

Measuring Students' Empathy and Prosocial Attitudes toward Persons with Disabilities at the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Mulawarman University

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyse the level of student concern toward children with disabilities at the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Mulawarman University. While previous research has discussed empathy or inclusive education separately, few have quantitatively examined the relationship between affective and cognitive empathy and prosocial behaviour among university students at Mulawarman University in East Kalimantan. A quantitative approach using a survey method was employed to measure the dimensions of affective empathy, cognitive empathy, and prosocial behaviour based on the theory of Eisenberg and Miller (1987). A total of 97 students were selected as research samples using the simple random sampling technique. Data were collected through questionnaires and analysed using validity and reliability tests, as well as multiple linear regression analysis. The results indicate that affective and cognitive empathy have a significant influence on students' prosocial behaviour in supporting children with disabilities. The implications of this study highlight the importance of education and socialisation regarding inclusivity to enhance students' social awareness.

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INTRODUCTION

Persons with disabilities are a social group that often faces various barriers in social, economic, and educational aspects. Every individual has the right to equal opportunities in all aspects of life (Ministry of Law and Human Rights, 2016). The government has shown its commitment to ensuring the rights of persons with disabilities in the education sector through the issuance of Ministry of Research, Technology, and Higher Education Regulation No. 16 of 2017, which serves as a guideline for universities in implementing inclusive education, where disability-friendly campus criteria can be designed (Hikmah et al., 2021, pp.C147-C148; Septiana Fajar, 2019, introduction section). However, in practice, persons with disabilities still encounter stigma, discrimination, and limited access to public services and higher education. Limited access to services also poses a challenge for higher education institutions, as significant budget allocations are required to support inclusivity on their campuses (Cerilli et al., 2025).

Social concern, including that from students, plays a crucial role in supporting the inclusivity and well-being of persons with disabilities. Prejudice against persons with disabilities can be reduced through the ability to understand perspectives and empathise with them (Olivia Lukika&MarseliusSampeTondok, 2022). As agents of change, students are expected to have a high level of concern for persons with disabilities. This concern can be demonstrated through participation in inclusive activities, advocacy for the rights of persons with disabilities, and social interactions that support their empowerment.

This study aimed to describe the level of student concern for persons with disabilities in the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences at Mulawarman University, Samarinda. This concern was also measured along with the general prosocial attitudes of students, regardless of the type of disability. The study may provide a clearer picture of the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences (FISIP) students' concern for persons with disabilities and showcase their concern

through prosocial behaviour. Furthermore, this study aims to provide recommendations for educational institutions, specifically Mulawarman University, in creating a more inclusive environment and encouraging active student participation in advocating for the rights of persons with disabilities.

The study by Siregar et al. (2021) demonstrates that cognitive behavior plays a significant role in shaping how university students interact with social media, including how they absorb information, form attitudes, and regulate their behavior. The findings indicate that students with strong cognitive awareness are more likely to use social media positively, indirectly reflecting potential empathy and concern for social issues, including disability. In this context, cognitive function becomes essential in shaping caring attitudes, as it is closely related to how individuals comprehend, evaluate, and respond to their social environment.

As seen in a study on Instagram usage among students in Bengkayang, social media can serve as a means of educating about inclusivity if managed with high cognitive awareness. This aligns with findings that students from the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences (FISIP) at Universitas Mulawarman possess a moderate level of cognitive empathy (Table 4.1), thus requiring support through educational content on disabilities in digital platforms.

Meanwhile, Rohman (2020) investigated workplace inclusivity toward persons with disabilities and emphasised the importance of informal norms and interpersonal communication in shaping acceptance attitudes. The study highlights how strengthening social norms and values within the workplace can reduce social exclusion of people with disabilities, particularly those with visual impairments. This suggests that, beyond structural factors, cognitive aspects and internalised values within individuals and groups also play a role in fostering concern toward people with disabilities.

Rohman's research at PT. Thinkweb demonstrated that informal norms—such as the “BioskopBisik” (Whisper Cinema) program—are effective in enhancing empathy and collaboration between employees with and without disabilities. These findings can be adopted by FISIP Mulawarman through initiatives such as joint training with students with disabilities, especially given the currently low level of prosocial participation among students.

Research on persons with disabilities remains a relevant topic widely explored by scholars. The relationship between empathy levels and inclusive attitudes toward persons with disabilities shows that higher empathy levels are more likely to support inclusivity (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987). Similarly, concern levels are influenced by direct interaction experiences with persons with disabilities. Brown (in Hanifah & Sujarwanto, 2023) found that individuals with more interaction experiences with persons with disabilities exhibit higher levels of concern.

Research on student concern has shown that knowledge has a significant relationship with concern levels (Kumurur, 2008). Sugiarto's study found that although students have a high level of awareness, they tend to lack implementation of that awareness (Sugiarto & Gabriella, 2020).

Empathy Theory

Eisenberg's theory of empathy and prosocial behavior emphasizes that an individual's social concern is influenced by cognitive and emotional factors. Empathy, which develops from childhood, affects an individual's prosocial actions later in life. In this study, the theory is relevant to understanding how student empathy influences their concern for persons with disabilities.

Paul A. Muller's research discusses the relationship between social experiences and an individual's level of concern for vulnerable groups. The theory asserts that individuals who interact more frequently with vulnerable groups tend to have higher social awareness (Muller et al., 2014). This is relevant to examining how students' experiences interacting with persons with disabilities affect their level of concern.

Definition of Persons with Disabilities

Persons with disabilities are defined as individuals with long-term physical, intellectual, mental, and/or sensory impairments that may hinder their full and effective participation in society (Law No. 8 of 2016 on Persons with

Disabilities). Socially, this concept not only refers to physical limitations but also includes social and environmental barriers that prevent the active participation of persons with disabilities.

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), inclusive education aims to ensure that all individuals, including persons with disabilities, have equal access to education without discrimination (Yuliyanti et al., 2024). This study seeks to analyse the extent to which students at Mulawarman University are aware of and concerned about persons with disabilities in their academic and social environments.

METHODS

Research Approach and Type

This study employs a descriptive quantitative approach using a survey method, which systematically describes the studied phenomenon based on data obtained from respondents through structured questionnaires. The collected data will be analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques to provide an overview of the research variables and the patterns that emerge from the findings.

This study also aims to determine the level of student concern for children with disabilities based on the dimensions of affective empathy, cognitive empathy, and prosocial behaviour, in accordance with Eisenberg and Miller's theory. Quantitative data is collected through structured questionnaires using a Likert scale.

Population and Research Sample

The population in this study consists of all students of the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences (FISIP) at Mulawarman University, totalling 2,800 students. Due to the large population size, this study employs a simple random sampling technique with a 10% margin of error. The sample size is determined using the Slovin formula (Sugiyono, 2019).

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

Where:

n = Required sample size

N = Total population (2,800 students)

e = Margin of error (10% or 0.1)

Substituting the values into the formula:

$$n = \frac{2800}{1 + 2800(0,1)^2}$$

$$n = \frac{2800}{1 + 2800(0,01)}$$

$$n = \frac{2800}{29} \quad n = 96,55 = 97$$

Thus, the sample size used in this study is 97 students, and the samples were selected using simple random sampling to ensure good representation of the population.

Research Variables

The main variable in this study is the level of student concern for children with disabilities, which is measured through the following three dimensions:

1. Affective Empathy: Measures students' emotional responses to the conditions of children with disabilities.
2. Cognitive Empathy: Measures students' ability to understand the perspectives of children with disabilities.
3. Prosocial Behaviour: Measures students' tendency to act prosocially in supporting children with disabilities.

Research Instrument

The instrument used in this study is a questionnaire with a 5-point Likert scale, with the following rating scheme:

- 1 – Strongly Disagree
- 2 – Disagree
- 3 – Somewhat Agree
- 4 – Agree
- 5 – Strongly Agree

The questionnaire was designed based on the theory of Eisenberg and Miller (1987), covering three main dimensions: Affective Empathy, Cognitive Empathy, and Prosocial Behaviour. Examples of questionnaire statements:

"I feel sad when I see children with disabilities struggling." (Affective Empathy)

"I can understand the challenges faced by children with disabilities." (Cognitive Empathy)

"I am willing to help children with disabilities in their daily activities." (Prosocial Behaviour)

Data Collection Technique

Data were collected through online questionnaires using survey platforms. The questionnaire was distributed to FISIP students at Mulawarman University who were selected as samples via email and social media, while ensuring respondent anonymity and confidentiality, because it accurately describes the data collection method in a research study.

Data Analysis Technique

This study employs a descriptive quantitative approach using a survey method to measure student concern for children with disabilities, focusing on three dimensions are affective empathy, cognitive empathy, and prosocial behavior. The instrument used is a structured questionnaire, designed by the researcher based on the theoretical framework of Eisenberg and Miller (1987), and constructed with a 5-point Likert scale. The population consists of 2,800 students from the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences (FISIP) at Mulawarman University.

A simple random sampling technique was used to select 97 students, as determined using Slovin's formula with a 10% margin of error. To ensure the quality of the instrument, validity and reliability tests were conducted. The validity test employed the Pearson Product-Moment correlation technique on a try-out sample of 30 students. Each item was correlated with the total score of its dimension. The validity test was conducted using Pearson correlation to measure the relationship between variables (Anwar, 2019). This validity test was performed on 30 students as a test sample for this study. The analysis results indicate that most items correlate at 0.8, signifying a very strong relationship. Furthermore, the highest correlation (1.0) was found between certain statements, such as:

"I understand why children with disabilities may feel frustrated in certain situations", and "I recognise the special needs that children with disabilities may have."

"I am willing to help children with disabilities when they need assistance," and "I encourage others to treat children with disabilities with respect and inclusivity."

These results demonstrate that the questionnaire used in this study has a very high level of validity.

These thresholds are commonly accepted in educational and social research as indicators of moderate to strong item validity. The results of the validity test showed that all items exceeded these thresholds, suggesting that each item contributed meaningfully to the measurement of the construct. This indicated that the instrument had a high degree of internal coherence and was theoretically aligned with the dimensions proposed by Eisenberg and Miller's empathy framework.

To ensure the consistency of the research instrument, a reliability test was conducted using the split-half reliability method. In this approach, the total questionnaire items were divided into two groups, typically based on odd and even

numbered statements, to assess the internal consistency of the instrument. The correlation between the two sets of scores was then calculated. This correlation, referred to as the split-half reliability coefficient (r_b), was used to determine the overall reliability of the instrument using the Spearman-Brown prophecy formula:

$$r_i = \frac{2r_b}{1 + r_b}$$

Where:

r_i = Instrument reliability

r = Split-half reliability coefficient

r_b = Correlation between the two parts of the questionnaire

Reliability is considered good if it is greater than 0.7. Descriptive Statistics: Used to describe the respondent profile and the distribution of students' level of concern. A reliability value (r_i) greater than 0.7 indicates that the instrument has acceptable internal consistency, suggesting that the items are measuring the same underlying construct reliably.

In addition to the reliability analysis, descriptive statistics were employed to present an overview of the data collected.

The reliability test was conducted using the Spearman-Brown split-half method to measure the internal consistency of the research instrument. The steps for reliability testing include dividing the questionnaire items into two parts: even-indexed items were placed in Column 1, while odd-indexed items were placed in Column 2. Next, the total scores from all questions in each section were summed for each respondent, generating two total score vectors: Half 1 Score (total score from the first part) and Half 2 Score (total score from the second part). To determine the r_{br_brb} value (correlation between the two parts of the questionnaire), the Spearman correlation between Half 1 Score and Half 2 Score was calculated, yielding $r_b = 0.799$, which was rounded to 0.8.

Then, the Instrument Reliability (r_i) was calculated using the following Spearman-Brown formula:

$$r_i = \frac{2r_b}{1 + r_b}$$

Given: Substituting the value $r_b = 0.8$

$$\begin{aligned} r_i &= \frac{2 \times 0,8}{1 + 0,8} \\ r_i &= \frac{1,6}{1,8} \\ &= 0,888 \end{aligned}$$

The reliability value was rounded to 0.9.

A good Spearman-Brown reliability value ranges between 0.7 and 0.9, while a very good reliability value is above 0.9. Reliability values between 0.5 and 0.7 are considered moderate. Since $r_i > 0.7$, this instrument has good reliability. This means that the instrument used in this study is highly consistent in measuring students' level of concern for persons with disabilities.

Research Location and Time

This study was conducted at the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Mulawarman University. Data collection took place from February to March 2025.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Students play a crucial role in building a more inclusive society for persons with disabilities. Their attitudes, awareness, and behaviour significantly influence not only the immediate social environment on campus but also extend to shaping broader community perceptions and interactions. In higher education settings, students' interactions with individuals with disabilities, whether through formal programs or daily social exchanges, can either reinforce or challenge prevailing stereotypes and biases. Recognizing this, the present study seeks to examine students' level of concern for children with disabilities through three interconnected dimensions: affective empathy, cognitive empathy, and prosocial behavior.

A structured questionnaire, which has undergone rigorous validity and reliability testing, was utilised to ensure the accuracy and credibility of the findings. The instrument was carefully designed to measure nuanced aspects of empathy and prosocial tendencies among students, ensuring that each item corresponded clearly to one of the measured dimensions. Data were collected from 97 students drawn from various academic backgrounds to capture a diverse range of perspectives. The responses were then analysed using IBM SPSS 25, a statistical software tool widely used in social science research (Ghozali, 2018).

The analytical process was not limited to descriptive statistics; it was extended to explore patterns and underlying variables that may influence student attitudes and behaviors toward children with disabilities. This approach enables a richer interpretation of the data, highlighting not only what students report feeling or thinking but also revealing correlations between demographic characteristics and levels of empathy or prosocial behavior.

The results of the study are presented in tabular form to enhance clarity and ensure ease of interpretation. By organising the data systematically, the analysis becomes more accessible and transparent, allowing for an objective examination of trends and anomalies. This structured presentation also serves as a critical step in ensuring the research findings are both communicable and replicable, strengthening the study's validity.

Furthermore, the tabulated results offer valuable insights into the emotional and cognitive responses students exhibit when confronted with the reality of disability, particularly in children. These findings are instrumental in identifying gaps in awareness or understanding that may hinder inclusive practices within educational and social settings. The study also explores the extent to which students engage in prosocial behaviour, voluntary actions intended to benefit others, toward children with disabilities, shedding light on their readiness to contribute to inclusive efforts in practical terms.

By analysing these aspects, this study aims not only to map current attitudes but also to identify key factors influencing student awareness and involvement in inclusive activities. The findings serve as a foundational reference for developing future educational interventions and strategies that aim to foster greater empathy, inclusion, and support for persons with disabilities. They also provide practical implications for university programs, community outreach initiatives, and policymaking in the realm of inclusive education. The research results are presented in the following table. The categorisation of scores in Table 1 is based on the following scale: 4.1–5.0 = Very High; 3.1–4.0 = Moderate; 2.1–3.0 = Low.

Aspect	Statement	Average Score	Categories
Affective Empathy	I feel sad when I see children with disabilities struggling.	4.78	Very high
	I feel happy when children with disabilities achieve certain accomplishments.	4.75	Very high
	I feel concerned when children with disabilities do not receive fair treatment.	4.71	Very high
Cognitive Empathy	I understand the challenges faced by children with disabilities in daily life.	4.02	High
	I can imagine what it feels like to be a child with a disability.	3.76	Moderate
	I am aware of the special needs that children with disabilities may have.	3.80	Moderate
Prosocial Behavior	I am willing to help children with disabilities when they need assistance.	4.56	High
	I participate in activities that support children with disabilities.	3.50	Moderate
	I donate my time or resources to organisations that help children with disabilities.	3.30	Moderate

Table 1: Research Analysis Results
Field data from student survey (n = 97), processed using SPSS 25 (2025) [source]

Based on the analysis presented in Table 1, a detailed interpretation of the students' responses can be conducted by examining each measured dimension: affective empathy, cognitive empathy, and prosocial behaviour. This descriptive breakdown allows for a more nuanced understanding of how students emotionally respond to, cognitively process, and behaviorally engage with issues related to children with disabilities. The results for each aspect are elaborated as follows:

Affective Empathy

Students demonstrate a very high level of affective empathy toward children with disabilities, as evidenced by the consistently high average scores across all related indicators. This strong affective response is reflected in students' intense emotional reactions, including sadness when witnessing the struggles faced by children with disabilities (mean score = 4.78) and joy when observing their accomplishments (mean score = 4.75). Furthermore, students expressed significant concern when encountering situations where children with disabilities are treated unfairly (mean score = 4.71), underscoring their emotional attunement to issues of equity and justice.

These findings suggest that, at an emotional level, students are highly sensitive and responsive to the lived experiences of children with disabilities. Their empathy is not limited to passive awareness but extends to a shared emotional resonance, indicating a deep emotional connection that could serve as a foundation for inclusive attitudes and behaviours. The consistency of very high scores across affective indicators implies that students are not emotionally indifferent or disengaged from the issue; instead, they are likely to perceive the well-being of children with disabilities as a matter of personal and moral significance.

This affective responsiveness is particularly important in the context of inclusive education and community engagement, as it reflects students' readiness to emotionally connect with marginalized groups, a quality essential for fostering genuine solidarity and inclusive social environments. Moreover, these emotional dispositions may serve as catalysts for further cognitive understanding and prosocial action, highlighting the interrelation between feeling, thinking, and doing in social empathy development.

Cognitive Empathy

Students' cognitive empathy levels demonstrate a mixed pattern, indicating both strengths and areas that require further development. Most cognitive empathy indicators scored within the moderate category, suggesting that students still require deeper understanding and perspective-taking capacity. The data show that students possess a fairly good understanding of the challenges faced by children with disabilities in daily life, as reflected by the average score of 4.02.

This suggests a general awareness of the external barriers and difficulties these children encounter, such as limited access, social stigma, or learning constraints. However, when it comes to the ability to mentally place themselves in the position of a child with a disability, the score declines to a moderate level (3.76), indicating a gap in deeper perspective-taking abilities.

In addition, students' awareness of the specific or special needs that children with disabilities may require is also categorised as moderate (3.80). This points to a limitation in their understanding of more nuanced or individualised support, which is often essential in inclusive settings. The moderate scores suggest that while students may recognise that children with disabilities face unique circumstances, they may not fully grasp the diversity and complexity of those needs.

This combination of findings highlights that students' cognitive empathy is present but not yet fully developed. Their knowledge base may be shaped more by general observations than by structured learning or direct interaction with individuals with disabilities. As such, it becomes evident that educational interventions, such as inclusive curriculum content, experiential learning, or service-learning programs, are needed to deepen students' cognitive engagement. Enhancing cognitive empathy is critical not only for raising awareness but also for encouraging informed and meaningful involvement in inclusive practices.

Prosocial Behavior

Despite demonstrating high levels of empathy, students' prosocial behaviour toward children with disabilities reveals a contrast between willingness and action. Although students express a strong willingness to help, the majority of their prosocial behaviour indicators remain within the moderate range, reflecting a limited actual engagement in inclusive actions. While the majority of students express a strong willingness to help when assistance is directly needed (mean score = 4.56), their actual involvement in structured or organised activities that support children with disabilities remains relatively low (3.50). Even more concerning is the limited contribution in terms of time, effort, or financial donations to relevant organisations, which shows an even lower average score (3.30).

These findings suggest that students' support tends to be situational and reactive rather than proactive or sustained. The inclination to help appears to emerge primarily in direct, immediate contexts rather than through long-term engagement or planned participation in inclusive initiatives. This gap between empathetic disposition and behavioural follow-through underscores the need to bridge awareness with action through institutional support and opportunities for involvement.

Such patterns may be influenced by several factors, including a lack of access to inclusive volunteer programs, limited information about how to get involved, or uncertainty about how best to contribute meaningfully. Therefore, to transform emotional concern into tangible impact, higher education institutions and social organisations must play a more active role in facilitating prosocial engagement, such as through community service, campus inclusion programs, or awareness campaigns.

By creating more accessible and meaningful avenues for action, students' empathy can be translated into sustained social responsibility, reinforcing their role in building a more inclusive and participatory society for children with disabilities. This study employed a simple random sampling technique without stratification by gender or academic year, as its primary aim was to assess the general level of concern among students in the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Mulawarman University.

While this approach provides a broad overview, it does not capture possible variations across demographic subgroups. Future research may benefit from adopting a stratified sampling design to explore how gender, academic level, or study programs might influence students' empathy and prosocial behavior. To minimize potential limitations common to self-report surveys, this study utilized anonymous online questionnaires. The design aimed to reduce social pressure and encourage honest responses. Nevertheless, future research could consider combining survey data with qualitative approaches for a more comprehensive understanding.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings, it can be concluded that students have a high level of empathy toward children with disabilities; however, their active participation remains lacking. Their participation is mostly limited to intentions rather than concrete actions. Therefore, several recommendations can be made:

1. Education and Socialisation: Universities can organise seminars and training sessions to enhance students' understanding of disability issues. Additionally, disability-related discussions can be incorporated into the curriculum, particularly in study programs related to social sciences.
2. Volunteer Programs: More volunteer programs are needed to allow students to interact directly with persons with disabilities. For example, students can participate as volunteers in major events such as National and International Disability Awareness Days.
3. Collaboration with Social Organizations: Universities can collaborate with organizations focused on disability issues to provide students with more meaningful opportunities to contribute. This collaboration is broad, not only involving social organizations but also fostering partnerships with student organizations in implementing programs related to disability awareness.

These strategies are expected to ensure that students not only develop high empathy but also translate it into tangible actions that positively impact the lives of children with disabilities. Furthermore, future research may consider employing a longitudinal design to examine changes in empathy and prosocial behaviour over time, particularly in response to specific interventions such as disability awareness training, inclusive education programs, or volunteer experiences. This would help to identify which educational strategies are most effective in fostering sustainable social concern among university students.

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