

TEACHERS AS SOCIAL MEDIATORS IN DEVELOPING AUTISTIC CHILDREN'S SOCIAL INTERACTION IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study is to investigate how teachers facilitate social interactions among children with autism within inclusive education practices at SDLB Inpres 73 Malaengkedi in Sorong City. This study is based on a sociocultural perspective, emphasizing that social interaction is developed through socially mediated experiences rather than solely through the child's individual abilities. A significant amount of research on inclusive education has focused on structural elements such as curriculum adaptations and policy implementations. However, there has been comparatively less attention on how teachers engage in social mediation during daily classroom interactions. This study employs a qualitative approach, utilizing a case study design that includes 13 informants: 1 school principal, 7 teachers, and 5 parents. Data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. The data were then analyzed thematically using NVivo version 14. The findings indicate that teachers act as primary social mediators through three main mechanisms: collaborative interaction strategies, enhancement of interpersonal communication, and promotion of peer acceptance. These practices facilitate the gradual development of interpersonal communication, classroom participation, and social engagement within an inclusive learning environment for children with autism. This study argues that the social interactions of children with autism in inclusive education do not occur automatically through formal inclusion systems. Instead, teachers' ongoing social mediation practices in daily learning activities are crucial in shaping these interactions.

Keywords: children with autism, inclusive education, relational inclusion practices, social interaction, teacher-mediated social interaction

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis bagaimana guru memediasi interaksi sosial anak autis dalam praktik pendidikan inklusif di SDLB Inpres 73 Malaengkedi Kota Sorong. Penelitian ini didasarkan pada perspektif sosiokultural yang menekankan bahwa interaksi sosial berkembang melalui pengalaman yang dimediasi secara sosial, bukan semata-mata melalui kemampuan individual anak. Penelitian sebelumnya mengenai pendidikan inklusif lebih banyak berfokus pada

aspek struktural seperti adaptasi kurikulum dan implementasi kebijakan, sementara praktik mediasi sosial guru dalam interaksi kelas sehari-hari masih relatif terbatas dikaji. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus yang melibatkan 13 informan terdiri atas 1 kepala sekolah, 7 guru, dan 5 orang tua siswa. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi partisipatif, wawancara mendalam, dan dokumentasi, kemudian dianalisis secara tematik menggunakan NVivo versi 14. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa guru berperan sebagai mediator sosial utama melalui tiga mekanisme utama, yaitu strategi interaksi kolaboratif, stimulasi komunikasi interpersonal, dan fasilitasi penerimaan teman sebaya. Praktik tersebut membantu anak autisme mengembangkan komunikasi interpersonal, partisipasi kelas, dan keterlibatan sosial secara bertahap dalam lingkungan pembelajaran inklusif. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa interaksi sosial anak autisme dalam pendidikan inklusif tidak berkembang secara otomatis melalui sistem inklusi formal, tetapi dibentuk melalui praktik mediasi sosial guru yang berlangsung secara berkelanjutan dalam aktivitas pembelajaran sehari-hari.

Kata kunci: anak autisme, interaksi sosial mediasi sosial guru, pendidikan inklusif, praktik inklusi relasional

A. Introduction

Inclusive education has emerged as a pivotal priority in the contemporary educational landscape, underscoring the fundamental right of all children to access education without discrimination (Ainscow, 2020; UNESCO, 2023). In the context of children with autism, inclusive education is not merely about physical access to school or curriculum adaptations. It is also about how schools create a social environment that enables students with autism to participate meaningfully in interpersonal interactions and the classroom community (Goodall, 2020; Bruce & Aylward, 2021). Social interaction constitutes a pivotal facet of the developmental trajectory of

children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). A considerable proportion of individuals with ASD encounter difficulties in the domains of communication, emotional reciprocity, and peer relationships (Pellicano et al., 2022; Hume et al., 2021).

Recent research suggests that the presence of autistic children in inclusive schools does not necessarily guarantee meaningful social participation. Petersson-Bloom & Holmqvist (2022) posit that numerous inclusive education practices continue to prioritize academic accommodations and administrative integration, while the relational dimensions of inclusion remain underemphasized. In alignment with

this perspective, Goodall (2020) underscores that the concept of inclusion should not be confined to the mere physical presence of children with autism within a school environment. Instead, it ought to be interpreted as the experience of being accepted and valued within the school's social community.

A substantial body of research has been dedicated to investigating the structural aspects of inclusive education, encompassing factors such as teacher preparedness, curriculum adaptations, educational policies, and the barriers to implementation (Yuwono & Mirnawati, 2021; Alassaf, 2025). While these studies have made significant contributions to the understanding of inclusive education systems, the focus on the daily social practices in the classroom that shape the social experiences of children with autism remains relatively limited. A paucity of research exists that explicates how teachers actively mediate the social interaction processes of children with autism within inclusive learning environments.

Moreover, the prevailing paradigm in autism research continues to conceptualize social

interaction challenges as inherent individual deficiencies in children with autism. This perspective frequently disregards the role of the school environment as an active social structure that influences children's opportunities to participate and communicate (Leadbitter et al., 2021). In contrast, the sociocultural perspective posits that social development is shaped by interaction processes mediated by social actors and the educational environment. From this perspective, teachers assume a pivotal role not only as academic instructors but also as social mediators who establish relational spaces to facilitate communication, peer engagement, and a sense of belonging for students with autism.

Recent studies have emphasized the significance of collaborative learning and supportive classroom interactions in promoting the social participation of children with autism (Ashburner & Remington, 2022; Azevedo et al., 2024). However, a significant empirical gap remains regarding the function of teachers' social mediation practices in daily learning activities, particularly within the context of inclusive education in Indonesia. Existing research rarely

elucidates the specific mechanisms through which teachers facilitate peer interactions, stimulate interpersonal communication, and build a socially supportive classroom environment for students with autism.

In light of the aforementioned conditions, the objective of this study is to examine the manner in which teachers' social mediation in inclusive education practices influences the social interactions of children with autism at SDLB Inpres 73 Malaengkedi in Sorong City. This study offers a theoretical contribution by framing the development of social interactions among children with autism as a relational process shaped through continuous teacher mediation. In contrast, the study posits that such development should not be viewed as an automatic outcome of formal inclusion policies. Conceptually, this study develops the perspective of relational inclusive practice—a relational approach to inclusion that positions the teacher as the primary social mediator in fostering participation, communication, and social acceptance within the inclusive classroom.

This research gap forms the basis of the present study, which aims

to analyze how teachers mediate the social interaction of autistic children in inclusive education practices at the school. The present study focuses on the social mediation practices employed by teachers in daily learning activities, with the objective of examining the role of these practices in shaping the social engagement of autistic children within the inclusive classroom environment. Therefore, the present study poses the following research question: The central question guiding this study is how teachers effectively mediate the social interaction of autistic children in inclusive education practices.

This study makes a theoretical contribution by positioning teacher social mediation as the primary mechanism in shaping the social interaction of autistic children. The present study posits that the development of social interaction among autistic children in inclusive education does not occur automatically through the existence of a formal inclusion system. Teachers' social mediation practices in daily learning activities shape the development of social interaction among autistic children in inclusive education.

B. Research Method

The present study employs a qualitative approach, utilizing a case study design. This approach was selected because the objective of the study is to gain an in-depth understanding of teachers' social mediation practices in fostering social interactions among children with autism within the natural school setting (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The study was conducted at SDLB Inpres 73 Malaengke di in Sorong City. The selection of the location was made through the use of purposive sampling, given the implementation of inclusive education practices at the school. These practices involve the inclusion of children with autism in both academic and social school activities.

The selection of research participants was conducted using purposive sampling, with the following criteria being employed for the selection process: The first prerequisite is direct involvement in the education of children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. The second prerequisite is experience in inclusive education practices. The present study's informant pool comprised 13 individuals, including 1

school principal, 7 teachers, and 5 parents. The selection of informants was predicated on their direct involvement in the educational process and the development of social interactions among children with autism within the inclusive school environment (Campbell et al., 2020).

The data for this study was collected through a combination of methods, including participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation, which were conducted over a period of three months. Observations were made during learning activities, playtime, and students' social interactions within the school environment. In-depth interviews were conducted to explore the experiences of teachers, the school principal, and parents regarding inclusive education practices and the social development of children with autism. The present study applied the principle of data saturation. The data collection process was halted when the obtained information revealed recurring patterns and no new significant categories were identified (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022).

The analysis was conducted through a thematic approach,

encompassing the stages of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The data analysis process was supported by NVivo version 14 software to facilitate data organization, the coding process, theme categorization, and the systematic identification of relationships between categories (Maher et al., 2018). The approach of open coding was utilized to identify units of meaning from the results of observations and interviews. Axial coding was performed to establish links between categories based on their conceptual relationships, while selective coding was used to identify central themes regarding teachers' social mediation and the social interactions of children with autism.

The validity of the data was ensured through a variety of methods, including source triangulation, methodological triangulation, member checking, and reflexivity. The practice of reflexivity was implemented through the use of reflective notes, which were recorded during the research process. These notes were used to mitigate potential bias in data interpretation by the researchers.

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles

of qualitative research, particularly those applicable to studies involving children with special needs. Prior to data collection, the researcher obtained research permission from the school administration and explained the study's objectives, procedures, and benefits to all participants.

Prior to conducting interviews and observations, informed consent was obtained from the school principal, teachers, and parents. In order to maintain the confidentiality of the participants, the identities of the respondents were anonymized in the research data report. The study's design also entailed a meticulous effort to ensure that the observation and interview components of the study did not disrupt the children's learning activities or social development while they were in the school environment.

Tabel 1 Distribution of Research Informants

No	Informant Category	Number of Informants	Role in the Study
1	School Principal	1	Provided information regarding inclusive education policies and school support systems.
2	Teachers	7	Explained classroom interaction practices, social mediation strategies, and learning

			experiences involving autistic children.
3	Parents of Autistic Children	5	Parents of autistic children: Provided information regarding children's social development and communication experiences at school.
Total		13	

Collaborative Interaction Strategy

Teachers encourage social interaction among children with autism by using collaborative learning strategies that promote direct participation in group activities with their peers. In their teaching practice, they purposefully place children with autism in small groups and assign straightforward cooperative activities to help them gradually develop their social communication skills. One teacher explained:

"In the absence of adult supervision, children diagnosed with autism have a tendency to become taciturn. However, when they are placed in small groups and given group tasks, they begin to voice their opinions and respond to their peers."

Another teacher also made the following statement:

"Children with autism find it easier to interact when activities are done together. They begin to learn to look at their peers, listen to instructions, and then respond."

Observations have shown that students with autism begin to make eye contact, respond to peers' calls, and follow group instructions after being routinely engaged in collaborative activities. These findings suggest that collaborative learning is not merely a pedagogical strategy but also a social mechanism that enables children with autism to gain direct relational experiences. In this context, teachers function as mediators who facilitate connections between children with autism and the classroom's social environment.

These findings are consistent with the research by Ashburner, J., Costley, D., & Remington (2022), which posits that collaborative learning activities can enhance the social participation of children with autism in inclusive educational settings.

Communication Stimulation

The study indicated that teachers used interpersonal communication strategies to help children with autism build confidence in social interactions. They offered simple communication cues, such as greetings, invitations to speak, social games, and verbal reinforcement

when children exhibited positive social responses. One of the support teachers explained:

"The spontaneous emergence of social interaction among children diagnosed with autism is an infrequent occurrence. Teachers must therefore take the initiative in prompting, guiding, and modeling appropriate peer interactions."

Another teacher added the following:

"When a child starts responding or making eye contact with the person they're talking to, we immediately provide positive reinforcement so they feel safe enough to keep communicating."

Observations indicate that children with autism show greater responsiveness in structured and familiar communication settings compared to spontaneous social interactions. Research has shown that these children are better able to respond to straightforward questions, make eye contact, and participate in brief exchanges when given repeated prompts. These findings suggest that the development of social interaction in children with autism is greatly influenced by the communication mediation process implemented by teachers. Teachers play a crucial role in creating opportunities for interaction

and fostering a sense of psychological safety, which enables children with autism to engage in interpersonal communication.

From the standpoint of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, this process highlights the idea that children's social development occurs through the mediation of social interactions that are facilitated by the educational environment.

Social Reinforcement and Peer Acceptance Facilitation

The study revealed that teachers are essential in encouraging social acceptance of children with autism among their peers. They actively promote the inclusion of these children in shared play and learning activities. One teacher noted:

"We consistently provide guidance to their peers, encouraging them to engage in play activities with children diagnosed with autism, thereby ensuring that these children do not feel marginalized or excluded from group interactions."

In addition, a marked increase in the degree of social acceptance among students was observed, which appeared to be the result of the teacher's consistent efforts to cultivate a classroom environment that was

conducive to the acceptance of differences. Observations demonstrated that children with autism demonstrated increased engagement in social activities when their peers responded positively and did not exhibit social rejection.

These findings suggest that the success of social interactions among children with autism is influenced not only by the children's individual abilities but also by the quality of social relationships established within the school environment. In this context, teachers function as social mediators who shape a culture of social acceptance in the classroom. These findings serve to reinforce Goodall's (2020) position that the inclusion of children with autism in school settings should not be conceptualized as merely a matter of physical presence. Instead, it is essential to understand this as a process of social acceptance and integration into the school's social community.

These findings suggest that the formation of social interactions among children with autism in inclusive education is not solely attributable to school inclusion policies, but rather is facilitated by continuous social mediation practices implemented by

teachers in daily learning activities. These findings serve to reinforce the sociocultural perspective, which posits that children's social development is shaped through mediated interactions within a social environment (Ashburner, J., Costley, D., & Remington, 2022; Petersson-Bloom & Holmqvist, 2022; Sundari & Supena, 2022).

In this study, teacher mediation is posited as a mechanism that engenders opportunities for social participation among students diagnosed with autism. Through collaborative learning activities, teachers create structured interaction situations that allow children with autism to engage with peers in a safer and more supportive social context. These practices have been demonstrated to reduce social isolation and encourage gradual engagement in classroom communication. These findings are consistent with the research by Ashburner & Remington (2022), which posits that collaborative learning environments can enhance the social participation of students with autism in inclusive education. Research by Locke et al. (2016) also indicates that the social engagement

of children with autism increases when schools provide structured and supportive collaborative activities for peer interaction. Azevedo et al. (2024) emphasize that interactive learning strategies contribute to the development of interpersonal communication in children with autism within inclusive classrooms.

In addition, the communication stimulation strategies employed by teachers indicate that the interpersonal interactions of children with autism require intentional and repeated mediation. Teachers fulfill a dual role in the classroom, serving as both facilitators of interaction and active models of communication. They encourage social responses from their students and reinforce positive social behaviors. In this context, teacher mediation has been shown to foster a sense of psychological safety, thereby enabling students with autism to feel more confident in their social communication skills. These findings are consistent with those reported by Hume et al. (2021), who emphasize that consistent communication stimulation can aid the development of social and communication skills in children with autism within educational settings. Furthermore, Molekoa &

Malahlela (2026) posit that teachers' interpersonal communication mediation strategies have a significant influence on the social engagement of students with social communication challenges in inclusive classrooms.

The present study also found that peers' acceptance of children with autism is influenced by the social practices established by teachers in the classroom. Teachers proactively promote the inclusion of children with autism in shared activities, thereby fostering a more inclusive social environment. These findings suggest that the quality of social interactions among children with autism is significantly influenced by teachers' social mediation practices during daily learning activities. Jones et al. (2021) posit that the acceptance of autistic individuals by their peers is enhanced when the social environment facilitates positive interaction experiences that are structured in a supportive manner. The findings of this study further substantiate Goodall's (2020) assertion that the inclusion of autistic children in school extends beyond mere physical presence; it encompasses the experience of being accepted as a

member of the school's social community.

The research findings indicate that teachers' social mediation plays a crucial role in shaping the social interactions of children with autism through collaborative learning strategies, stimulation of interpersonal communication, and facilitation of peer acceptance within an inclusive school environment.

This study makes a significant contribution to the field of inclusive education by establishing teacher social mediation as the primary mechanism in shaping the social interactions of children with autism. To date, the majority of research on inclusive education has centered on structural elements, including policies, curricula, and teacher preparedness. In contrast, the present study demonstrates that the daily interaction practices carried out by teachers have a significant influence on the development of social participation among children with autism in the school environment. These findings align with the perspectives of neurodiversity and relational inclusion, which emphasize the significance of the social environment in the development of social interactions

among children with autism (Leadbitter et al., 2021; Tsou et al., 2026).

The novelty of this study lies in its explanation of how teachers' social mediation operates through collaborative learning strategies, stimulation of interpersonal communication, and facilitation of peer acceptance in shaping the social interactions of children with autism. Consequently, this study substantiates the notion that the evolution of social interactions among children with autism in inclusive education is not a spontaneous process; rather, it is influenced by teachers' social mediation practices incorporated into daily learning activities.

This study offers theoretical implications for the development of a sociocultural perspective on inclusive education for children with autism. To date, research on the social interactions of children with autism in inclusive education has predominantly conceptualized social barriers as inherent individual characteristics of children with autism. This theoretical framework has contributed to the prevailing understanding that social interactions in children are

predominantly a consequence of their individual capacity to adapt to the demands of the school environment.

The findings of this study indicate that the development of social interaction in children with autism cannot be understood solely as an individual process, but rather as a relational process shaped through teachers' social mediation practices in daily learning activities. In this context, teachers function not only as academic instructors but also as social mediators who actively create opportunities for interaction, interpersonal communication, and social engagement for children with autism within the classroom environment.

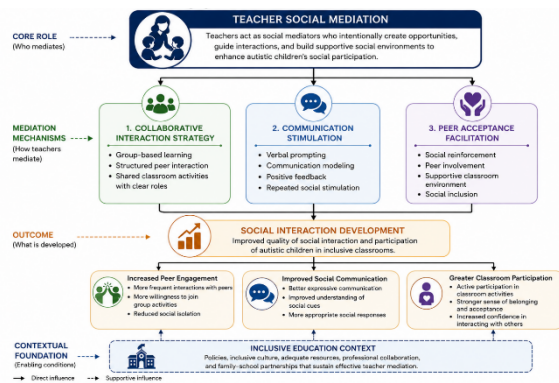
Theoretically, this study contributes to the expansion of Vygotsky's sociocultural perspective by demonstrating that social mediation in inclusive education is not only related to cognitive support in the learning process but also encompasses the creation of relational spaces that enable children with autism to gain safe, supportive, and meaningful social experiences (Vygotsky, 1980; Bodrova & Leong, 2015). Consequently, teachers' social mediation functions as a relational

mechanism that facilitates the social participation of children with autism in an inclusive school environment.

Furthermore, this study makes a conceptual contribution by reinforcing the relational perspective of inclusive practice. That is, the understanding that the success of inclusive education is not solely determined by the existence of formal inclusion systems but by the quality of social interaction practices built within the daily classroom setting. From this perspective, inclusion is understood as a social process shaped through the teacher's active engagement in facilitating social relationships between children with autism and their surrounding environment.

Consequently, this study substantiates that teachers' social mediation practices constitute a pivotal component in the cultivation of autistic children's social interactions within the paradigm of inclusive education. These findings contribute to the expansion of the study of inclusive education by positioning autistic children's social interactions as the result of a relational mediation process that occurs continuously during learning activities.

Figure 1. Conceptual Model of teacher Social Mediation in developing Autistic Children's Social Interaction in Inclusive Education



D. Conclusion

The present study demonstrates that the social interactions of children with autism in inclusive education do not develop automatically through the existence of a formal inclusion system in schools. Rather, these interactions are shaped through teachers' social mediation practices in daily learning activities. Teachers function as pivotal social mediators, aiding children with autism in the cultivation of interpersonal engagement through the implementation of collaborative learning strategies, the promotion of interpersonal communication, and the facilitation of peer acceptance within the classroom milieu.

The extant research findings indicate that teachers' social

mediation practices can assist children with autism in gradually developing communication responses, the courage to interact, and social participation within an inclusive school environment. In addition to fostering opportunities for interaction, educators play a pivotal role in cultivating a supportive social environment. This enables children with autism to acquire safer and more positive social experiences during learning activities with their peers.

The present study lends support to the notion that the efficacy of autistic children's social interactions in inclusive education is considerably influenced by the caliber of teachers' social mediation practices in the classroom. Consequently, inclusive education signifies more than merely facilitating educational access for autistic children; it also encompasses the manner in which the learning environment fosters meaningful social engagement for them.

From an academic perspective, the present study makes a significant contribution by establishing teachers' social mediation as the primary mechanism that influences the social interactions of children with autism within the framework of inclusive

education. This study contributes to the existing discourse on inclusive education by demonstrating that the development of social participation among children with autism is the result of social interaction practices that are actively cultivated within the school environment.

The present study is not without its limitations; it was conducted in a single school with a limited number of participants. Therefore, the findings cannot yet be generalized to all contexts of inclusive education. Consequently, future research is recommended to explore teachers' social mediation practices across various inclusive school contexts, as well as to examine more specifically the influence of each form of social mediation on the development of communication and social participation among children with autism.

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