

Relational Coordination In Inclusive Education: A Critical Review And Theoretical Extension Toward Emotional Responsiveness In Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive education in Indonesia often remains symbolic due to fragmented collaboration and hierarchical school cultures. Relational Coordination Theory (RCT) focusing on shared goals, shared knowledge, mutual respect, and quality communication has proven effective in high interdependence sectors like healthcare but is seldom applied in educational contexts in developing countries. This critical literature review aims to synthesize the theoretical development and empirical findings of RCT across sectors and propose its adaptation to foster emotional responsiveness, a school's capacity to address students' emotional needs in Indonesian inclusive schools. The synthesis confirms RCT's strong potential as a theoretical and diagnostic framework for enhancing collaboration among teachers, therapists, and support staff. The study further proposes a theoretical model linking structural inputs and relational coordination mechanisms to emotional responsiveness as a core outcome. Policy and practical implications for stakeholders are discussed, along with recommendations for future empirical research to test the model in the Indonesian context.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Education that includes all has become a major focus around the world, a critical element in the pursuit of quality education that demands commitment from all levels and every educational actor. In Indonesia, this commitment is codified in national regulations, which require that schools accept all students with special needs (Rofiah & Suhendri, 2023). Nevertheless, implementation often amounts to little more than physical placement rather than genuine participation, with pedagogy and school structures often remaining resistant to the needs of diverse learners (Srivastava, de Boer, & Pijl, 2017). As a result, teachers, learning support assistants (LSAs), counselors, and therapists often work within self-referential systems, fostering school cultures that are ill-equipped to meet the emotional and academic needs of all children (Ainscow, Dyson, & Weiner, 2013).

Prevalent research in Indonesia, like in many developing contexts, has largely remained in the individual domain, targeting factors such as teacher attitudes, resource shortages, and government policy analysis (Cabatay, Hermanto, & Aningrum, 2024). Although these views are important, they do not yield a deep enough understanding of the relational and collaborative processes that make inclusion work. They fail to explain how interdependent staff members coordinate their work or why some schools manage to develop sustainable, responsive practices while others do not. This theoretical and practical void creates a need for a framework that captures the quality of collaborative interactions among all relevant parties.

Relational Coordination Theory (RCT) (Gittell, 2015) provides a powerful framework to address this need. RCT proposes that highly effective coordination in interdependent work settings is achieved through relationships characterized by shared goals, shared knowledge, and mutual respect, supported by communication that is frequent, timely, accurate, and problem-solving. For decades, RCT has been validated in high-pressure industries such as aviation and healthcare, where it is consistently associated with enhanced performance, innovation, and staff well-being (Bolton, Logan, & Gittell, 2021). However, its application within education, especially in non-Western countries such as Indonesia, remains nascent and limited.

This paper presents a critical review of the literature with three main aims:

First, it seeks to synthesize the historical evolution, core facets, and empirical applications of RCT across diverse, high-interdependence sectors. This synthesis builds a comprehensive understanding of RCT as both a theory and a diagnostic tool for analyzing collaborative work systems.

Second, it argues for the purposeful expansion of RCT into the field of inclusive education. By highlighting the structural and operational parallels between inclusive schools and other sectors where RCT has proven effective, this review positions RCT as a fresh and dynamic framework for conceptualizing cooperation among teachers, LSAs, psychologists, and therapists.

Finally, and most significantly, this review explores the potential of RCT to foster emotional responsiveness, understood as a school's capacity to create an environment where students feel secure, respected, and supported within Indonesian inclusive schools. By proposing a novel theoretical connection between relational coordination and this critical outcome, this paper seeks to contribute to organizational and inclusive education theory, providing new insights into how the relational texture of a school shapes its socio-emotional climate.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

The study is based on a literature review, with a particular focus on RCT kernels across sectors (since its inception to the development period) and is particularly concerned with its relevance for an inclusive education in Indonesia. Unlike systematic reviews which focus more on replicable methodology (e.g., PRISMA), a critical review favors theoretical depth, conceptual integration, and the identification of novel areas of inquiry. This type of design is useful for theory building in new areas, where we have little empirical data, but where conceptual integration is necessary to advance scholarship.

We searched peer-reviewed literature in Scopus, Web of Science, ProQuest, and Google Scholar, for articles with keywords of relational coordination, collaboration, inclusive education, emotional responsiveness, and sectoral applications. The search included articles published between 2000 and 2025 to include both basic and recent initiatives. Key search terms included:

“Relational Coordination Theory” and “Jody Hoffer Gittell”

“Collaboration”, “Interdependence”, “Inclusive Education”

“School Climate”, “Emotional Responsiveness”

Keywords: “Healthcare” “Aviation” “Public Service” “Disability Services” “Banking” “Remote Work”

This approach guarantees the representation of both a conceptual and empirical work that emulates RCT in systems that are highly interconnected and examples that may be translated to educational environments.

The following were considered as criteria to filter the corpus: Inclusion Criteria: Journals (not peer reviewed) or chapters in academic books Studies that describe the use of RCT as a theory Studies conducted in complex interdependent domains (e.g., health, aviation, education, disability services, money, telecommute) Exclusion Criteria: Unpublished (or grey literature): Non-peer reviewed (dissertations, conference abstracts, grey literature) Case studies with no clear theoretical basis in RCT Articles that use “coordination” in a broad sense and do not relate it directly to Gittell's conception

A hybrid method of coding was used by merging deductive and inductive methods to examine the chosen literature.

- a. Deductive Coding: Guided by seven dimensions on RCT, three relational (sharing goals and values, shared knowledge, mutual respect) and four communicative (frequent, timely, accurate, problem-solving).
- b. Inductive Coding: Emerging themes included:
 - 1) The cultural adaptation to RCT in hierarchical and not-Westernised settings
 - 2) Conceptual link: Relational coordination and emotional responsiveness
 - 3) Challenges of RCT application in inclusive school settings

The analysis was based on two stages:

- a. Sectoral Synthesis: Applying RCTs in aviation, health and social care, public sector, banking, disability services and teleworking.
- b. Theoretical Integration: Utilizing cross-sectoral knowledge for better use of RCT in IE, through the case of Indonesian schools as a model with high interdependent and little systemic coordination.
- c. 3.5 Narrative Synthesis

Results are reported as a narrative synthesis that groups them into four thematic categories:

- a. The historical evolution of RCT
- b. Empirical applications across sectors
- c. Conceptual limitations and critiques
- d. Prospects for theory development toward inclusive education especially in Indonesia

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The key themes that emerge from our critical examination of both higher and lower interdependence sector RCT studies include, the empirical robustness of RCT across high interdependence sectors, the process by which relational coordination improves operational and social outcomes, and the limited but growing application of RCT within education, particularly within the Global South. Together, these themes begin to demonstrate the theoretical and practical significance of taking RCT further into the more inclusive context of schools and Indonesian schools bring with them a particularly compelling case.

Sectoral Applications of RCT

RCT has been applied across diverse sectors including aviation, healthcare, public services, disability services, banking, and remote work demonstrating that relational mechanisms consistently drive performance beyond formal structures and procedures (Gittell, 2000; Havens et al., 2010; Warfield et al., 2022; Siddique & Islam, 2023). Table 1 summarizes representative studies and their relevance for inclusive education.

Table 1. Overview of Reviewed Studies on Relational Coordination across Fields Sector Key

| Sector | Key Authors & Year | Sample/Context | Main Findings Relevant to RCT | Relevance for Inclusive Schools |
|-----------------|--|---------------------------------|---|---|
| Aviation | Gittell (2000) | Airline flight operations | Shared goals, knowledge, and respect improved safety & timeliness | Mirrors interdependence among school staff roles |
| Healthcare | Havens et al. (2010); Gittell et al. (2020); Tørring et al. (2019) | Hospitals, surgical teams | High RC reduced errors, improved outcomes, boosted staff well-being | Analogous to team-based coordination in inclusive schools |
| Public Services | Gittell & Thistlethwaite (2013) | Interprofessional collaboration | RC used as diagnostic and evaluation framework | Informs cross-role teamwork among educators and LSAs |

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|---------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|---|--|
| Disability Services | Warfield et al. (2022) | Community-based group homes | RC enhanced participation and social integration | Directly relevant to fostering student belonging |
| Banking | Siddique & Islam (2023) | High-performance work systems | RC mediated HR practices and unit-level performance | Demonstrates RC's viability in hierarchical systems |
| Remote Work | Fuchs & Reichel (2023) | Digital work teams | Job design shaped RC through virtual communication | Applicable to post-pandemic digital education environments |
| Education (nascent) | Bolton, Logan & Gittell (2021) | Synthesis of 230+ studies | RC linked to performance, innovation, well-being; education underexplored | Highlights gap in Global South, including Indonesia |

Patterns and Implications Across Sectors

Following an integrated summary shows us three untiring trends with respect to how relational coordination functions under different conditions :

Relational Mechanisms Drive Outcomes

Relational Mechanisms Drive Outcomes Across a variety of industries, shared aims, shared information and mutual respect always facilitate high-quality communication, frequent, timely, accurate, and problem solving (Gittell, 2006). Relational dimensions which decrease coordination failures, avoid siloing practices, and support resilience in complex systems. In aviation, RC defined how flight crews create safety amidst uncertainty (Gittell, 2000). In the health care sector, RC was associated with lower occurrences of medical errors, and an increased patient care (Havens et al., 2010). These results support that relational coordination is not sector restricted but it is a portable infrastructure for interdependent work.

Contextual Adaptation Is Essential

The principles of RCT are sound but their implementation needs to take account of local context, both structurally and culturally. In health care RC prevails when extreme time pressure and professional interdependence (Tørring et al., 2019) are present. In banking, RC mediated the association between high performance work systems and unit level outcomes implying that relational mechanisms need to be nurtured (Siddique & Islam, 2023). Especially for schools in Indonesia, hierarchical norms and fragmented communication can constrain openness of communication and therefore explicit strategies are needed to localise RC in the governance and cultural context of the school.

Social Outcomes Matter as Much as Efficiency

While early use of RCT stressed operational metrics, RCTs in more recent studies have emphasized their influence on social results. High relational coordination enhances staff engagement, job satisfaction, and decreases burnout (Bolton et al., 2021). In disability services, RC facilitated the sense of belonging and participation among the underprivileged (Warfield et al., 2022). These results are particularly pertinent to inclusive schooling where how responsively the students are treated with respect to their emotional needs is key to students perceiving a sense of safety, belonging and support. For Indonesian classrooms, this means that researchers recommend whether RC can even be considered to improve academic performance and create an emotionally responsive learning climate.

A synthesis of studies across aviation, healthcare, public services, banking, disability services, and digital work reveals three recurring patterns in how Relational Coordination (RC)

operates: (a) relational mechanisms consistently drive outcomes, (b) contextual adaptation is essential in hierarchical or resource-constrained environments, and (c) social outcomes such as well-being and belonging are as critical as efficiency (Bolton, Logan, & Gittell, 2021; Warfield, Lorenz, Ali, & Gittell, 2022).

Gaps in Educational Applications

Despite its strong empirical evidence base across various domains, Relational Coordination Theory (RCT) finds only a limited application in educational settings in terms of scope, geographic area and depth of understanding. Existing research mainly highlights teacher teamwork or administrative practices, often without systematically investigating collaboration among multiple roles such as teaching alternatives (TAs), therapists, psychologists and guidance counselors (Bolton, Logan et al., 2021). This narrow perspective has neglected the interconnected nature of all roles in inclusive schools whose cooperation forms the basis for student success.

From a geographical perspective, almost all the RCT research in education has been done in rich, Western countries that have flatter organizational hierarchies. By contrast, the Global South and those who are in it use a more vertical model, if only because they have less access to resources, institutional support is limited and able-bodied philosophers scarce. The genesis of this gap in practice is best illustrated in Indonesia, which has policies for inclusive education but they are not implemented consistently. Nor is there a very developed infrastructure in place to deal with any oversight or rule pruning/shaping, and most of the bridges across these divides tend to be informal rather than formal.

Emotional responsiveness is virtually neglected as an independent field of inquiry in the RCT literature on education. In stark contrast Health system, disability services research has shown that RC predicts affective outcomes like well-being, belonging, and Internal. Education policy reading is still focused on access or efficiency instead of responding to learning. This omission is of critical importance, because inclusive education requires not just structures of entry but also emotional environments where both students and faculty can feel safe, respected and supported.

Therefore, this study sought to extend RCT into the field of inclusive education in Indonesia, using emotional responsiveness as a new outcome and filling the picture. A dataset of staff coordination was derived from the RC Survey. Table 2 summarizes the discovered gaps and this study's contributions.

Table 2. Research Gaps and Contributions of the Present Study

| Sector | Key Authors & Year | Sample/Context | Main Findings Relevant to RCT | Relevance for Inclusive Schools |
|---------------------|--|---------------------------------|---|---|
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| Banking | Siddique & Islam (2023) | High-performance work systems | RC mediated HR practices and unit-level performance | Demonstrates RC's viability in hierarchical systems |
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Theoretical Integration

Based on evidence from different sectors and contextual analysis, this study introduces three integrative insights into inclusive education: (1) Relational Coordination Theory (RCT) as a conceptual bridge between structural and relational paradigms, (2) emotional responsiveness as a novel organizational outcome, and (3) Indonesian inclusive schools as a critical case for testing RCT's adaptability in hierarchical resource-constrained environments.

RCT as a Conceptual Bridge Between Structural and Relational Paradigms

Structurally, inclusive education policy and resource allocation provide the necessary foundation. But in its absence of relational infrastructure they remain meaningless. RCT argues that effective coordination depends on the relational activables of shared goals, shared knowledge and mutual respect helices which afford high-quality communication across functions (Gittell, 2011; Gittell, Bolton, & Logan, 2021). This relational perspective adds on to structural concepts by pointing out that inclusive practices are kept alive and well by these social forces. When educators have to collaborate with different types of professionals, RCT affords a way forward for understanding how influence is exerted on policy implementation by relational mechanisms of various kinds.

Emotional Responsiveness As A New Organizational Outcome

Drawing on applications in healthcare and disability services, this study treats emotional responsiveness as an understudied but basic element of relational coordination. It covers empathy, affective attunement, and psychological safety and therefore underpin students' psychological needs. While RCT has been linked to efficiency and performance, new data increasingly show that strong relational coordination also promotes an inclusive climate and social integration (Warfield et al., 2022). By extending RCT to include effective results, this study provides a more thorough understanding of the effectiveness of educational institutions as organizations.

Indonesian Inclusive Schools as a Critical Test Case

Indonesia's inclusive education landscape marked by regulatory mandates, fragmented implementation, and hierarchical school cultures provides a compelling context for examining RCT's adaptability. In such environments, collaboration is often informal, role boundaries are rigid, and communication is shaped by status differentials. These conditions challenge the enactment of relational coordination and highlight the need for intentional strategies to cultivate shared purpose and mutual respect (Cabatay, Hermanto, & Aningrum, 2024; Madanih, 2023). By applying RCT in Indonesian inclusive schools, this study tests the theory's relevance beyond its Western origins and contributes to comparative organizational scholarship. It also offers practical insights for designing relational interventions that complement structural reforms and foster sustainable inclusion.

4. CONCLUSION

This critical review has examined the genesis, applications, and theoretical significance of Relational Coordination Theory (RCT) within Indonesia's emerging inclusive education landscape. Our analysis

of literature across healthcare, aviation, and public sectors confirms RCT's robust framework for understanding coordination in highly interdependent environments. The theory's core principles, shared goals, shared knowledge, mutual respect, and quality communication, consistently demonstrate positive impacts on performance, efficiency, and staff well-being (Gittell, 2000; Bolton, Logan, & Gittell, 2021). However, applications in educational contexts, particularly in non-Western settings like Indonesia, remain limited, presenting significant opportunities for theoretical advancement. Three key insights emerge from our analysis. First, relational coordination serves as a crucial mechanism for translating structural policies into daily practice. Evidence across sectors indicates that when professionals engage through shared purpose and problem-solving communication, they implement policies more effectively and achieve better outcomes (Gittell & Thistlethwaite, 2013). Second, the review highlights emotional responsiveness, a school's capacity to recognize and address students' emotional needs as a vital outcome of successful coordination. Research from disability and health services suggests that strong relational coordination fosters belonging and well-being among marginalized groups (Warfield et al., 2022). This positions emotional responsiveness not as a separate concern, but as integral to successful inclusion, deeply interconnected with staff collaboration quality. Third, Indonesia's inclusive education context, characterized by legal mandates, cultural hierarchies, and resource limitations, provides an ideal environment for examining RCT's adaptability. The review suggests the theory requires conscious contextualization to succeed in such settings, offering a powerful lens for diagnosing collaboration challenges and designing interventions that bridge policy practice gaps. In summary, this review presents RCT not merely as a theoretical lens but as an operational framework for reimagining collaboration in inclusive schools. By integrating RCT with emotional responsiveness, this synthesis offers a fresh perspective on how inclusive schools can achieve academic excellence while creating environments where all students feel valued and included. Inclusive education is fundamentally relational work. This review contends that meaningful inclusion requires more than policies and resources it demands intentional investment in schools' relational infrastructure. Relational Coordination Theory provides the language and methods to make collaboration visible, measurable, and actionable. Applying this lens to Indonesia contributes to growing understanding that sustainable inclusion emerges not from compliance, but from cultivating cultures of shared purpose, mutual respect, and responsive communication among all adults responsible for nurturing every child's potential.

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