implementation. Therefore, it is important to reread this concept in light of contemporary theoretical developments.

Ultimately, the relevance of the concept of normalization in inclusive early childhood education (ECE) lies in its ability to shift the focus from mere access to the quality of children's lived experiences. It challenges educational practices that are still oriented towards a single standard, while also opening up space for a more flexible and humanistic approach. However, its successful implementation depends heavily on a deep understanding and commitment to structural change. Without this, normalization risks becoming a rhetorically normative concept but weak in practice.

Critical reflection on this concept demonstrates that inclusion is not a state that can be achieved instantly, but rather a process that requires continuous negotiation between values, practices, and contexts. In this process, normalization can serve as a framework that helps guide transformation, as long as it is not understood narrowly. Herein lies both the challenge and the opportunity for early childhood education to develop truly inclusive practices rooted in respect for human dignity and diversity.

Philosophical and Pedagogical Implications

Understanding the concept of normalization within the framework of inclusive early childhood education cannot be separated from its underlying philosophical implications. At this level, normalization is not simply a conceptual tool for improving educational practices, but rather a perspective on human beings, social life, and the meaning of justice. The ideas developed by Bengt Nirje implicitly critique reductionist human ontologies, particularly those that view individuals with disabilities solely as deficient or incomplete entities. Within the perspective of normalization, humans are understood as beings with the right to live in conditions of dignity, regardless of their differing abilities. This shift has serious consequences for how education is designed and implemented.

Philosophically, normalization intersects with the humanist tradition, which places human dignity at the center. However, it does not stop at an abstract affirmation of human worth but instead moves toward concrete social critique. In the educational context, this means that systems that result in exclusion cannot be justified solely for reasons of efficiency or limited resources. Normalization demands in-depth reflection on structures that have long been considered normal, including curricula, teaching methods, and power relations within the classroom. Education is no longer understood as a neutral process, but rather as an arena in which values and ideologies operate.

Another equally important implication is the epistemological shift in understanding children with special needs (Fauzi & Chirzin, 2023). Traditional approaches tend to use a medical framework focused on diagnosis and deficits. Children are viewed through categories that characterize their deficiencies, resulting in interventions oriented toward improvement or compensation. Within the framework of normalization, this approach is questioned because it potentially ignores the social context that shapes children's experiences. Knowledge about children is no longer based solely on clinical classifications, but also on an understanding of social interactions, the environment, and opportunities for participation. This opens up space for a more holistic and contextual approach.

From a pedagogical perspective, the implications of the concept of normalization demand fundamental changes in learning practices in early childhood education. Teachers no longer act as transmitters of uniform knowledge, but as facilitators capable of creating inclusive and responsive learning environments. This role is not simple, as it requires the ability to understand the diversity of children's needs while maintaining inclusive classroom dynamics.

In practice, this means that learning strategies must be flexible, adaptive, and open to modification. The curriculum should not be treated as a rigid document, but as a framework that can be adapted to the context and needs of students (Fauzi et al., 2024).

Furthermore, normalization also has implications for how social interactions within the classroom are understood. Early childhood education is a phase in which social relationships begin to form intensively. In this context, the presence of children with special needs should not be positioned as a burden or a disruption to the learning process. Instead, this diversity should be viewed as a learning resource that enriches the experiences of all children. The interactions that occur not only serve to support cognitive development but also to foster empathy, tolerance, and respect for differences. This is where the pedagogical dimension meets the moral dimension.

However, translating these principles into practice is not always smooth sailing. One major challenge is the tendency to maintain homogenous developmental standards. In many cases, teachers are faced with demands to achieve specific, institutionally established targets. This often limits the space for differentiation. Normalization, in this context, requires the courage to question these standards and seek more inclusive alternatives. This does not mean rejecting the standards altogether, but rather critiquing the underlying assumptions.

Another pedagogical implication relates to learning evaluation. Conventional evaluation systems tend to measure success based on uniform outcomes. In the context of inclusive education, this approach is problematic because it fails to capture the diverse development of individuals (Abate et al., 2023). Normalization encourages the use of more authentic evaluations, which consider process, participation, and context. Assessment no longer focuses on comparisons between children, but on the development of each individual. This approach requires a profound paradigm shift, especially in an education system that is still highly results-oriented.

Furthermore, the philosophical implications of normalization also touch on the relationship between education and society. Education cannot be separated from the broader social context, including the values that exist within society (Ravikumar & Naik, 2025). In many cases, exclusive attitudes toward individuals with disabilities occur not only in schools but also in the broader social environment (Szumski et al., 2020). Therefore, inclusive education practices need to be accompanied by efforts to build broader social awareness. Teachers and educational institutions have a strategic role in this process, not only as policy implementers but also as agents of change.

However, it is important to recognize that the concept of normalization is not without criticism. One frequently encountered issue is the tendency to assume the existence of an ideal and universal standard of living. In educational practice, this can lead to attempts to conform children to certain norms, rather than accommodating differences. From a philosophical perspective, this assumption needs to be questioned because it has the potential to ignore the plurality of human experiences. In the context of early childhood education, this risk is even more significant because children are at a developmental stage that is highly sensitive to identity formation.

Another criticism relates to the potential for simplification in the application of the concept. Normalization is often understood as a solution that can be applied directly without considering the complexity of the context. However, each educational environment has different characteristics, including culture, resources, and policies. Without a thorough understanding, the application of normalization can lead to ineffective or even counterproductive practices. Therefore, a reflective and contextual approach is needed to integrate this concept into educational practice.

In the development of inclusive education theory, the concept of normalization also needs to be positioned in dialogue with other approaches. The social model of disability, for example, places a stronger emphasis on the role of the environment in creating barriers. A rights-based perspective adds a normative dimension, emphasizing that inclusion is not merely a choice but an obligation. In this dialogue, normalization can serve as a bridge connecting these various approaches. However, this integration requires a critical reading to avoid reduction or distortion of meaning.

Ultimately, the philosophical and pedagogical implications of the concept of normalization demonstrate that inclusive education is not merely a technical issue, but also a question of values. It demands a fundamental shift in perspectives on human beings and differences. In the context of early childhood education, this change is crucial because this phase lays the foundation for subsequent development. When children are accustomed to living in an inclusive environment, they learn not only knowledge but also how to live together in diversity.

This reflection also emphasizes that normalization is not a finished concept. It continues to evolve along with social change and theoretical developments. In the context of education, this means that inclusive practices must always be open to evaluation and improvement. No single model can be considered final, as needs and contexts are constantly evolving. In situations like this, normalization can serve as a compass that helps guide educational practice, as long as it is understood critically and contextually.

Considering these various implications, it is clear that the concept of normalization has significant potential to enrich the practice of inclusive early childhood education. However, this potential can only be realized if accompanied by a deep understanding and commitment to change. Without it, normalization will remain at the level of discourse, without having a real impact on children's learning experiences. Therefore, the main challenge lies not in the lack of concepts, but in how those concepts are translated into consistent and reflective practice.

Criticism and Challenges of Implementation

The concept of normalization formulated by Bengt Nirje has made a significant contribution to shifting perspectives on disability and inclusion. However, when this concept is confronted with the reality of implementation, particularly in inclusive early childhood education, various criticisms arise that cannot be ignored. These criticisms are not simply rejections, but also reflections on the complexity of implementing an idea that is fundamentally born from a specific social context. Therefore, it is important to read these criticisms seriously and examine possible responses that can enrich understanding and practice.

One of the most fundamental criticisms concerns the implicit assumption of "normal life" that serves as a reference in the concept of normalization. The term "normal" itself is never truly neutral, as it is always shaped by specific social, cultural, and historical norms. In a pluralistic society, the definition of what is considered normal becomes highly relative. When the concept of normalization is applied without critical reflection, there is a risk that majority standards are imposed as universal standards. This has the potential to exclude diverse experiences and reinforce new, more subtle forms of exclusion.

This criticism has strong grounds, especially considering educational practices that still tend to prioritize uniformity. However, this criticism does not necessarily invalidate the relevance of normalization. Rather, it demands a more contextual reinterpretation. Normalization should not be understood as an attempt to achieve a single, perceived ideal form of life, but as a principle for ensuring access to decent and meaningful living conditions. In this sense, "normal" is not a rigid standard, but rather a spectrum of socially recognized

experiences. With this perspective, normalization can remain relevant without falling into problematic universality.

Another frequent criticism concerns the potential of normalization to encourage assimilation. In some practices, there is a tendency to adapt children with special needs to follow the behavior and achievement patterns of other children, with the aim of creating uniformity (Rumsa et al., 2025). This approach can lead to neglecting the child's specific needs and suppressing the expression of distinct identities. In the context of early childhood education, this risk is even more significant because children are at a developmental stage that is highly vulnerable to social pressures.

In response to this criticism, it is important to reiterate that normalization is not synonymous with assimilation. Nirje himself emphasized that it is living conditions that should be normalized, not individuals. Therefore, the focus should be on environmental changes, not on forced adjustments to children. In educational practice, this means that curricula, methods, and social interactions need to be designed to accommodate differences. As environments become more inclusive, the need to enforce uniformity will diminish significantly.

Furthermore, there are critics who highlight the limitations of the concept of normalization in addressing the complexity of individual needs. Not all experiences can be standardized within the framework of "normal life." Some children with special needs require intensive support that differs significantly from the experiences of other children. In such situations, the literal application of normalization can be unrealistic, even counterproductive. This criticism reminds us that not all principles can be applied universally without adjustment.

In response, normalization needs to be understood as a flexible principle, not a rigid rule. It provides general direction about the importance of a meaningful and participatory life, but does not prescribe the specific form it should take. In the context of early childhood education, this flexibility allows teachers to adapt approaches based on individual needs without losing an inclusive orientation. Thus, normalization does not conflict with differentiation, but rather supports it.

The next criticism relates to the structural and institutional context. Many education systems, including those in Indonesia, are still not fully prepared to implement the principles of inclusion comprehensively (Isnawati et al., 2025; Komarudin & Kaeni, 2023). Limited resources, inadequate teacher training, and inconsistent policies are real obstacles. In situations like this, normalization is often seen as an elusive ideal. As a result, the concept risks being reduced to normative discourse without practical implications.

This critique highlights the real gap between theory and practice. However, rather than viewing it as a conceptual weakness, it can be understood as an implementation challenge. Normalization is not designed as an instant solution, but rather as a direction for long-term change. Therefore, its implementation requires a gradual and contextualized strategy. Investment in teacher training, curriculum development, and policy reform are crucial steps to bridge this gap. In this regard, normalization serves as a vision that guides the transformation process, not a target to be achieved quickly.

Furthermore, there are critiques coming from the perspective of contemporary disability theory, particularly the social model and rights-based approaches. These critiques argue that normalization still bears the imprint of older approaches that focus on individual adjustment to social norms. Within this framework, normalization is considered less radical than approaches that explicitly call for structural change and the removal of social barriers. This critique is important because it demonstrates the ongoing development of discourse.

In response, normalization can be positioned as part of the evolution of thought, rather than a static, stand-alone concept. It can be seen as a first step paving the way for more critical and progressive approaches. Integrating normalization with the social model of disability, for

example, could yield a more comprehensive framework. Normalization focuses on the quality of everyday life, while the social model emphasizes structural change. The combination of the two allows for a more balanced approach between the micro and macro dimensions.

Another equally important criticism concerns the cultural dimension. In a society with diverse values and norms, the application of normalization cannot be separated from the local context. What is considered normal in one community may not be relevant in another. In the Indonesian context, for example, values of collectivity and strong social relations can influence how inclusion is practiced. If normalization is implemented without considering these dimensions, it has the potential to lose relevance.

In response, a contextual approach is key. Normalization needs to be translated into practices that are sensitive to local culture, without losing its fundamental principles. This requires a dialogue between concept and reality, where educational practice not only adopts theory directly but also adapts it to existing needs and values. In this process, the role of educators becomes crucial as mediators between concept and practice.

Finally, there is a reflective critique of the use of the concept of normalization in educational discourse itself. In some cases, this concept is used for legitimacy without being accompanied by a deeper understanding. The term "normalization" has become progressive-sounding jargon, but it hasn't translated into real changes in practice. This criticism reminds us that the main problem lies not with the concept, but with how it is adopted and used.

In response, efforts are needed to strengthen conceptual literacy among education practitioners. A deep understanding of the philosophical roots and practical implications of normalization is a prerequisite for meaningful implementation. Furthermore, ongoing reflection is necessary to ensure that practices remain aligned with inclusive values. Without reflection, an initially critical concept can lose its transformative power.

All of these criticisms and challenges demonstrate that implementing normalization in inclusive early childhood education is not a simple process. It involves negotiating between constantly changing values, contexts, and practices. However, it is precisely in this complexity that lies the concept's potential. Normalization does not offer final answers, but rather provides a framework for continually questioning and improving existing practices. In this sense, criticism is not a threat, but rather part of a process that enriches and deepens understanding.

By reading criticism constructively and responding reflectively, the concept of normalization can remain relevant and adaptive. It is no longer understood as a doctrine to be rigidly followed, but as a perspective open to dialogue and change. In the context of inclusive early childhood education, this kind of approach is essential to ensure that every child, without exception, can experience a truly meaningful and dignified education.

CONCLUSION

This article stems from concerns about the dominance of the tolerance paradigm in Islamic education curricula, which, while important, has not adequately addressed the complexities of intra-religious diversity. Tolerance tends to limit itself to passive acceptance and often operates within a framework of unequal relations. Through a critical reading, it is clear that the curriculum is not entirely neutral but rather contributes to reproducing forms of misrecognition, whether in the form of invisibility, simplification, or hierarchical representation of Islamic sects.

Adopting Axel Honneth's theory of recognition, this article proposes a paradigm shift toward a more substantive approach. Recognition opens the possibility of viewing the curriculum as a space for the formation of just social relations, where diversity is not only acknowledged but also valued for its contributions. The three dimensions of recognition— affective relations, normative legitimacy, and social solidarity—provide a strong conceptual

foundation for reconstructing a more inclusive curriculum. This reconstruction addresses not only aspects of teaching materials but also encompasses a more dialogical and reflective pedagogical approach and evaluation system.

The discussion demonstrates that the shift from tolerance to recognition has broad implications. Theoretically, it challenges conventional ways of understanding the curriculum and encourages a repositioning of Islamic education as part of a social justice project. Pedagogically, it calls for a transformation of the role of teachers, learning methods, and evaluation practices to be more responsive to diversity. Various criticisms of this approach, such as the potential for relativism, the risk of conflict, and implementation challenges, cannot be ignored. However, these criticisms can be addressed through a more precise understanding of the concept of recognition and the development of contextualized implementation strategies.

Ultimately, this article asserts that developing an inclusive Islamic education curriculum cannot be achieved simply by adding the value of tolerance. More fundamental changes are needed in the way diversity is understood and taught. Recognition offers a more promising direction because it places recognition at the core of educational relations. Through this approach, Islamic education has the opportunity not only to reflect its internal plurality but also to shape subjects capable of living within diversity critically, fairly, and responsibly.

This research is still conceptual in nature and opens up opportunities for further study, particularly empirical research that tests the implementation of a recognition-based curriculum in various educational contexts. Further studies are also needed to develop a more detailed operational model and explore its relevance to educational policy. This direction is important so that the ideas offered do not stop at the theoretical level, but can contribute significantly to the transformation of Islamic education in an increasingly pluralistic society.

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