ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL INTERACTION IN AUTISTIC CHILDREN AT SLB NEGERI MANDAILING NATAL

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the social interactions of autistic children at SLB Negeri Mandailing Natal. Social interaction is a relationship between individuals, groups, or environments that can influence one another, creating responses and dynamic social relationships. It is one of the developmental aspects that often experiences obstacles in autistic children, making it important to understand the forms of their social interaction, the influencing factors, and the aspects of social interaction involved.

The research method used was qualitative with a descriptive approach. The informants in this study consisted of three autistic children, a homeroom teacher, and three parents. Data collection techniques used in this study included interviews, observations, and documentation.

The results of the study showed that the forms of social interaction among autistic children at this school varied depending on the severity level of autism, the teachers' approach methods, and the support from the social environment. Autistic children tended to show limited social interaction. They interacted more frequently with teachers or parents than with their peers. The interactions that occurred were generally one-way interactions, such as answering questions without showing interest in continuing the conversation. Factors influencing children's social interaction included teacher approaches and therapy, the school's social environment, and the individual characteristics of the children. SLB Negeri Mandailing Natal continues to improve the quality of its services through teacher training, collaboration with external parties such as psychologists and therapists, and organizing inclusive social activities. Strengthening therapy programs and actively involving families are future priorities to support the overall social development of autistic children.

Keywords

Social Interaction, Autistic Children, SLB Negeri Mandailing Natal

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisi interaksi sosial pada anak autis di SLB Negeri Mandailing Natal. Interaksi sosial merupakan suatu hubungan antar individu, kelompok, atau lingkungan yang dapat saling mempengaruhi sehingga menimbulkan respon dan menciptakan hubungan sosial yang dinamis, dan merupakan salah satu aspek perkembangan yang sering mengalami hambatan pada anak autis, sehingga penting untuk memahami bagaimana bentuk interaksi sosial mereka, faktor-faktor yang mempengaruhi, serta aspek-aspek interaksi sosial. Metode penelitian yang digunakan adalah kualitatif dengan pendekatan deskriptif. Informan dalam penelitian ini terdiri dari tiga anak autis, guru Wali Kelas, dan tiga orang tua. Teknik pengumpulan data yang digunakan dalam penelitian ini melalui wawancara, observasi, dan dokumnetasi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa bentuk interaksi sosial anak autis di sekolah ini menunjukkan karakteristik yang beragam tergantung pada tingkat keparahan autisme, metode pendekatan guru, serta dukungan lingkungan sosial. Anak autis cenderung menunjukkan interaksi sosial yang terbatas. Mereka lebih sering berinteraksi dengan guru atau orangtua dibandingkan dengan teman sebayanya. Interaksi yang terjadi cenderung bersifat satu arah, seperti menjawab pertanyaan tanpa menunjukkan minat untuk melanjutkan percakapan. Faktor-faktor yang mempengaruhi interaksi sosial anak meliputi pendekatan guru dan terapi, lingkungan sosial sekolah, serta karakteristik individu anak. SLB Negeri Mandailing Natal terus berupaya meningkatkan kualitas layanan melalui pelatihan guru, kerja sama dengan pihak luar (seperti psikolog dan terapis), serta mengadakan kegiatan sosial inklusif. Penguatan program terapi dan pelibatan keluarga secara aktif menjadi fokus ke depan untuk mendukung perkembangan sosial anak autis secara lebih menyeluruh.

Kata Kunci
Interaksi Sosial, Anak Autis, SLB Negeri Mandailing Natal

INTRODUCTION

Humans are social beings who always need the help of others in every aspect of life. As social beings, humans naturally seek to establish interactions with their surrounding environment. According to Gillin in Soekanto (2012), social interaction is a relationship between one or more individuals in which they establish social contact and communication with one another. Social interaction creates influence, changes, or improvements between individuals. In social interaction, the relationship that occurs is reciprocal.

Lamport (2012:57) states that social interaction is important not only for academic achievement but also for self-development and well-being. Social interaction is a relationship between one individual and another in which individuals can influence each other reciprocally (Ahmadi, 2009). According to Soekanto and Sulistyowati (2013), social interaction is useful for analyzing and studying problems that exist in society.

In social interaction, the influence given by one individual to another does not stop immediately but continues as long as the interaction relationship exists. Soekanto (2013) explains that social interaction is influenced by factors such as imitation, suggestion, identification, and sympathy. Imitation is the process of copying the behavior of others.

For example, children imitate the way their parents speak. Suggestion is the process of giving views or influence to someone so that they act without much consideration. Identification is the desire to become similar to another person consciously. Sympathy is the feeling of attraction or emotional concern toward another person, arising from feelings rather than rational logic.

Soekanto (2012) states that there are two main requirements for social interaction: social contact and communication. Social contact is the beginning of social interaction, such as eye contact or smiling at one another. Communication can occur directly or indirectly and serves as a way to strengthen social interaction.

Desiningrum (2016) explains that autistic children are less able to build and interact with their surrounding environment. In interaction, autistic children have difficulty initiating conversations. When spoken to, they often do not immediately understand the meaning intended by the other person and require repeated explanations. During conversations, autistic children also have difficulty making eye contact and tend to pay more attention to their surroundings. They also have difficulty controlling their behavior. When experiencing tantrums, they may engage in unexpected actions such as biting, hitting, or kicking, usually because their desires are not fulfilled. Sometimes autistic children laugh or cry without clear reasons. In daily life, they prefer to be alone. If peers invite them to play, they often move away and prefer to play with objects they like rather than engage with peers. Therefore, the interaction of autistic children with others is very limited.

Rahayu (2017) explains that children with mild autism are still able to interact and communicate with children without special needs. However, children with severe autism tend to interact only with children who have similar levels of autism. Even so, they can still be friends with children without special needs, although they often remain silent and do not display typical social interaction.

Meanwhile, Sugiarto et al. (2004) define autism as a pervasive developmental disorder involving impairments in verbal and nonverbal communication, social interaction, behavior, emotions, and repetitive behaviors ranging from mild to severe. According to Kanner (in Yatim, 2002), Autism or Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a developmental disorder affecting brain functions related to social skills, verbal and nonverbal communication, imagination, flexibility, interests, attention, and cognition.

In the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Fifth Edition* (DSM-V), several criteria are used to diagnose autism, including limitations in communication and social interaction across multiple contexts, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, and activities, symptoms appearing during early developmental periods, and significant disturbances in social or occupational functioning. Children with ASD generally experience speech and language difficulties due to disorders in the brain's language center or peripheral nerve issues. Verbal communication problems in children with ASD may include delayed speech, meaningless sounds or words, unclear speech, use of nonverbal gestures, and echolalia (repeating words heard from others).

Several neuroscientists believe that dysfunction in the mirror neuron system may cause ASD and other disorders related to social function impairment (Perkins et al., 2010). However, the American Psychiatric Association (2013) does not clearly specify the exact causes of autism. The DSM-V only mentions that risk factors may arise from environmental factors, such as maternal age during pregnancy, birth weight, and exposure to valproic acid during pregnancy, as well as genetic factors, where 15% of autism cases are caused by genetic mutations.

According to Larete (2016), the number of children with autism disorders in Indonesia has increased significantly. Although there is still no exact data regarding the number of autistic children in Indonesia, the government estimates approximately 112,000 individuals with autism disorders. Individuals with ASD have varying abilities and limitations, requiring support from others for self-development. With proper guidance and treatment, children with ASD can live normally and socialize with others (Marijani, 2003).

Communication with autistic children can be done verbally by speaking slowly and clearly moving the lips, while nonverbal communication can be achieved through gestures, touch, facial expressions, and supportive body language (Panggabean, 2019). Since autistic children experience difficulties in language and speech, they also face challenges in communicating with people around them. Language development is one of the most complex aspects of autism and requires special attention. Speech development and communication abilities in autistic children do not follow a uniform pattern, and there is often a gap between receptive language abilities and active language use (Ginanjar, 2008).

Autism is a pervasive developmental disorder characterized by abnormalities in social interaction and communication. Autism can also be defined as a childhood disorder marked by cognitive delays, communication delays, limited social interaction, and behavioral development disorders (Lauranita, 2017). Autism disrupts childhood development and prevents children from interacting socially in a typical manner. This disorder is usually diagnosed between the ages of 18–30 months and is identified through language delays, behavioral problems, and impaired social interaction (Iskandar & Indrayani, 2020). The effects of autism vary according to developmental stages and may include tantrums, delayed speech, lack of eye contact, absence of social smiling, preference for solitude, and inability to understand existing rules.

The background of this study on the Analysis of Social Interaction in Autistic Children at SLB Negeri Mandailing Natal is based on the fact that autistic children experience difficulties interacting with others, which affects their ability to socialize, learn, and participate in daily activities. Effective interaction is essential for autistic children to improve their ability to adapt to their surrounding environment. SLB Negeri Mandailing Natal, as a special education institution for children with special needs, including autistic children, plays an important role in helping autistic children develop interaction and communication skills. However, there is still limited research describing social interaction and communication among autistic children at SLB Negeri Mandailing Natal.

Based on interviews with the homeroom teacher, Mrs. TH, autistic children at SLB Negeri Mandailing Natal tend to have limited social interaction within the school environment. They may require environmental adjustments to help them interact with others. These children also experience interaction difficulties such as lack of eye contact when spoken to and lack of response when given toys. They show little interest in playing with peers and are often focused on specific objects or activities. Some of them are also unable to speak. Children who do not interact often prefer to be alone, daydream, and cry easily without clear reasons. They are unable to cooperate with others and are less sensitive to their surroundings.

Therefore, research on the Analysis of Social Interaction in Autistic Children at SLB Negeri Mandailing Natal is important to conduct. This study can provide valuable information about how autistic children interact within the school environment and can assist teachers and school staff in developing more effective intervention programs to improve social interaction abilities in autistic children. The study may also contribute to the development of knowledge about autism and the needs of autistic children in the

Mandailing Natal region, as well as increase public awareness about the importance of supporting autistic children in developing interaction and communication skills.

Based on the problems above, the researcher became interested in conducting a study entitled *"Analysis of Social Interaction in Autistic Children at SLB Negeri Mandailing Natal."*

METHOD

This research was conducted at SLB Negeri Mandailing Natal, located on Jl. Prof. Andi Hakim Nasution, STAIN Panyabungan Complex, Panyabungan, Mandailing Natal Regency, North Sumatra Province, Indonesia. More specifically, the research took place in Pidoli Lombang Hamlet, Pidoli Lombang Village, Panyabungan District. The research was carried out approximately two months after the research permit was issued by Universitas Muhammadiyah Tapanuli Selatan.

The approach used in this study was a qualitative approach. This research provided an accurate description and explanation of the conditions or phenomena encountered. According to Bogdan and Biklen in Sugiyono (2020:7), descriptive qualitative research methods involve collecting data in the form of words or images, rather than emphasizing numerical data. After being analyzed, the collected data were described in a way that was easy for others to understand. Descriptive qualitative methods are conducted intensively, allowing researchers to spend considerable time in the field, carefully record events, conduct reflective analyses of various documents found in the field, and prepare detailed research reports (Dela et al., 2023).

Research informants are individuals who provide information regarding the data needed by the researcher related to the ongoing study. The informants were selected using purposive sampling techniques. Purposive sampling is a sampling method based on specific criteria, namely children at SLB Negeri Mandailing Natal. The informants in this study consisted of teachers and three parents of autistic children, while the respondents were three autistic children.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This chapter describes the research findings and discussion in the following order: an overview of the research findings and the discussion of the analysis of social interaction among autistic children at SLB Negeri Mandailing Natal.

There are four forms of social interaction identified in this study:

A. Cooperation

The interview results showed that autistic children were able to demonstrate forms of cooperation, although at a simple level. Teachers observed that the forms of cooperation displayed included helping to pick up stationery or tidying up toys together after activities. This cooperation did not always occur consistently because it was strongly influenced by the children's emotional condition and their comfort with the environment or peers.

B. Competition

Competition was reflected in the children's enthusiasm when seeing the success of others. When one of their friends won a drawing competition, the child showed greater effort in practicing drawing and even expressed a desire to perform better than their friend. This indicates the presence of intrinsic motivation to develop through the influence of the social environment. In addition, children also showed a strong desire to be the first to do something at home, such as when asked to take something or tidy up toys. Although autistic children generally face challenges in social interaction, some children demonstrated a desire to compete, especially in activities they were interested in, such as drawing, completing games, or finishing tasks quickly. They felt proud when receiving praise from teachers, which indicated a drive to excel in certain areas. This shows that autistic children still have the potential to compete in a healthy manner according to their individual capacities and interests.

C. Accommodation

Accommodation refers to adjustments made by teachers and the environment to meet the special needs of autistic children so they can interact and learn optimally. Teachers adjusted teaching methods according to the characteristics of each child, for example by using visual media such as picture cards and colorful materials to help children understand lessons. In addition, when children experienced difficulties or stress in class, they were provided with a special space to calm themselves. Teachers also arranged seating positions to avoid sources of noise and provided sensory breaks when needed. These accommodations helped create a safe and supportive learning environment and served as a bridge for autistic children to interact more effectively with their social surroundings. Regular routines were also very important for the children. When routines were disrupted, the children showed signs of anxiety and difficulty concentrating. This condition indicates that with family support and appropriate environmental arrangements, children were able to adapt and carry out daily activities more effectively.

D. Conflict

Conflicts or disputes can still occur among autistic children, especially during play or interactions with peers. Children often experience difficulty managing emotions when games do not go as expected, when turns are delayed, or when they feel misunderstood. Reactions may include anger, crying, withdrawal, or tantrums.

In conflict situations, autistic children tend to blame others, not because of bad intentions, but due to limitations in understanding situations and a lack of self-reflection abilities. They also experience difficulties expressing feelings verbally, so they more often express emotions through nonverbal behaviors such as crying, avoiding others, or using certain body movements. However, it cannot be denied that children still face difficulties managing emotions during conflicts. They tend to become easily offended, angry, or aggressive when they feel defeated, compared, or ignored. Children are also not yet fully capable of calming themselves after conflicts and still require assistance from parents to regulate their emotions. These conflicts illustrate that children's abilities to control themselves and understand differences of opinion are still in the developmental process. The role of parents is therefore very important in guiding children to manage their emotions more constructively.

Social interaction is a fundamental process in individual life, including for children with special needs such as autistic children. Based on the results of interviews, observations, and documentation conducted at SLB Negeri Mandailing Natal, it can be concluded that

the forms of social interaction among autistic children at this school showed diverse characteristics depending on the severity of autism, teacher approaches, and support from the school environment.

1. Forms of Social Interaction Among Autistic Children at SLB Negeri Mandailing Natal

It was found that autistic children at SLB Negeri Mandailing Natal tended to display limited social interaction. They interacted more frequently with teachers or parents than with peers. The interactions that occurred tended to be one-way interactions, such as answering questions without showing interest in continuing the conversation. This finding is consistent with Santrock's (2012) opinion that children with autism spectrum disorders experience difficulties in forming and maintaining reciprocal social relationships. Some autistic children categorized as high-functioning autism were able to establish simple communication with teachers and peers, although they often required stimulation or guidance from adults. In contrast, children with severe autism tended to display solitary behavior, avoid eye contact, and focus more on individual activities.

2. Factors Influencing Social Interaction in Autistic Children

The results of the study showed that social interaction among autistic children was greatly influenced by several factors, namely:

a. Teacher Approaches and Therapy

Teachers at SLB Negeri Mandailing Natal used individual and small-group learning methods. Behavioral therapy and speech therapy were also used to improve communication and interaction skills. The success of these approaches could be seen in the increased participation of children in group activities, although it was still limited.

b. School Social Environment

An inclusive and supportive school environment also helped autistic children adapt more easily. Peers at the school were trained to understand the characteristics of autistic children so they could interact more empathetically.

c. Individual Characteristics of the Children

Each autistic child has unique behavioral patterns. Children who were more responsive to social stimuli tended to be easier to guide in social interactions. In contrast, children with sensory disorders or aggressive behavior required special approaches to prevent social isolation.

3. Teachers' Strategies in Improving Social Interaction

Teachers at SLB Negeri Mandailing Natal implemented several strategies to improve the social interaction of autistic children, including:

a. The use of visual and concrete media in learning

This strategy was applied to facilitate understanding and communication.

b. Modeling or role-playing

This method was used to train children to recognize emotional expressions and appropriate social responses.

c. Providing rewards or positive reinforcement

Positive reinforcement was given when children showed interactive behavior, such as greeting others or sharing stationery with friends.

These strategies proved effective in helping children improve basic social skills. Although the process occurred gradually and required considerable time, positive changes could be observed over a certain period.

4. Challenges Encountered

Several challenges were faced in efforts to improve social interaction among autistic children, including the limited number of assistant teachers compared to the number of students, which caused individual approaches to be less than optimal. Another challenge was the lack of parental involvement in training children's social interaction skills at home, resulting in less effective transfer of social skills from school to home. In addition, verbal communication barriers, especially among nonverbal children, made social interaction very limited and required alternative communication aids.

5. Future Efforts to Develop Social Interaction

SLB Negeri Mandailing Natal continues to improve service quality through teacher training, collaboration with external parties such as psychologists and therapists, and the organization of inclusive social activities. Strengthening therapy programs and actively involving families are future priorities to support the overall social development of autistic children.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the study and discussion regarding the analysis of social interaction among autistic children at SLB Negeri Mandailing Natal, it can be concluded that although children with autism experience obstacles in communication and social involvement, they are still capable of gradually developing interaction skills through appropriate learning approaches. Teachers and educational staff at this school have implemented special strategies such as individualized learning, the use of visual media, and positive reinforcement, which have proven effective in helping autistic children become more active and confident in interacting with their surrounding environment.

Other supporting factors include family support, an inclusive school environment, and peer involvement, all of which contribute to building the social skills of autistic children. Therefore, it is important for all parties, including teachers and parents, to continue providing proper attention and appropriate approaches so that autistic children can develop optimally, especially in terms of social interaction.

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