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Educational quality assurance: The impact of policy on student learning outcomes

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Abstract

This study examines how schools for students with special needs maintained quality assurance practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. It examines the stages of QA planning, implementation, evaluation within the school accreditation process, and how school leaders viewed QA as a form of institutional accountability during a period of educational disruption. The analysis refers to the standards established by the National Accreditation Board for Schools/Madrasah which focuses on four major aspects: graduate competency, teaching and learning processes, teacher qualifications, and school management. As the demand for globally competitive education continues to grow, the Indonesian government has encouraged educational institutions to strengthen their accreditation systems. This has raised important issues, including the role of national accreditation bodies, alignment between local and international quality assurance (QA) standards, and recognition of accreditation outcomes across institutions. The study found that schools relied heavily on collaboration among teachers, principals, parents, and other stakeholders to maintain educational quality during the pandemic period.

Keywords

Educational policy, inclusive education, quality assurance, COVID-19, student learning outcomes

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Introduction

The success of educational institutions is closely related to their ability to maintain and improve the quality of educational services. Quality assurance in education not only helps improve student achievement but also strengthens institutional credibility and public confidence. Previous studies by Chen and Hou (2016) and Ahmed and Alharbi (2025) highlight that the quality of educational services plays a major role in achieving institutional excellence. In today's rapidly changing educational landscape, prioritizing quality is essential for institutions seeking to remain sustainable and globally competitive (Tripathi & Nundy, 2025).

The expansion of educational access, particularly during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, has increased concerns about maintaining consistent educational standards. The shift toward digital learning exposed weaknesses in traditional quality control systems that relied heavily on internal monitoring by national authorities, leading to a need for more robust and adaptable quality assurance frameworks that can effectively evaluate online learning environments. As a result, many educational institutions have begun adopting external quality assurance (EQA) approaches to address the growing diversity of learners, large-scale educational participation, and international quality benchmarks (Kaiser et al., 2022).

The pandemic also revealed deeper inequalities within education systems and challenged the principles of learner-centered education, highlighting how marginalized groups faced greater barriers to accessing quality learning resources and support during this transition. Education may fail to support student development when learners are not given equal opportunities to participate according to their individual abilities and situations. Ball (2019) argued that education should function as a practice of freedom rather than control. Therefore, teachers are not only responsible for delivering lessons effectively but also for supporting meaningful and liberating learning experiences. Students should be encouraged to actively participate in their learning rather than be restricted by rigid teaching methods or systemic barriers (Deiniatur & Hasanah, 2024).

Maintaining educational standards also depends heavily on external quality assurance agencies, which evaluate schools objectively while balancing institutional self-assessment processes (Chen & Hou, 2016). EQA systems generally combine external reviews conducted by professional evaluators with internal evaluations carried out by institutions themselves, allowing schools to improve from both internal and external perspectives (Rahminawati & Supriyadi, 2023).

In addition to teaching responsibilities, educators are expected to follow professional ethics and established academic standards (Sethy, 2018). Schools are also responsible for creating learning environments that support students' intellectual growth, character development, spirituality, and social awareness (Aradea & Harapan, 2019). Accreditation, as one of the main instruments of EQA, determines whether schools meet national standards for quality and institutional performance (Fauzi, 2021).

At the same time, changing demographics, limited public funding, rapid digital transformation, and increasing global competition have reshaped expectations in education. To respond to these pressures, many institutions have adopted Total Quality Management (TQM) practices that focus on continuous improvement, stakeholder involvement, and evidence-based decision-making (Anderson & Kuswanto, 2021).

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In Indonesia, educational regulations require external quality assurance at every level of education, from primary schools to universities. Institutions such as BAN-S/M and BAN-PT/LAM oversee accreditation through standardized, continuous evaluation processes (Ishak, 2023). These systems promote transparency, accountability, and institutional improvement through systematic data collection and regular assessments (Sari & Muslim, 2023).

Ultimately, accreditation helps schools create effective learning environments and maintain curricula that align with current educational and workforce demands (Gamboa & Melão, 2012). Indonesian schools are therefore expected to implement quality assurance consistently to maintain public trust, meet measurable standards, and respond to both national educational priorities and global developments (Ishak, 2023; Rahminawati & Supriyadi, 2023).

Literature Review

Quality assurance in education

Quality assurance has become an important part of educational management because it helps schools maintain academic standards and improve institutional performance. In education, quality assurance refers to systematic efforts used by institutions to monitor, evaluate, and improve teaching, learning, and school management processes. According to Harvey and Green (1993), educational quality should not only focus on academic achievement but also on whether institutions are able to meet stakeholder needs and respond to changing educational conditions. Similarly, Chen and Hou (2016) explain that effective quality assurance systems encourage schools to develop continuous improvement practices rather than relying only on external accreditation requirements. In recent years, many educational institutions have strengthened internal and external quality assurance systems to improve accountability, transparency, and public trust in education.

Quality assurance during the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic created major challenges for schools in maintaining educational quality. The sudden transition from face-to-face learning to online learning forced schools to adjust their teaching methods, management systems, and evaluation practices. Several studies reported that many schools experienced difficulties related to internet access, student participation, and learning supervision during remote education (Darmody et al., 2021). In response to these challenges, schools adopted more flexible quality assurance practices to support learning continuity and student well-being. Cardoso et al. (2019) state that quality assurance should become part of institutional culture rather than only an administrative obligation. During the pandemic, schools were required to make rapid decisions, improve communication with parents, and redesign learning activities according to students' needs and conditions.

Quality assurance in inclusive and special needs education

Quality assurance in inclusive education requires approaches that are flexible, collaborative, and student-centered. Students with special needs often require individualized learning support, especially during periods of educational disruption. According to Popovska

Nalevska et al. (2021), collaboration between schools, teachers, and parents plays an important role in supporting students' learning development. In addition, Leithwood et al. (2020) emphasize that school leadership is essential in maintaining institutional stability and encouraging cooperation among stakeholders during crisis situations. Previous studies also show that educational quality in inclusive schools should not be measured only through standardized academic outcomes but also through students' emotional, social, and developmental progress. Therefore, schools need adaptive quality assurance systems that can respond to diverse student needs and changing educational environments.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive research design to examine the implementation of Quality Assurance (QA) practices in schools serving students with special needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. A qualitative approach was chosen because the study focused on understanding participants' experiences and school practices in detail rather than producing numerical data. This design helped the researcher describe the actual conditions experienced by schools while managing quality assurance during the pandemic.

The research mainly focused on how QA processes were planned, implemented, and evaluated in special needs schools throughout the pandemic. The researcher focused particularly on the challenges school stakeholders faced in maintaining educational standards while adapting to online and blended learning systems. The study also explored how school leaders, teachers, parents, and students perceived QA's role as a form of institutional accountability and educational improvement under crisis conditions.

The theoretical framework of this research was based on the National Accreditation Standards developed by the National Accreditation Board for Schools/Madrasah (BAN-S/M, 2022). Four major components of educational quality assurance served as the foundation for the data analysis. These components included: (1) graduate competence, which refers to students' academic and non-academic achievements; (2) the quality of teaching and learning processes, particularly during remote learning implementation; (3) teacher qualifications and professional competence; and (4) school governance and management practices that supported educational continuity during the pandemic.

Data collection was conducted using multiple qualitative methods to obtain rich, detailed information. First, direct observations were conducted within the school environment to understand how QA practices were applied in daily educational activities. The observations focused on classroom interactions, learning management, administrative processes, and the adaptation of learning systems during COVID-19 restrictions. Through observation, the researcher identified both the strengths and challenges schools face in maintaining quality standards.

Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain more profound insights into participants' experiences and perspectives. The interview format allowed participants to express their opinions openly while still maintaining focus on the study objectives. The questions explored various topics, including the effectiveness of QA implementation, leadership strategies, teacher readiness, parental involvement, and the learning experiences of students with special needs during the pandemic.

Third, document analysis was used to strengthen the findings obtained through observation and interviews. Several institutional documents were reviewed, including School

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Self-Evaluation reports (EDS), School Work Plans (RKS), School Budget Plans (RKAS), accreditation reports, and other administrative records related to quality assurance implementation. These documents provided additional evidence regarding school policies, planning processes, and institutional responses to educational challenges during COVID-19.

The participants in this study were selected through purposive sampling because they were directly involved in implementing quality assurance activities. A total of 10 informants participated in the research, including 3 teachers, 3 parents, and 4 students with special needs. Teachers were selected based on their active role in teaching and school quality management during the pandemic. Parents were included because they played a significant role in supporting home-based learning, especially for students with special educational needs. Meanwhile, students were involved in directly discussing their learning experiences and challenges during remote education.

To support data collection, several research instruments were used. Observation sheets were used to systematically record school activities and QA implementation practices. Interview guides were prepared to ensure consistency across interviews while allowing participants to elaborate on their experiences. In addition, document review checklists were used to examine the relevance and completeness of institutional records related to accreditation and quality assurance processes.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The researcher organised and interpreted the data by identifying recurring themes and patterns across the four national QA components established by BAN-S/M. The analysis process involved data reduction, data categorisation, interpretation, and conclusion drawing. Data from interviews, observations, and school documents were compared to ensure the consistency and credibility of the findings.

To ensure the study's trustworthiness, several qualitative validation strategies were applied. Credibility was strengthened through triangulation and member checking, where participants were provided opportunities to confirm the accuracy of interview interpretations. Transferability was achieved by providing detailed, contextual descriptions of the research setting and participants' experiences, enabling readers to understand the applicability of the findings in similar contexts. Dependability and confirmability were maintained through audit trails, field notes, and researcher reflexivity, thereby minimising subjectivity and ensuring transparency throughout the research process.

Overall, this methodology enabled the researcher to gain a thorough understanding of how schools for students with special needs managed quality assurance during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study examined institutional practices and highlighted the experiences of various stakeholders in maintaining educational quality under challenging, rapidly changing conditions.

Findings and Discussion

This study examined how quality assurance (QA) was implemented in schools for students with special needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although schools experienced major disruptions during COVID-19, quality assurance activities continued to be implemented. However, schools were required to adapt their systems, leadership strategies, and instructional practices to respond to changing conditions, such as remote learning requirements and the need for individualized support for students with special needs. QA implementation was carried out in three interconnected stages: planning, implementation, and evaluation.

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Cooperation among principals, teachers, parents, and students became increasingly important in helping schools maintain educational quality during the crisis.

Table 1. *Summary of quality assurance findings during the covid-19 pandemic in special needs schools*

Themes	Key Findings	Evidence from the Study	Interpretations
QA as a continuous process	Quality Assurance continued during the COVID-19 pandemic despite major disruptions.	Schools maintained QA through planning, implementation, and evaluation stages.	QA was not limited to accreditation but became a continuous process for sustaining educational quality.
Collaborative QA planning	QA planning became more strategic and participatory.	School leaders involved teachers, parents, committees, and administrative staff in decision-making.	Collaboration helped schools respond to online and hybrid learning challenges more effectively.
Use of school self-evaluation tools	Schools used EDS, RKS, and RKAS as tools for reflection and improvement.	These documents helped identify weaknesses, allocate resources, and improve services.	QA planning shifted from formal compliance to institutional learning and problem-solving.
Adaptive implementation	Schools adjusted curriculum, teaching methods, and learning activities.	Teachers modified materials, simplified assignments, and used video calls and parent communication.	QA implementation became flexible and responsive to students' individual needs.
Challenges in remote learning	Students with special needs faced concentration, supervision, and access problems.	Limited devices, poor internet connectivity, and difficulty learning independently were reported.	The pandemic exposed inequalities and showed the need for inclusive, differentiated support.
Increased parent involvement	Parents became active partners in supporting learning from home.	Teachers regularly communicated with parents about progress, difficulties, and strategies.	Family-school collaboration became essential for maintaining educational quality.
Institutional innovation	The pandemic encouraged schools to improve digital and management practices.	Teachers became more familiar with technology, and leaders improved communication systems.	Crisis conditions accelerated institutional adaptation and learning.
Internal QA evaluation	Schools continued monitoring, audits, and reflective discussions.	Principals and QA teams reviewed learning activities, teacher performance,	Evaluation supported both accountability and continuous institutional improvement.

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		and program effectiveness.	
External accountability	Schools still followed BAN-S/M accreditation standards.	Accreditation encouraged documentation, transparency, and institutional credibility.	External evaluation remained important even during crisis conditions.
Data-driven improvement	Schools used reports, audits, assessments, and stakeholder feedback for decision-making.	Evaluation findings were used to revise strategies and future planning.	Organised data helped schools respond more effectively to pandemic-related challenges.
Broader implication	QA in special needs schools must be adaptive, inclusive, and context-sensitive.	Schools prioritised well-being, accessibility, flexibility, and student-centred practices.	Educational quality should consider academic, emotional, social, and developmental needs.

Table 1 shows that schools for students with special needs continued implementing quality assurance practices during the COVID-19 pandemic, even though many learning activities had to change. Schools adjusted their planning, teaching processes, and evaluation systems to keep learning activities running during difficult situations. Teachers, principals, parents, and school staff worked together more closely, especially when students experienced problems during online learning. Several participants also explained that schools became more flexible in responding to students' academic and emotional needs rather than focusing only on accreditation targets. In many cases, evaluation activities helped schools identify problems more quickly and improve communication, learning strategies, and decision-making throughout the pandemic period.

Participants explained that quality assurance was no longer seen only as an accreditation requirement during the pandemi**c**. Instead, Instead, schools began to view QA as an ongoing effort to support learning continuity, student well-being, and better educational services during difficult conditions. These findings support previous studies suggesting that effective QA systems must remain adaptive, inclusive, and responsive to contextual challenges (Chen & Hou, 2016).

QA planning during the pandemic

One important finding was that schools became more collaborative in planning quality assurance activities during the pandemic. Schools realized that maintaining educational quality under emergency conditions required more than routine administrative planning. As a result, school leaders involved teachers, parents, school committees, and administrative staff in designing educational strategies and determining institutional priorities.

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The findings revealed that collaborative planning helped schools respond more effectively to the rapid transition from face-to-face to online and hybrid learning. Teachers discussed difficulties in managing online instruction, while parents were more concerned about students' motivation, emotional condition, and internet access. Through regular meetings and discussions, schools identified urgent problems and revised learning targets to align with students' needs and capacities.

This situation reflects Harvey and Green's (1993) idea that educational quality should respond to institutional goals and stakeholder needs, which emphasizes that educational quality should be measured by an institution's ability to respond to contextual demands and stakeholder expectations. During the pandemic, schools were forced to redefine educational priorities, focusing not only on academic achievement but also on student well-being and learning accessibility.

The study also found that schools used self-evaluation documents such as the Evaluasi Diri Sekolah (EDS), School Work Plans (RKS), and School Budget Plans (RKAS) as practical tools for institutional reflection and decision-making. Rather than treating these documents merely as formal accreditation requirements, schools used them to identify weaknesses, allocate resources, and improve educational services. This supports the argument by Stensaker and Leiber (2015) that effective QA planning should be integrated into institutional learning and continuous improvement processes.

Another important finding was the shift from compliance-oriented QA toward more adaptive planning practices. Before the pandemic, many schools focused heavily on fulfilling accreditation indicators. However, COVID-19 forced schools to prioritize flexibility, responsiveness, and problem-solving. This finding is consistent with Cardoso et al. (2019), who argue that sustainable QA systems should move beyond bureaucratic compliance and become embedded within institutional culture and everyday educational practice.

QA implementation in schools for students with special needs

The implementation phase revealed that maintaining educational quality during the pandemic required strong collaboration and institutional adaptability. Schools established internal quality assurance teams (TPMI) to monitor learning processes, curriculum implementation, teacher performance, and institutional management. These teams played an important role in ensuring that schools continued to align educational activities with national quality standards despite operational limitations caused by the pandemic.

Teachers played a central role in helping students with special needs continue learning during the pandemic. Teachers were required to redesign instructional materials, modify learning activities, and adopt more flexible teaching approaches suitable for online and hybrid learning environments. Since many students with special needs experienced difficulties participating independently in virtual learning, teachers often provided individualised support via video calls, simplified assignments, and regular communication with parents.

Many participants reported that maintaining student participation during online learning was difficult. Several participants reported that students struggled to maintain concentration during online classes and often required direct supervision. In addition, unequal access to digital devices and internet connectivity created additional barriers to effective learning. These findings are consistent with Darmody et al. (2021), which highlighted that the pandemic widened educational inequalities, particularly among vulnerable student populations.

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To overcome these difficulties, schools adjusted learning activities and used more flexible teaching approaches. Teachers adjusted assignments to students' abilities and family situations rather than strictly adhering to conventional academic standards. This demonstrates that educational quality in inclusive education cannot be measured solely through standardized academic outcomes but must also consider students' emotional, social, and developmental needs.

The increased involvement of parents was also an important finding in this study. During home-based learning, parents became active partners in supporting educational activities and monitoring student progress. Teachers maintained regular communication with parents to discuss instructional strategies, learning difficulties, and student development. This finding supports Popovska Nalevska et al. (2021), who emphasize that effective QA systems in inclusive education require strong collaboration between schools, families, and communities.

The study further found that the pandemic encouraged institutional innovation. Teachers became more familiar with digital learning technologies, while school leaders improved communication systems and management practices. Although the pandemic created significant difficulties, it also accelerated institutional learning and encouraged schools to develop more adaptive educational practices. This finding aligns with To et al. (2012), who argue that continuous quality improvement often emerges from institutional responses to changing environmental challenges.

QA evaluation and institutional accountability

The findings related to QA evaluation demonstrate that schools continued to implement both internal and external evaluation processes during the pandemic. Internally, school principals and QA teams conducted regular monitoring, institutional audits, and reflective discussions to evaluate whether educational programs and learning activities were functioning effectively.

Participants explained that evaluation meetings became increasingly important during the pandemic because schools needed continuous feedback to respond quickly to changing learning conditions. Teachers collaboratively discussed instructional barriers, student participation issues, and possible improvement strategies. Evaluation activities were used not only to monitor school performance but also to help schools learn from their experiences during the pandemic.

This finding supports Sameena's (2020) argument that internal evaluation systems contribute significantly to sustainable quality improvement when institutions use evaluation results for reflection and evidence-based decision-making. Schools in this study used evaluation findings to revise instructional strategies, improve communication systems, and redesign future planning processes.

Externally, schools continued to follow the accreditation standards established by BAN-S/M despite operational restrictions due to COVID-19. Accreditation processes encouraged schools to maintain documentation, strengthen transparency, and ensure accountability in institutional management. The findings suggest that external evaluation remained important in supporting educational consistency and institutional credibility during crisis conditions.

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Schools also began to understand evaluation as a continuous process rather than an activity carried out only for accreditation purposes. Planning, implementation, evaluation, and revision became interconnected processes supporting continuous institutional improvement. Schools regularly used data from internal audits, teacher reports, student assessments, and stakeholder feedback to guide decision-making and identify development priorities.

The findings also demonstrate the importance of data-driven decision-making in effective QA systems. Schools that maintained organised records and systematic evaluations were generally better able to respond to educational challenges during the pandemic. This finding supports Awashreh (2025), who emphasize that institutional resilience and educational quality depend heavily on coherent systems, accountability structures, and transparent data management practices.

Broader discussion and implications

Overall, the findings of this study suggest that quality assurance in schools for students with special needs must be adaptive, collaborative, and context-sensitive. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that educational quality cannot be maintained solely through rigid administrative procedures. Instead, schools require flexible QA systems that can respond to rapidly changing educational realities and diverse student needs.

The study highlights the critical role of leadership in maintaining institutional stability and educational quality during crisis conditions. School leaders who encouraged collaboration, communication, and shared responsibility were more successful in sustaining QA implementation throughout the pandemic. This finding supports distributed leadership theories, which emphasize the importance of collective responsibility and stakeholder involvement in educational management (Leithwood et al., 2020).

The findings also show that inclusive education requires QA approaches that recognise learners' diversity and prioritise student-centred practices. Students with special needs experienced unique academic, emotional, and social challenges during remote learning, requiring schools to adopt differentiated instructional strategies and supportive educational environments.

Finally, the study demonstrates that the pandemic transformed schools' understanding of quality assurance. Rather than viewing QA (quality assurance) merely as an accreditation obligation, schools increasingly perceived it as an ongoing institutional process focused on continuous improvement, educational resilience, and student support. This shift reflects broader international perspectives on QA that emphasise adaptability, inclusivity, and sustainable educational development in times of uncertainty (Gamboa & Melão, 2012).

Conclusion

This study concludes that quality assurance in schools for students with special needs continued to play an important role during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, its implementation had to be adjusted to new educational challenges. The findings show that QA was carried out through three main stages: planning, implementation, and evaluation. During the planning stage, schools became more collaborative by involving principals, teachers, parents, school committees, and administrative staff in identifying problems and setting

priorities. This helped schools respond to the shift from face-to-face learning to online and hybrid learning.

In the implementation stage, teachers and school leaders showed flexibility in maintaining educational services. Teachers modified learning materials, adjusted assignments, used digital communication, and worked closely with parents to support students with special needs. These efforts were important because many students faced difficulties with concentration, independent learning, internet access, and the use of digital devices. The pandemic also encouraged schools to improve their communication systems and become more adaptive in managing learning activities.

The evaluation stage showed that schools continued to conduct monitoring, reflection, internal audits, and external accreditation processes. Evaluation was used not only to measure school performance but also to improve future planning and teaching practices. Schools used feedback from teachers, parents, students, and institutional records to make better decisions. This indicates that QA became a continuous process rather than a one-time administrative requirement.

Overall, the study shows that quality assurance in special needs education should remain flexible and responsive to students' academic, emotional, and social needs. The pandemic also changed how schools viewed the role of quality assurance in education. Instead of viewing QA only as an accreditation obligation, schools began to see it as a practical process for maintaining learning continuity, supporting student well-being, and improving educational quality during uncertain conditions. For this reason, schools should continue improving flexible QA practices, strengthening collaboration, and using evaluation results to improve future educational programs.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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