



TEACHERS' EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES TO PROMOTE FRIENDSHIP BETWEEN STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS AND REGULAR STUDENTS IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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Teacher Strategies; friendship; Children With Special Needs;	<i>This study aims to identify the strategies used by teachers in fostering friendships between students with special needs and regular students at SDN Nayu Barat 1. The main issue addressed is the limited positive social interaction between both student groups. This research employed a qualitative approach with a case study design. Data were collected through interviews, observations, and documentation. The findings show that peer tutoring and collaborative learning strategies effectively promote social interaction, confidence, and empathy in students with special needs. Teachers also created a supportive classroom environment through heterogeneous grouping, buddy systems, and emotional support. However, challenges such as lack of parental support and difficulties in managing tantrum behaviors remain. The study concludes that teacher strategies play a significant role in establishing inclusive social relationships and supporting the success of inclusive education in elementary schools.</i>

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Inclusive education is an important foundation for creating a fair and equal education system for all learners, including children with special needs. The integration of children with disabilities in regular classes not only supports their academic and social development but also benefits regular students through the development of empathy, tolerance and social solidarity (Aas, 2022). However, the implementation of inclusive education still faces challenges such as social stigma, limited resources and teachers' lack of understanding of the individual needs of students with disabilities (Zakiah et al., 2021).

The success of inclusive education is strongly influenced by teachers' attitudes and competencies in facilitating healthy and constructive social interactions among students (Putri & Hamdan, 2021). Therefore, the concrete strategies used by teachers in building social relationships between students with disabilities and regular students are important aspects to be studied further.



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Problem of The Study

Although inclusive education has been implemented in many schools, there is still a gap between idealism and reality. Many teachers struggle to foster positive social interactions between children with disabilities and regular students, mainly due to negative views from parents of regular students and a lack of external support (Efendi, 2018). At SDN Nayu Barat 1, for example, there are 58 students with disabilities and only two special assistant teachers. In this context, it is not yet known exactly what strategies teachers use to build inclusive social relations and to what extent these strategies are effective in overcoming the challenges.

Research's State of the Art

Previous research has discussed the benefits of inclusive education in general and emphasized the importance of teachers' positive attitudes and systemic support (Putri & Hamdan, 2021; Bešić et al., 2020). In addition, Suriatika et al. (2025) highlighted the importance of a learning environment that accepts and values differences. However, the majority of studies still focus on the policy level or general theory without delving specifically into how teachers handle social dynamics in inclusive classrooms.

Gap Study & Objective

There is a lack of research on concrete strategies used by teachers at the primary school level, especially in the context of building social relationships between children with disabilities and regular students in the classroom. Not many studies have explored teachers' best practices in real-life contexts such as at SDN Nayu Barat 1. There is also a lack of studies that specifically identify the obstacles and alternative solutions teachers face in supporting positive social interactions in an inclusive environment.

This study aims to make a real contribution to the development of inclusive education practices at the primary school level through an in-depth understanding of the strategies, challenges and solutions faced by teachers. The main focus of this research is to explore and analyze the various strategies used by teachers at SDN Nayu Barat 1 in building inclusive social relationships between students with special needs and regular students. Positive social interactions are an important foundation in creating a conducive learning environment for all learners, so understanding how teachers facilitate this process is crucial. This study aims to explore how teachers facilitate social interaction in the classroom through pedagogical approaches, the use of learning media and collaborative activities between students. By understanding the practices that are successfully implemented, it is hoped that patterns can be found that can be replicated in other schools with similar characteristics. This research will identify the specific challenges teachers face in implementing inclusive education, including the internal and external factors that influence its successful implementation. Through these findings, the research will also develop alternative solutions that are applicable and contextualized, based on real practices that have been implemented in the field.

Overall, the results of this study are expected to not only enrich the academic discourse on inclusive education but also serve as a practical reference for other schools, policy makers and education practitioners in designing programs and policies that are more inclusive, fair and pro-all learners without exception.

METHOD

Type and Design

This research used a qualitative approach with a case study design. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore in depth a complex social phenomenon in a natural context, namely teachers' strategies in building inclusive social relationships between students with special needs and regular students at SDN Nayu Barat 1. The case study design is considered relevant because it allows researchers to understand the real experiences of teachers in a specific context by utilizing various data sources in a holistic and integrated manner (Yin, 2018). The main focus in this design is on the process, meaning and experience of the research subjects in depth, not on statistical measurements or generalizations.

Data and Data Sources

The main source of data in this study is primary data obtained directly from research subjects who have direct experience in implementing inclusive education. The research subjects were determined purposively, based on certain considerations related to their relevance and direct involvement in the inclusive program. The research subjects included: Two special assistant teachers (GPK) at SDN Nayu Barat 1, Mrs. Alit and Mr. Aris. Students with disabilities who are involved in the inclusive learning process. Regular students who interact directly with students with disabilities in the classroom. In addition to primary data, this study also used secondary data in the form of documentation such as field notes, photos of activities and video recordings of classroom interactions. These varied data sources were intended to strengthen the validity of the research results through the triangulation process.

Data collection technique

Data collection in this study was conducted through three main techniques: semi-structured interviews, participatory observation and documentation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted directly with two special

assistant teachers (GPKs) at SDN Nayu Barat 1 to gain in-depth information about the strategies they use to build social relationships between students with special needs and regular students. The interviews also explored how teachers facilitate positive social interactions in the classroom and the challenges they face in fulfilling their role as inclusion facilitators. The interviews were open-ended but focused, allowing the researcher to explore aspects that emerged spontaneously during the discussion process.

In addition to interviews, researchers also conducted participatory observations, both inside the classroom during the learning process and outside the classroom during informal social interactions. The purpose of this observation was to directly observe the dynamics of interaction between students with disabilities and regular students, as well as the real strategies applied by teachers in managing an inclusive learning environment. During the observation, researchers recorded important situations in field notes and also documented them through visual recordings such as photos and videos. Documentation includes a variety of visual and administrative materials, such as photos of classroom activities, videos of interactions between students and school documents related to the implementation of the inclusive education program. This technique helps to enrich the data and strengthen the validity of the findings by comparing and complementing the results of interviews and observations.

Data analysis

To ensure the validity of the data, this study applied several validation techniques, including: Source triangulation, which compares data from various sources (teachers, students with disabilities, regular students and documentation). Member checking, which is asking informants to confirm the accuracy of the interview results and the researcher's interpretation. Audit trail: systematic recording of the research process to ensure transparency. The results of this study are expected to make a real contribution to the development of inclusive education, especially in terms of strengthening social aspects and relationships between students. The findings can be taken into consideration in the preparation of teacher training, school policy development and decision-making by education policy makers. However, the main limitation is that the study covered only one school, so generalization of the results needs to be done with caution. Nonetheless, this study still provides important and in-depth insights into real practices in the field, which can serve as inspiration or reference for schools with similar characteristics.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This research was conducted at SDN Nayu Barat 1, which has 60 students with special needs with the support of two special assistants. Through in-depth interviews with teachers and documentation, we found several strategies used to build friendships between students with disabilities and regular students.

1. Inclusive Friendship Building Strategies Peer Tutoring Strategy

At SDN Nayu Barat 1, the strategy of using peers as tutors plays an important role in helping students with special needs who still have difficulty in reading and writing. In its implementation, students who have more ability are encouraged to provide assistance to friends who need support. Based on the interview with the teacher, it was found that when a student mocked his friend for not reading fluently, the teacher responded wisely. The teacher said, "It's okay, are you able? If so, please help your friend." This remark aims to foster an empathetic attitude and encourage students to take an active role in helping others.

Through this approach, students with disabilities feel more accepted and supported. They not only learn from the teacher but also from their classmates. Research shows that positive social interactions between more able students and children with disabilities can improve their confidence and socialization skills (Ali et al., 2015). With peer support, children with disabilities can learn to read and write in a comfortable atmosphere without fear of ridicule, making the learning process more enjoyable.

Teachers also encourage students to participate in group activities that allow them to work together. Through these activities, students not only gain academic knowledge, but also learn to build strong social relationships. They are trained to respect each other and understand differences, thus creating an inclusive learning environment. This is in line with the principle of inclusive education, which is to provide equal opportunities for every student to participate and feel accepted in the learning community.

Collaborative Learning Strategies

Collaborative learning at SDN Nayu Barat 1 is also an effective strategy to improve students' social skills, especially for students with disabilities. In this approach, students work in small groups to complete tasks together. By combining children with disabilities and regular students in one group, it creates opportunities for them to learn from and support each other.

Interviews with teachers showed that collaborative learning builds trust and closeness between students, which plays an important role in reducing stigma towards students with disabilities. Through collaborative activities, students with disabilities have the space to actively participate in learning. Not only do they learn from their peers, but they also get the emotional support they need to face challenges in the learning process.

Research by (Aas et al., 2024) found that collaborative learning can improve the learning motivation and learning outcomes of children with disabilities and encourage healthy social interactions. Thus, children with disabilities feel more valued and are encouraged to contribute optimally to the learning group.

2. Facilitating Positive Interactions between Students with Special Needs and Regular Students

Teachers at SDN Nayu Barat 1 play an active role in encouraging positive interactions between students with special needs and regular students, both through in-class and out-of-class activities. The approach used is comprehensive and systematic to create an inclusive and supportive learning environment.

Building an Inclusive and Friendly Classroom Environment

The first step teachers take is to create an inclusive classroom atmosphere where every student feels accepted, valued and protected from all forms of discrimination. Teachers consciously design a warm and pleasant classroom climate that provides space for students with disabilities to feel comfortable expressing themselves and interacting with their peers. This approach not only creates a sense of emotional safety but also opens up space for empathy and mutual respect between students. A study by (Bossart et al., 2013) showed that a supportive social environment is highly influential in building healthy relationships between students with and without special needs.

Implementing Cooperative Learning as a Social Interaction Strategy

Teachers consistently use cooperative learning models in the teaching and learning process. Students are divided into heterogeneous groups consisting of children with disabilities and regular students, and given shared tasks that demand active collaboration. In this situation, each student is given an equally important role and responsibility, so they learn to listen, cooperate and help each other. In addition to improving academic skills, this strategy has proven effective in building social closeness and strengthening relationships between individuals. The teacher also acts as a facilitator who monitors the group dynamics, ensuring that no student is marginalized.

Organizing Inclusive Social and Extracurricular Activities

Outside of formal learning activities, schools also provide a variety of social and extracurricular programs designed for all students to participate in, without exception. Activities such as celebrations of national and religious holidays, sports competitions, art performances, and joint community service programs are effective means of strengthening togetherness among students. In this context, interactions are more natural and informal, expanding the space for social interaction beyond academic boundaries. As mentioned by (Schwab et al., 2022) participation in inclusive non-academic activities can increase students' sense of belonging and attachment to the school community.

Implementing Buddy and Peer Mentoring Systems

To support students with disabilities in adapting socially and academically, teachers implement buddy and peer mentoring systems. In this system, regular students who have been prepared are given the responsibility of accompanying children with disabilities in learning and social activities. They help with understanding instructions, interacting in groups and participating in other school activities. This system not only helps the children with disabilities to feel more confident, but it is also a means of learning the values of empathy, responsibility and social care for the regular students. Peer support is an important component of successful inclusive education.

Providing Adaptive and Inclusive Learning Media and Materials

To ensure learning accessibility for all students, teachers use a variety of media and methods tailored to the learning needs of each student. Materials are delivered through visual, auditory and kinesthetic approaches to reach diverse learning styles. Especially for students with disabilities, learning materials are often modified to make them simpler or more concrete, making them easier to understand. Teachers also provide learning aids if needed. (Goldan et al., 2022) state that providing varied and adaptive learning media is a key strategy in achieving learning equity in inclusive classrooms.

Providing Positive Feedback and Consistent Emotional Support

Teachers not only focus on academic achievement but also pay great attention to the emotional aspects of students. Children with disabilities are regularly praised for their efforts and progress, no matter how small. This kind of support not only strengthens their motivation to learn but also gives them a sense of being valued and accepted. In addition, teachers also provide emotional support when students experience difficulties, both in academics and in social interactions. (Leigh A Tipton 1, Lisa Christensen, 2013) emphasizes that consistent positive feedback from teachers is an important foundation in building the confidence of students with special needs in the school environment.

3. Teachers' Challenges in Building Inclusive Friendships Lack of Support from Parents of Regular Students

One of the main challenges in building inclusive friendships at SDN Naya Barat 1 is the lack of support from parents of regular students. In fact, parental involvement is very important in creating a learning environment that supports inclusive education. If parents have a positive view of children with special needs, their children tend to imitate this attitude. However, there are still many parents who have a negative stigma towards children with disabilities and are reluctant to let their children interact with them. This attitude is an obstacle for teachers in instilling the value of inclusion and cooperation in the classroom.

The role of parents in education cannot be ignored. Research (Smith, J., Brown, A., & Taylor, 2019) shows that parental involvement in education, both at home and at school, has a positive impact on children's learning outcomes. Therefore, teachers need to engage parents by providing clear information about the benefits of inclusive education and providing an open dialogue space to discuss their concerns. With these steps, it is hoped that negative views can be transformed into positive support for children with disabilities.

Handling students with disabilities who experience tantrums

In teaching and learning activities, teachers often face situations when students with disabilities experience tantrums or difficulty controlling their emotions. This condition can be caused by various factors, such as frustration while learning or challenges in socializing. When this happens, students are usually separated temporarily (pullout) to receive special attention and to maintain classroom calm. Proper handling is essential so that the learning atmosphere remains conducive and all students feel safe.

According to (Aas et al., 2024), handling students with special needs requires an empathetic and planned approach. Teachers need to have specific strategies to defuse the situation, such as applying relaxation techniques or providing quiet time. With this approach, teachers not only help children with disabilities manage their emotions but also create a classroom environment that supports healthy social interactions. This allows the children with disabilities to integrate better with their peers and feel accepted in the learning community.

CONCLUSION

This study examines the strategies implemented by teachers at SDN Naya Barat 1 in building inclusive friendships between students with special needs and regular students. The results show that methods such as peer tutoring and collaborative learning can improve social interaction and empathy between students. However, there were still challenges, such as a lack of support from parents and difficulties in dealing with students with disabilities who experienced tantrums. The limitations of this study lie in the limited scope of the location, so the findings cannot be widely generalized without careful consideration.

The findings make an important contribution to the development of inclusive education practices and can serve as a reference for teachers and policy makers. Schools are advised to involve parents more, provide training for teachers and design policies that support the implementation of inclusive education. In addition, providing adequate resources is also needed to optimize the implementation of inclusive strategies.

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