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TEACHER'S EXPERIENCE IN ACCOMPANYING AUTISTIC CHILDREN IN SOCIAL INTERACTION WITH PEERS WHEN PLAYING OUTSIDE THE CLASS

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to determine the behavior and social interactions of autistic children, the form of acceptance of their peers in social interactions with autistic children, the impact of social interactions of autistic children when playing, the obstacles and treatments found by teachers when accompanying autistic children when playing outside the classroom. This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach. The data collection techniques used were interviews and observation. The data analysis technique used is thematic analysis. From the research results, it was found that there are three types of H interactions, namely: communication patterns, social contact and direct and indirect playing patterns. Friend H's response was to accept it openly. This shows that there are positive and negative impacts for H, his friends and the teacher. However, several obstacles were found. This obstacle is not a problem as long as H and his friends are under the supervision of the teacher. When the teacher supervises and gives direction to the children, it indirectly becomes an intervention for H.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Education is a right for everyone, without exception, including children with special needs, such as those with autism. These children are entitled to receive education and stimulation to optimize both their limitations and abilities. Children with special needs are those who require special attention due to developmental disorders or disabilities (Desiningrum, 2016). Special needs children, also referred to as exceptional children, are those who deviate from the average normal child in terms of mental characteristics, sensory abilities, physical and neuromuscular abilities, social and emotional behavior, communication skills, or a combination of two or more of these aspects (Mangunsong, 2009). Types of children with special needs include those who are visually impaired, intellectually disabled, hearing impaired, physically disabled, emotionally disturbed, have learning difficulties, cerebral palsy, autism, giftedness, Rett's disorder, Asperger's, slow learners, and ADHD (Mangunsong, 2009). Among them, individuals with autism are characterized by developmental disorders, pervasive developmental disorders, or comprehension disorders, but not mental illnesses (Peeters, 2004). Individuals with autism also have difficulties in communication, behavior, interests, and activities, including social interaction (Widiastuti, 2014).

Experts agree that a good education should be provided from an early age. At a young age, children easily absorb various stimuli to help develop their potential. Therefore, the government, through educational institutions, strives to implement various policies to help optimize the potential of each child. One of the government's efforts to fulfill the right to education for all children is the establishment of inclusive schools for children with special needs. As outlined in National Government Regulation No. 70 of 2009 on inclusive education for students with disabilities and those with potential intelligence and/or special talents (Pratiwi, 2015). Inclusive education is a system of educational provision for all children with disabilities/special intelligence to participate in learning activities alongside generally normal children (Yunita et al., 2019).

The education of children with autism is certainly not separated from the role of parents and how they accept the presence of these children. As research by Suryanti & Faizah (2019) states, if children with autism are well-accepted by their parents and environment, they will receive good support from various parties. This makes the interaction patterns of children with autism better. This is reinforced by the statement of Ramadia et al. (2020) that

the earlier children with autism are given opportunities to interact with their peers, the stronger their mental resilience to face challenges in their environment will be. The role of parents is crucial in strengthening the mental well-being of children with autism, just as the role of teachers is important. The role of teachers becomes essential for children with autism, as stated by Arini & Kurniawati (2020), in early childhood education for those with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), the role of teachers is significant. This is supported by Aktar's (2020) opinion that the skills possessed by teachers while teaching will help improve the socialization abilities of children with autism. One characteristic of children with autism is having difficulties in interaction and communication (Nurfadhilah, 2021), so teachers, as figures who educate and teach children, play an important role. The diversity of characteristics among children with special needs certainly requires special skills from each teacher (Imroatun, 2017) in helping children with autism learn.

In research by Siron (2023), it is emphasized that dealing with children with autism requires patience and specific learning tailored to the child's needs. Research by Fitriyani (2023) discusses training communication skills in children with autism using the PECS medium. Further, Ahmad (2019) explains the stages of communication for children with autism. Research by Yunita (2019) focuses more on school management in providing services for children with autism. Ayuningtyas (2022) focuses on the reasons for choosing to become a teacher of children with special needs, such as those with autism. Meanwhile, research by Firli et al. (2020) highlights teachers' perceptions of inclusive schools. Research by Kamil (2023) focuses on analyzing articles, books, and journals related to handling children with autism using prompts. This method functions to focus the child's attention with repeated instructions or commands in hopes that the child understands and comprehends all the directions given by the teacher. These studies are conducted in special schools or inclusive schools.

For children with autism, adapting to the environment is not easy because the prominent disorders in individuals with autism are communication and social interaction. However, they still have rights and need attention to be guided and educated in their family, school, and community environments. In this regard, it is not only children with autism who have difficulties in social interaction; even their normal peers face their own challenges when interacting with their different friends. Therefore, it is the role of adults to bridge the gap and facilitate the expected social interactions. In schools, teachers are the right individuals to

Nurheti & Euis Kurniati, Teacher's Experience In Accompanying Autistic Children ... | 44 guide and bridge the social interactions between children with autism and their peers so that

they can interact well socially.

Based on the above explanation, the researcher is interested in conducting a study titled "Teacher's Experience in Accompanying Autistic Children in Social Interaction with Peers When Playing Outside The Class.".

2. METHOD

The method used in this research is a qualitative approach, where data is obtained through observation and interviews, presented in a descriptive format. Through this approach, the researcher will be able to provide a detailed explanation of teachers' experiences in dealing with children with special needs, particularly those with autism, at the PAUD PINTAR school in Bandung. The data collection techniques used in this study are interviews and observations. The data analysis technique employed is thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a method used to identify, analyze, and report patterns or themes within data (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

The method employed in this study uses a descriptive qualitative approach because the research describes the written and verbal words of the interviewed teachers. The researcher collects descriptive data through interviews, observations, and documentation. Research data are obtained using observation, interviews, and inventories. Subsequently, the results of the observations, interviews, and inventories will be analyzed using the data analysis technique of Miles et al. (2014), which includes: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing.

Based on the explanation above, the steps to be taken in this research are collecting relevant data through books, documents, and journals; conducting interviews and documentation; observing and record the results of interviews and observations; and analyzing or review the data to be studied, allowing the researcher to draw more detailed conclusions about the issues to be examined.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The behavior of the autistic child in this study focuses on the activities of H (an initial), a student with autism at the research site. The activities refer to the actions and habits H exhibits when interacting with peers while playing outside the classroom. According to the interviews conducted with four teachers at PAUD PINTAR 1 school and one principal, H's behavior and interactions with peers during outdoor play fall into three types.

The first type involves H interacting with peers through direct and sometimes indirect communication patterns. An example of direct communication is when H cries when not allowed to play with others. Indirect communication could be H observing first before joining in with others to play.

The second type, as conveyed by the teachers during interviews, pertains to H's social contact with peers, which can be both direct and indirect. Direct social contact occurs when H immediately joins in playing, such as when others are playing ball or running around; H also joins in. Direct social contact can also be expressed through H's emotions, such as being happy when allowed to play and having a bright expression. Conversely, if H is not allowed to play, H might feel sad, which could lead to anger, resulting in H pulling or pushing friends.

The third type of interaction is related to H's play patterns. H usually joins in playing directly, but sometimes, when rules are introduced in a game, H can follow directions, adhere to rules, and take turns.

Several factors facilitate social interaction between autistic children and their non-autistic peers. These factors include the extent to which the autistic child is accepted by their peers (openness), the level of cooperation that occurs during learning or playing, the frequency and duration of interactions, and the timing and location of these interactions, which are often aligned with activities that the autistic child enjoys (Darojat & Laksmiwati, 2014).

All these responses during H's interactions with peers are influenced by the role of teachers who supervise during playtime. Teachers' guidance regarding appropriate play behaviors helps create a more conducive and enjoyable environment for all children. This aligns with the interview results, where nearly all teachers mentioned that children's play activities are closely related to the role of teachers.

Based on the discussion above about the impact of H's social interactions with peers, it can be concluded that from the teachers' experiences in accompanying H during these interactions, there are some negative effects, but more positive impacts for both H and his peers. Integrating H, an autistic child, with non-autistic peers in various outdoor games fosters empathy and sympathy among the peers and provides numerous stimuli for H to interact better. Besides stimulating, these activities can serve as interventions for H through play.

Regarding the challenges faced by teachers when accompanying H during interactions, these are generally manageable by the teachers at PAUD PINTAR 1. As long as H and his peers are under teacher supervision while playing, these challenges do not pose significant problems. Even if there are minor conflicts between H and his peers, teachers immediately intervene to mediate and ensure their safety. Teachers' efforts to overcome challenges while accompanying H during play involve supervision and providing guidance, helping children learn to solve problems and indirectly intervening for H through these directions.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 Behavior and Social Interaction of Autistic Children During Play with Peers Outside the Classroom

The findings on H's behavior and social interactions during play differ somewhat from Suryanti (2019), who stated that social interaction in autistic children involves the intensity of eye contact, communication, and the ability to engage in various activities, leading to an inability to express their own feelings and a limited understanding of rules or norms in everyday life. This results in autistic children seemingly having their own world and feeling isolated from their surroundings. This shows that the characteristics of each autistic child are different, aligning with Sari (2021), who noted that autism is now referred to as ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder) because the severity and symptoms vary among individuals with autism. H, for example, shows a significant interest in playing with peers, even though there are sometimes misunderstandings due to communication challenges. These misunderstandings occur not only between H and his peers but also between H and the teachers who accompany him during play. The accompanying teachers need time to understand what H means or wants when playing with his peers outside the classroom. The communication difficulties experienced by H are consistent with Nurfadhilah (2021), who stated that one characteristic of autistic children is having difficulties in interaction and communication. Nevertheless, the teachers at PAUD PINTAR 1 strive to understand H's communication patterns with patience and a thoughtful approach to make him comfortable in the school environment and help him adapt to his peers. This effort is evident in the changes in H's behavior after nearly a year of attending PAUD PINTAR 1.

4.2 Peer Acceptance in Social Interaction with Autistic Children During Play Outside the Classroom

Observations show that H's peers do not mind when he joins in play, whether it is playing soccer, swinging, playing tag, and so on. As Hurlock stated, the type of personal and social adjustment a child makes is greatly influenced by the level of peer acceptance they receive (Hurlock, 1999). Peer interaction is a form of relationship between individuals of relatively the same age. According to the DSM-IV (APA, 2000), interacting with others is a major challenge for autistic children, who experience difficulties in engaging in interactions such as making eye contact, expressing emotions, or gestures. Additionally, they struggle with playing with peers, lack empathy, and have no reciprocal socio-emotional exchange.

The involvement of parents, teachers, and therapists is crucial in helping H improve his interactions. As the theory suggests, a person's attitude is influenced by cognitive, emotional, and behavioral reactions toward others. In the context of autism, a teacher's attitude toward autistic children can significantly impact their interactions and the learning applied in inclusive classrooms (Ozel Eren et al., 2017). This is supported by Suryanti & Faizah (2019), who found that parental acceptance and support play a significant role in influencing the social interaction patterns of autistic children and can help develop these patterns further. In line with this, Twistiyandayani and Khoiroh (2021) stated that providing good examples and role models for behavior and socialization is essential, as autistic children rely heavily on the role of close family members. Therefore, parents and teachers must strive to set good examples and cultivate positive habits for autistic children to follow.

4.3 Impact of Social Interaction of Autistic Children During Play with Peers Outside the Classroom

According to Hasnita (2015), almost all autistic children have problems with fine motor skills, rigid and rough movements, and often find it challenging to hold, press, grasp, and pinch objects. These motor issues are not permanent; motor skills in autistic children can be developed through activities that continuously and routinely train muscle strength and coordination of small muscles (Santrock, 2011). These skills can be trained during play, such as climbing, running with friends, and playing soccer with peers outside the classroom. H's motor skills have been frequently trained at PAUD PINTAR 1, as he is an active autistic child with a wide range of interests in play activities. Thus, it is necessary to develop the motor skills of autistic children according to their characteristics. An effective therapy to enhance motor skills is play therapy, which works by developing new skills that the child enjoys. Play is a vital need for children, helping them learn to adapt, socialize, and express themselves

freely. Brewer (2007) supported this, stating that playing maximizes muscle function, increases metabolism, and improves muscle development. Through play, autistic children can experience overall development. Hence, recognizing the importance of play in children's lives, the teachers at PAUD PINTAR 1 do not limit H's play according to his interests as long as the play is safe for H and his peers.

4.4 Challenges Faced by Teachers When Accompanying Autistic Children in Social Interactions with Peers During Play Outside the Classroom

When accompanying H in playing with his peers, the teachers at PAUD PINTAR 1 acknowledge that communication is one of the main challenges, in line with Aziz (2021), who stated that autistic children face barriers in speech and communication, making it difficult for them to adapt to their environment. The challenges faced by the teachers at PAUD PINTAR 1 include various difficulties, most of which relate to communication issues, triggering other problems. For example, the challenge regarding H's reactive behavior is linked to his emotions. Emotional problems include frequent crying, sudden anger, laughter without reason, aggressive behavior, and destructive tendencies, even self-harm and lack of empathy (Rinarki, 2018).

Every child has their way of expressing what they think or feel, including autistic children, who may have unique ways of expressing their emotions and desires, even if they sometimes struggle. This aligns with Subyantoro (2013), who stated that autistic individuals find it challenging to express their feelings and desires to others. Similarly, H expresses his wants to teachers or peers by pulling or using gestures like pointing at what he wants. Lubis (2021) reinforces this by stating that the term autism refers to a psychological condition in children characterized by a blank facial expression as if daydreaming, losing thought, and being difficult for others to engage or communicate with.

4.5 Handling Strategies Provided by Teachers When Accompanying Autistic Children in Social Interactions with Peers During Play Outside the Classroom

Addressing the challenges in handling H requires the role of teachers, where the most fundamental attitude a teacher must possess is feeling called to a noble task, loving and caring for students, and having a full sense of responsibility for their duties. This attitude significantly influences the development of points contained in the teacher's personality competencies (Siswoyo et al., 2013). The competencies required of teachers are evidence that education is essential for humans as it is a means to maintain civilization and achieve success (Yunita,

2019). With education, children gain quality growth experiences, increase information, and enhance abilities (Kisti, 2023).

The challenges teachers face in dealing with autistic children present an opportunity for them to learn more about autism. Siron (2021) stated that this effort is made so teachers can adapt, be accepted by autistic children, and be closer and more affectionate towards them. Bestari and Zulmiyetri (2019) noted that in teaching, teachers need to understand children's character, manage emotions when dealing with children, and use simple words and touches as a form of affection. One way to show affection is by helping H feel accepted in his peer environment and being patient with him. Additionally, to address H's reactive behavior that may suddenly emerge and potentially endanger himself or others—such as running uncontrollably, climbing quickly, or swinging without caution—teachers take action by providing assistance and guidance.

Several efforts can be applied by teachers and parents in handling autistic children, as found in Halimah et al. (2021), who suggested that fostering independence in autistic children can be achieved through habituation. Teachers should build confidence in children to do things independently, like drinking water by themselves, with the teacher or parent demonstrating first. Similarly, instilling responsibility in autistic children is done through habituation with simple tasks, such as tidying up toys after playing and putting them back in place. Support from parents and teachers in helping develop the character of autistic children can reduce reactive and repetitive behaviors in H. The role and position of teachers in educational interaction guarantee the achievement of desired educational goals. In educational interactions, children also encounter various difficulties. Every child grows and develops according to their nature. They will learn regardless of success or praise; they learn in their own way, according to their abilities, potential, skills, and talents. The role of teachers in aiding the learning process of students is highly anticipated (Soekanto, 2012)..

5. CONCLUSION

Based on the results and discussion above, several conclusions can be drawn about H's interactions with peers during play. H's interactions can be categorized into three main types. The first type involves communication patterns. Direct communication is characterized by crying and making gestures when H wants something, whereas indirect communication occurs when H observes and watches before deciding to join in play. The second type of interaction relates to social contact. Direct social contact happens when H immediately

participates and expresses emotions while playing. In contrast, indirect social contact involves H showing attachment to certain objects and experiencing changes over time. The third type concerns play patterns. Direct play patterns occur when H directly joins in play, sometimes following directions and rules, while indirect play patterns involve H observing first before engaging in the activity.

The responses from H's peers suggest a form of acceptance towards H's presence among them while playing. This acceptance is conditional, meaning that certain situations may lead peers to respond with rejection. For example, they may show anger or frustration when they feel disturbed by specific behaviors. Nonetheless, the acceptance from H's peers is significant and beneficial for H's development of social interaction and communication skills. H's peers also make an effort to be open by giving H opportunities to join them in play. This demonstrates that there are positive impacts when H interacts with peers, as it fosters an inclusive environment and promotes social learning.

However, several challenges have been identified in this process. There are four main challenges: technical challenges, challenges with reactive behaviors, challenges with repetitive behaviors, and communication challenges. Technical challenges might involve logistical or situational issues that arise during play. Challenges with reactive behaviors occur when H's reactive behaviors emerge, leading to potential conflicts. Challenges with repetitive behaviors involve difficulties related to H's repetitive actions or routines that may affect play. Lastly, communication challenges are barriers in effectively communicating with H, which can complicate social interactions.

Despite these challenges, they do not pose significant problems as long as H and peers are under the supervision of teachers during play. When minor conflicts arise between H and peers, teachers immediately intervene to ensure safety and restore a conducive environment. Empirically, when teachers provide supervision and guidance to help children learn to resolve their issues, it serves as an intervention that indirectly helps H improve further. This approach not only supports H's social development but also enhances the overall inclusivity of the play environment, ensuring that all children feel supported and valued.

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