# Public Relations Practice in Issue Management of Inclusive Schools

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## ABSTRACT

The communications management aspect of inclusive schools is essential because the main constraints of inclusive schools and children with special needs (*ABK*) to advance and access education are not in their disability or impairment but on public acceptance. This research is motivated by the negative issues faced by inclusive schools. Negative assumptions against inclusive schools and children with special needs are challenges for inclusive schools. Therefore, inclusive schools need issue management. This research aims to know the communications management in inclusive school management conducted by SD Tumbuh 1 Yogyakarta. The approach used in this research is qualitative with the case study method. Data collection techniques used are in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation. The research result shows that SD Tumbuh 1 conducted issue management in five stages: problem identification, issue analysis, issue change strategy options, issue actions programming, and result evaluation. Society has given a positive response because of the various programs that have been organized to handle the issue. The inclusive aspect implemented by SD Tumbuh 1 can be portrayed as an added value for the school. As a recommendation, communication with the public of inclusive schools must be built continuously, consistently, and involving various parties. Communication acts that are persuasive and educative are also needed to construct positive opinions on inclusive schools. The use of mass media and social media also still needs to be optimized. For further research, because this study captured the school's issue management, there is an opportunity to research issue management from the public.

*Keywords:*
*communications management, issue management, inclusive school*

## INTRODUCTION

Communication management in inclusive schools is a critical aspect knowing that the main constraints of inclusive schools and children with special needs (*Anak Berkebutuhan Khusus - ABK*) to step forward and access education are not about their disability social acceptance. Communication management run by certain educational institutions can not separate the public acceptance.

Referring to Bélanger, academic inclusion is defined by comprehensive integration for all students without the exception of students with special needs in regular classes tailored to the student's age and school's location (Schmidt & Venet, 2012). Then it can be concluded that inclusive schooling is a friendly and open school to all people and the diversity of their condition; mentally, physically, intellectually, and socially. It can also be interpreted that the inclusive school is a school that accepts various degrees of diversity and differences.

Since its establishment, inclusive schools have reaped the pros and cons. The rejection of inclusive schools would potentially jeopardize the image and sustainability of inclusive schools as educational institutions. Those who decline the idea expressed concern over children with special needs (ABK), which negatively influences regular students. From secondary data, the developing discourse on inclusive schools tends to be negative.

Inclusive schools face a negative outlook towards children with special needs and a lack of community support for inclusive education. The title of the inclusive school also makes the school lose intelligent students because of the

reluctance of parents to send their children to inclusive schools (Tarnoto, 2016). Several media reports also highlighted the negative issue inclusive schools faced. Hanjarwati & Aminah (2014) also explained that most average students need to understand that most of them are worried about children with special needs students in inclusive schools. They worry that children with special needs can affect their children/average students and make their achievement decrease.

A negative tone from the opinions of some people becomes a particular communication problem that inclusive schools encounter. Moreover, the issue that strikes inclusive schools has adverse consequences for inclusive schools' internal and external public. From discomfort and negative image to financial loss are some of the many ominous implications of inclusive schools.

Therefore, identifying and managing issues are very important for an organization or institution. The inclusive school issue management then becomes interesting for further study. There are previous studies that have also highlighted issue management. Henderson, Cheney, & Weaver (2015) examined the role of employee identification and organizational identity in strategic communication and issue management. However, the research subject of Henderson, Cheney, & Weaver is commercial companies, while research on issue management in educational institutions is still scarce. There is also a study by Barbour, Doshi, & Hernández (2016), which compares narrative and non-narrative messages in issue management. However, these studies have focused on the message component, not yet looking at the overall issue management process.

In addition to research on issue management, there are also several studies on inclusive schools. Triwardhani (2011) makes inclusive schools the object of research by looking at the internal communication patterns of an inclusive school. She looks at the aspects of internal communication in inclusive schools, not yet on external communication, especially concerning issue management. Dulisanti (2015) also researched the social acceptance of non-special needs students to special needs students in the inclusive education process after the emergence of stigma behave instead of how inclusive schools manage this stigma. Tarnoto (2016) examines the problems experienced by teachers and schools in implementing inclusive education in Yogyakarta. However, this research has not examined schools' steps to overcome existing problems, such as through issue management.

One of the inclusive schools that shows an interesting portrait is the Sekolah Tumbuh, especially Elementary School (SD) Tumbuh 1 Yogyakarta, which is under the management of Yayasan Edukasi Anak Nusantara (YEAN). Since its founding, the school has been self-proclaimed as an inclusive school. This school was one of the inclusive school pioneers in Yogyakarta.

Since the beginning, SD Tumbuh 1 has been facing some issues. In particular, the emerging issues are the negative stigma of children with special needs, lack of public acceptance, and low level of knowledge from society about inclusive schools and children with special needs. However, it did not make SD Tumbuh 1 step down to fight for inclusive education. Therefore, this research aimed to learn about the communication management of the issues related to an inclusive school conducted by SD Tumbuh 1 Yogyakarta.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

**Communications Management and Public Relations in Educational Institutions** - The goals of communications management are often to shape the organization's identity, build the desired image through strategic communication, and increase public trust (Buhmann & Ingenhoff, 2015). In an organization, communications management cannot be separated from public relations (PR) as a function or part with a significant researched share in communicating with the public.

One of the organizations outside business enterprises that also needs a PR function is the educational institution or school. Nowadays, PR is a vital function for the success of educational institutions (Henderson, 2001). The primary audiences for PR of the school include parents; school staffs; students; business communities and school partners; community groups such as the neighborhood; potential donors and other caring citizens; news media, television, and websites; and education council members who can act as an intermediary between the school public and the administrator.

Referring to Broom & Sha (2012), the main targets for PR of schools are as follows: (1) Increasing knowledge about educational issues to eliminate misinformation and rumors, (2) Establishing relationships with key constituents to build public support and helping to ensure the funding if needed (3) Getting public acceptance of educational initiatives and public support while making changes to education, and (4) Strengthening school reputation in the eyes of targeted audiences.

**Issues and Public Opinions in the Educational Field** - An issue is a condition or event, both internal and external, towards the organization, which may significantly impact the organization's function, performance, or long-term interests (Regester & Larkin, 2003). Issues can also be understood as points of conflict between an organization with one or more of its public. Issues cover various levels of social conflict and lead to various types of interventions (Minnis, 2001). Prayudi (2007) revealed that an issue might include problems, changes, events, situations, policies, or values.

Furthermore, the emergence of an issue for the organization can not be separated from the public of its organization. The existence of gaps or cracks between the organization's activity and the public's expectation can raise an issue. Therefore, issues are closely related to public opinion.

In the educational field, issues that appear can be so diverse. It is because school activities are also related to many public and stakeholders. Freeman defines stakeholders as groups or individuals who can influence and be influenced by the achievement of organizational goals (Crane & Ruebottom, 2011). Stakeholders are often listed in the organization's mission statement, specifically employees, customers, and the community. Based on stakeholder theory, business is about creating value for stakeholders, and the company or organization lives through it (Myllykangas, Kujala, & Lehtimaki, 2010).

Schools can be exposed to several issues ranging from those related to teaching and learning activities (Kegiatan Belajar Mengajar –KBM), such as curriculum, learning methods, evaluation systems, and assessment, and continues. The quality of teachers or other educators can also trigger an issue if it goes against the public's expectations. Schools can also encounter growing aspects beyond the classroom. Funding problems, school fees, to cases around the children and adolescents can be issues that the school must manage.

**Issue Management** - Chase explains that issue management involves identifying issues, analyzing issues, setting priorities, choosing strategies, implementing action and communication programs, and evaluating their effectiveness (Regester & Larkin, 2003). In the context of public opinion, issue management seeks to explain the trends in public opinion so that the organization can respond to these trends and not develop into serious conflicts.

Several academic studies and practical case studies show that effective use of issue management can increase market share, strengthen reputation, save costs, and build essential relationships (Regester & Larkin, 2003). While failures in issue management can lead to market share erosion, reputation declining, create significant expenditures, and give management harmful exposure. Issues that are not appropriately managed can even lead to a crisis. As we know, public relations are required to control the impact of a crisis or prevent a crisis (Sari & Nugrahani, 2019). Therefore, effective issue management is critical.

Furthermore, referring to the explanation of Regester & Larkin (2003), the issue management process consists of five stages. The first stage is to identify the issue. Identification of the issue aims to put the initial priorities of the various issues that arise. The second stage is to analyze the issue. This stage aims to analyze issues more profoundly and determine the source or cause of the issue and the emerging impacts. The third stage is the choice of the issue change strategy, including fundamental decision-making on organizational response. The fourth stage is the issue handling program, including coordinating all the resources involved to support the goals and objectives. At this stage, the organization decides on a detailed policy, action, or program to address the issue. The last stage is the evaluation of results. Evaluation is held to find out how the implementation of the program has been carried out.

## RESEARCH METHOD

The paradigm of this research is constructivism with a qualitative approach and case study. Furthermore, the subject of this research is SD Tumbuh 1 Yogyakarta which is located at Jl. AM Sangaji 48, Jetis, Yogyakarta. The object of this research is issue management related to negative issues faced by inclusive schools. Data collection techniques are in-depth interviews as primary data sources and observation and documentation as secondary data sources. Then, the data obtained from the sources that have been set is analyzed USING qualitative data management. The School's image process of analysis is done by (1) categorizing data, (2) compile data, and (3) aggregate the data that has been collected. The categories in this study are five stages of issue management, including issue identification, issue analysis, choice of issue change strategy, issue handling program, and result evaluation. The validity of the data in this study was tested with triangulation techniques and studied various references and research results or documentation related to the research findings.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

SD Tumbuh 1 realizes that the journey to an inclusive life will always be challenging. One of the constraints that cannot be taken quickly is the society that cannot accept inclusive schools. Negative comments aimed at inclusive schools, including SD Tumbuh 1, are still often heard. The existence of negative discourse surrounding the inclusive school is in line with previous research conducted by Tarnoto (2016), where the results of the study show that inclusive schools face the problem of negative community views of children with special needs and inclusive schools and a lack of community support regarding inclusive education.

**Issues Management of SD Tumbuh 1 Yogyakarta** - The issues management undertaken by SD Tumbuh 1 covered five stages: problem identification, issue analysis, issue change strategy options, issue action programming, and result evaluation.

### A. Problem identification

There are two parties involved in identifying the issues, which are the internal and external public. Internally, SD Tumbuh 1 has several meetings to capture the phenomena or issues that are developing and related to the school. Then,

SD Tumbuh 1 also holds meetings periodically with the parents, called parents meeting, where the school management approaches them to know their needs and desires. In addition to several internal meetings, SD Tumbuh 1 identifies issues while interviewing several prospective parents in the new admissions period (Penerimaan Siswa Baru). Parents' involvement in identifying the issues is an excellent aspect of SD Tumbuh 1. As Lattimore, Baskin, Heiman, & Toth (2008) describes, parents or guardians are among the primary audiences for educational institutions.

Based on several steps in issues identification organized by SD Tumbuh 1, it was found that there are people who still view SD Tumbuh 1 as a school that contains naughty kids. There was also anxiety as the children's learning process will be obstructed in SD Tumbuh 1. Some parents were afraid that the children would be harmed as some children with special needs tended to act aggressively. Many parents worry that their children will imitate children's behavior with special needs like becoming difficult to control. This issue was recognized by SD Tumbuh 1 from the internal public, such as during the parents meeting and from prospective parents as the external public, especially when SD Tumbuh 1 held an open house during the admission of new students.

In addition, SD Tumbuh 1 also has an image as a school that it is challenging to pursue good academic scores. Sekolah Dasar (SD) Tumbuh 1 was also called Sekolah Bengkel to accommodate naughty children. This negative image was recognized by SD Tumbuh 1, especially when communicating with the external public in events open to the public held by SD Tumbuh 1, such as exhibitions, open houses, or other exhibition events.

Parents have also heard negative comments several times, where relatives sometimes still ask the reasons for sending their child to SD Tumbuh 1, what illness they have, or what special needs they have. This fact shows that there are still views that tend to be pessimistic about inclusive schools. This issue was recognized by SD Tumbuh 1 from the internal public during parent meetings or meetings with the school committee.

The impact of the issue was felt most by students and their parents, where both of them often heard negative comments about the inclusion school and SD Tumbuh 1. As a result, SD Tumbuh 1 often received complaints from the parents. Then, the school's image is not good enough, and teachers who want to apply for jobs there also think twice because they think it will be challenging to work at SD Tumbuh 1, which is very detrimental for them.

Furthermore, inclusive schools have become alternative schools, not as first choice schools for the wider community. The view that has not been wholly positive towards inclusion schools and SD Tumbuh also makes the school target market very segmented for those who understand inclusion and accept children with special needs.

Analyzed by some problem identification methods described by Regester & Larkin (2003), the issue identification held by SD Tumbuh 1 generally uses the focus group discussion method by actively establishing communication in various forums. In addition, to focus group discussion, SD Tumbuh 1 also conducted management activity by walking around while approaching the public groups to accommodate aspirations. SD Tumbuh 1 also ran monitoring of media coverage of the school.

### B. Issue Analysis

The analysis began with digging deeper into the source or cause of the issue. Indonesia's education system has become one of the leading causes of this issue. Students' academic achievement becomes the most significant factor in assessing whether the school is good or bad. Parents indeed worry a lot about the score of their children when they study in an inclusive school.

Another fundamental issue is that people focus on children with special needs, not on inclusive learning. There is still an assumption that inclusive schools are just the same as schools for children with special needs. In comparison, the concept of inclusive school is essentially more comprehensive than simply receiving those kinds of children. That extreme resistance against children with special needs is also the leading cause of opposition towards inclusive schools.

The various causes of the issues found in the SD Tumbuh 1 issue analysis phase confirm the results of Tarnoto's (2016) research, where it was found that there was a negative view of the community towards special needs children and inclusive schools, as well as a lack of community support regarding the implementation of inclusive education. In Tarnoto's (2016), it was also explained that the public's knowledge about inclusive education and children with special needs is still deficient.

Furthermore, it can be said that the impact is most felt by students and parents, both of whom often hear negative comments about inclusion school, specifically SD Tumbuh 1. Inside the school, students are always considered to have special needs. Parents often get questions about their child's unique needs, so that they send their child to SD Tumbuh 1. The assumption that children who become students at SD Tumbuh are naughty or have difficulty learning is also an impact felt by students and parents. In connection with the impact described earlier, SD Tumbuh 1 is often known as a Sekolah Luar Biasa (SLB) that only accepts children with special needs, not an inclusive school that accepts children with special needs and regular students.

Afterward, the impact of the issues analyzed by SD Tumbuh 1 relates to SD Tumbuh 1's reputation as an inclusive school. The current issue raises several unfavorable views on inclusive schools and SD Tumbuh 1, including the image of being a school for naughty children and having no academic achievement. If this impact is not managed correctly, it can reduce the interest of prospective students towards SD Tumbuh 1, which in other words will affect the market of SD Tumbuh 1. These impacts are in line with Regester & Larkin's (2003) explanation, as being said that the issues will directly influence the reputation and market share of the organization.

Considering the urgency aspect described by Laufer (2006), the issue that hit SD Tumbuh 1 can be classified as having medium urgency leading to high urgency because there is much interest among stakeholders; media exposure at the middle level; and there is an apparent relationship between issues and the organization. This issue leads to high urgency because there is already a public debate about the organization, SD Tumbuh 1, and the concept of inclusion.

**C. The Isschallenging Strategy Options of Inclusive School**

Speaking of strategy, SD Tumbuh 1 sees the current issue as an opportunity to explain to the public about the inclusive school, as the values of the inclusive school are beneficial to shape the children's character. SD Tumbuh 1 also believes that inclusive school is fundamental to be discussed by the public because SD Tumbuh 1 does not want to be the only inclusive school and create exclusivity.

There are three actions that SD Tumbuh 1 took towards the opposing views of inclusive school: (a) strengthening the child about the value of 'growth,' (b) strengthening the hallmark of the school, and (c) disseminating positive sides about SD Tumbuh 1 to the community. Concerning celebrating diversity, SD Tumbuh 1 has guidelines for the event to be implemented. There must be at least three types of events: (a) multicultural or religious events, (b) local and national events, and (c) international events.

According to the four choices of organizational responses described by Laufer (2006), the choices adopted by SD Tumbuh 1 are classified as 'initiate,' by starting proactive efforts to form an issue and the result by communicating aggressively. In this case, SD Tumbuh 1 wants society to understand correctly how the learning pattern in inclusive schools. Whereas when referring to the type of strategy presented by Chase and Jones in Regester & Larkin (2003), SD Tumbuh 1 tends to run the 'dynamic response strategy.'

As SD Tumbuh 1 chose to perform several communication steps in public was also following the type of gap that becomes the source of the issue for SD Tumbuh 1, which is the misperception of the concept of inclusive education felt by the stakeholders. Bartha explained that the misperception gap occurs when there is a gap between what is in the public mind and what the organization does (Veng, 2008).

**D. Issue Action Programming on Inclusive School**

The issue handling program that has been reviewed in this study took place in the academic year of 2016-2017. The activities held by SD Tumbuh 1 were as follows:

1. National and Local Activities: Independence Day Celebration of the Republic of Indonesia and Anniversary Celebration (HUT) of the city of Yogyakarta
   In national and local-themed activities, SD Tumbuh 1 shows one element of inclusion which is cultural diversity.
2. Multicultural and or Religious Activities: Lunar New Year
   Multicultural activities also reflect how diversity is celebrated in SD Tumbuh 1, following the ideal values of inclusive education. Multicultural activities are in line with one of the concepts often carried by SD Tumbuh 1, namely "Celebrating Diversity."
3. International Activities: World Teachers Day
   International-theme event also shows that SD Tumbuh 1 does not limit its program towards the national border.
4. Tumbuh Fair
   Tumbuh Fair is an excellent problem-handling action for SD Tumbuh 1 because this activity allows the public to see directly and visit SD Tumbuh 1. Exhibition activity and displaying the work of students also show how teaching and learning activities in SD Tumbuh 1 can bring out the creation and achievements of the children.
5. Tumbuh Expo
   Tumbuh Expo activities are very favorable for handling SD Tumbuh 1 as an inclusive school because this activity is open to the public widely and held in the long term.
6. Mini Trip and Field Trip
   These activities are two learning programs for the students of SD Tumbuh 1. However, these activities are also meant to introduce SD Tumbuh 1 to society and the diversity value that the school owns.

In addition to various activities or events organized by SD Tumbuh 1, they also use digital and social media owned by the school to handle the various issues, such as website, Facebook, and Instagram. SD Tumbuh 1 does not have its own website, but integrates with its parent brand, Sekolah Tumbuh, which is www.sekolahtumbuh.sch.id. On this website, besides the information about SD Tumbuh 1, SD Tumbuh 2, SD Tumbuh 3, and Tumbuh High School, the inclusion issue becomes the news priority. The news chosen is news that emphasizes diversity, tolerance, and mutual respect for differences. The site or website is used as an issue handling program because the website and SD Tumbuh 1 can disseminate messages related to existing issues. The public looking for information about SD Tumbuh 1 can also access this website without being limited by time and territory. The ease of updating information on the website is also the strength of the website that SD Tumbuh 1 can use.



Picture 1. Screenshot of Sekolah Tumbuh Website
Source: Sekolah Tumbuh Website

The messages on their Facebook page focus on positive things about SD Tumbuh 1 as an inspiring, inclusive school. The inclusion issues are displayed through SD Tumbuh 1 and its students who embrace diversity and tolerance values. The latest media owned by SD Tumbuh 1 is Instagram. Like the website, Instagram of SD Tumbuh 1 is integrated with the Instagram account of Sekolah Tumbuh. Instagram is also operated by SD Tumbuh 1 to provide factual messages to deal with negative issues around the inclusive school. SD Tumbuh 1 often uses hashtags such as #sekolahinklusi, #inclusiveschool, #multikultur, #anakberkebutuhankhusus, and #goodeducationforal. Photos on Instagram are also accompanied by a caption that provides information about SD Tumbuh 1 and the values adopted in SD Tumbuh 1, such as diversity, tolerance, and mutual respect.



Picture 2. Screenshot of Sekolah Tumbuh Instagram Feed
Source: Sekolah Tumbuh Instagram account

When it was examined furtherly, the strength of the issue-handling program run by SD Tumbuh 1 is on the conveyed vital messages. SD Tumbuh 1 tried to communicate that inclusiveness is not only about children with special needs but broader. An inclusive school is not limited to children with special needs and a school that is open to any kind of diversity, be it physical, mental, social, cultural, or even economic.

SD Tumbuh 1, through its programs, also shows that the learning process that adapts inclusion values can be done in a fun way. Then, in every activity or program of SD Tumbuh 1, the portraits of differences in SD Tumbuh 1, such as the presence of children with special needs also displayed so that the public can see the diversity in SD Tumbuh 1.

## RESULTS EVALUATION

The evaluation of issue management conducted by SD Tumbuh 1 leads to evaluating the activities, including preparation, implementation, obstacles, and emerging responses. The evaluation principle is that there are various positive responses from the target of the SD Tumbuh 1 issue management program, both the general public and many stakeholders such as parents of students in particular. Based on the evaluation carried by SD Tumbuh 1, it was found that the public responded to the activities positively. The evaluation can also be seen from many parties who appreciate and provide good comments, such as on social media owned by SD Tumbuh 1 or comments obtained directly at the time of the program.

Referring to Cutlip, Center, & Broom (2007), who explained the stage and level of public relations program evaluation, SD Tumbuh 1 has evaluated three stages: preparation, implementation, and impact. However, when reviewed further, the evaluation conducted by SD Tumbuh 1 was more based on school observations and discussions, they have not measured the impact properly, and the evaluation has not been done regularly.

**Media in Issue Management of SD Tumbuh 1 Yogyakarta** – The media has enormous influence on the issues that hit SD Tumbuh 1. As we know, the media is a robust public opinion maker. Recognizing that the media is a crucial party to address inclusive schools, SD Tumbuh 1 used mass media, new media, and social media as channels for issue-handling programs. Mass media also being involved in the coverage of various activities held by SD Tumbuh 1.

Good relations with several media are also built by inviting the media in SD Tumbuh 1. This media engagement constructed positive news about SD Tumbuh 1, which is undoubtedly very useful in overcoming the existing issues and building positive public perception. In addition, SD Tumbuh 1 uses the website and social media, including Instagram and Facebook. The application of new media has several advantages, such as ease of access, cost-effectiveness, and reaching the broader public without being limited by geography or time. In addition, the content in new media owned by SD Tumbuh 1 is also entirely under the management of its parent school brand so that SD Tumbuh 1 can strategically choose the messages to be published.

## CONCLUSION

As an inclusive school with different educational concepts, SD Tumbuh 1 needs proper communications management to have a society. The issues that were handled by SD Tumbuh 1 show that inclusive education still faces several challenges, specifically related to public reception.

Based on the research, SD Tumbuh 1 conducted issue management by five stages: issue identification, issue analysis, choice of issue change strategy, issue handling program, and result evaluation. As a conclusion of the issue management, society has given positive responses so far. In addition, the success of the issue management can be seen from the increasing number of new student enrollment.

With the various stages of issue management run by SD Tumbuh 1, it can be said that the inclusive aspect implemented by SD Tumbuh 1 can be portrayed as an added value for the school. The negative discourse on inclusive schools is well-managed by SD Tumbuh 1 and positively impacts the school, although some shortcomings require improvement.

Several suggestions are proposed in regards to this research. First, there is an urgency of forming an integrated effort from the government as policymakers, inclusive school providers, academics, and society to build more favorable opinions on inclusive schools. Then, consistent and continuous communication from related stakeholders must build good relationships with the public to receive inclusive schools and children with special needs. Communication acts that are persuasive and educative are also needed to construct positive opinions on inclusive schools, given the lack of public acceptance is also due to the lack of public knowledge. The use of mass media and social media also still needs to be optimized.

Further research on communications management, public relations, and issue management in inclusive schools is demanded to complement this study's limitations. Because this study captured the school's issue management, there is an opportunity to research issue management from a public perspective.

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