

COMMUNICATION DYNAMICS IN SOCIAL SKILLS DEVELOPMENT IN CHILDREN WITH AUTISM IN SCHOOL ENVIRONMENTS

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Abstract

This study aims to describe the dynamics of communication in the development of social skills in children with autism in an inclusive school environment. The research uses a qualitative approach with a case study type. The study subjects consisted of three children with autism, three companion teachers/classroom teachers, and six peers. Data were collected through participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation, then analyzed using the Miles and Huberman model which included data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawn, and validated through triangulation of sources and methods. The results showed that the communication patterns of children with autism were dominated by non-verbal and simple verbal communication with limited initiative. The main barriers to social skills development include difficulty understanding spoken language, a tendency to withdraw from crowded social situations, and a lack of peer understanding of inclusive interactions. However, communication strategies based on visual media, teacher mentoring, peer involvement, and positive reinforcement have proven effective in increasing the frequency of children's social interactions. In conclusion, structured communication dynamics and inclusive school environment support are able to significantly promote the development of social skills of children with autism. These findings confirm the importance of collaboration between teachers, peers, and parents to realize a sustainable socialization process in schools.

Keywords: *Communication, Social Skills, Autism, Inclusive Schools.*

INTRODUCTION

In every elementary or secondary school classroom, social interaction is presented as a vital part of the daily dynamics of students (Marsini et al., 2022). However, for children with autism, this line of communication is often challenging. They often feel different, both in understanding verbal language and non-verbal signals that surround their associations. From morning to the bell, children with autism face rich but complex social situations. How they understand a friend's greeting, when to answer a question, or how to express a desire — all of these processes are not just a matter of talking, but understanding the social context. Communication is the main bridge in building the social skills in question. Without this bridge, even simple interactions like "hello" or "can I join?" can become a stretch of chasm that is difficult for them to cross. When children with autism receive the right support, both from teachers and peers, they can learn to interpret facial expressions, voice intonation, or body language of others around them. School becomes a very broad social arena — with diverse layouts, routines, teachers, and friends (Marsini, 2023b). All of these components form a dynamic communication field, as well as being a challenge for children with autism. Families and teachers are key partners in shaping the communication experience of children with autism at school (Satriani et al., 2024). They also create an atmosphere that can strengthen or weaken children's opportunities to learn to socialize. A teacher who understands the specific communication needs of children with autism can create more inclusive teaching methods: simplifying instruction, providing visual cues, or organizing small group interactions (Ardiansah, 2024). On the other hand, peers who show empathy and patience can open up a safe space for children with autism to express their feelings, ask questions, or simply play together. However, obstacles remain. For example, when a child feels confused by an ambiguous command, or when a friend spontaneously switches topics to discuss these things may cause anxiety and close opportunities for effective communication (Marsini, 2023d). The use of auxiliary media such as images, cards, or alternative communication technologies (AAC) is often an important helper.

They provide a visual structure that makes it easier for children to understand messages, so that social skills can develop gradually. This dynamic also concerns how schools organize the physical environment: classrooms, break areas, or placement of sitting buddies (Marsini, 2023c). All of that can affect children's comfort in interacting. No less important is the role of trained peer coaching who can accompany children with autism in various social activities, helping to bridge communication before that social interest really grows. Learning communication and social interaction is not just about transferring information. It is also about building a sense of security, confidence, and motivation for children to participate in the social atmosphere instead of feeling pressured or isolated (Marsini, 2023a). As social skills begin to grow, children with autism are able to recognize the classroom atmosphere, read play situations, and even express desires such as wanting to try out friends' toys without fear.

This is where communication and social come together in a series of dynamics: every small interaction, morning greeting, play, exchanging stories all becomes a learning ground for them. The study and practice of inclusive education increasingly emphasizes the importance of measuring these dynamics not only from an academic point of view, but also from a child's social experience in school. A multidisciplinary approach is often applied: teachers, school psychologists, speech therapists, and parents work together to create social communication strategies that suit the characteristics and needs of children (Rabbani, 2024). Even so, every child with autism has a uniqueness. Some are stronger in visual communication, some need a direct verbal approach, and some are responsive to certain social rhythms. Therefore, a deep understanding of their communication dynamics is key to understanding how they interpret words and gestures, and how we can respond in ways that bridge their social needs and goals. By comprehensively understanding these communication dynamics, educators and related parties are able to design more effective interventions. The goal: to build stronger and more sustainable social skills—so that children with autism can not only communicate, but also feel like a real part of school life.

RESEARCH METHODS

1. Approaches and Types of Research

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study type (Ilhami et al., 2024). The qualitative approach was chosen because the focus of this research is to understand communication phenomena and social dynamics in depth from the perspective of children with autism, teachers, and peers in the school environment. The case study allows researchers to explore in detail children's communication behaviors and social skills in a real-world context in schools.

2. Location and Research Subject

The research was carried out in an inclusion school at the elementary school level that had students with mild to moderate autism. The research subjects consisted of:

- Three children with autism identified as having challenges in social skills,
- Three classroom teachers or special assistant teachers (GPK) who accompany the learning process, and
- Six peers who often interact with the children.

The selection of subjects was carried out by purposive sampling, namely based on the criteria of active involvement in social activities in schools and availability to participate in the research.

3. Data Collection Techniques

This study uses three main data collection techniques (Jogiyanto Hartono, 2018) that is:

- **Participatory Observation**
Observations were carried out in classrooms, school yards, and play areas to see communication patterns, social responses, and interactions of children with autism in learning and non-academic activities.
- **In-Depth Interviews**
Interviews were conducted with accompanying teachers, classroom teachers, and peers to gain perspective on communication dynamics and strategies used to support children's social skills. Interviews are also conducted with parents as additional information about communication patterns at home.
- **Documentation**
Documentation in the form of photos, daily activity notes, and videos of children's social interactions was used as supporting evidence and analysis material to see changes in communication behavior.
- **Research Instruments**

The main instrument in this study is the researcher himself (human instrument) who acts as an observer, data recorder, and analyst. Auxiliary instruments are social interaction observation sheets, interview guides, and audio/video recorders to document communication processes in schools.

4. Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis was carried out in a descriptive qualitative manner using a (Miles & Huberman, 1994), which includes three stages:

- Data Reduction – selecting, focusing, and simplifying data from observations, interviews, and documentation.
- Data Presentation – compiles data in the form of narratives, social interaction matrices, and descriptions of communication events to facilitate understanding patterns.
- Conclusion Draw – deduces patterns of communication dynamics that support or inhibit the development of social skills of children with autism in schools.

5. Data Validity Test

To ensure the validity of the data, the research uses triangulation of sources and methods. Source triangulation is done by comparing data from teachers, peers, and parents. The triangulation method was carried out by comparing the results of observations, interviews, and documentation. In addition, member checks are carried out on teachers to ensure that the results of data interpretation are in accordance with the reality in the field.

RESULTS OF RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION

1. Communication Patterns of Children with Autism in the School Environment

The results of the observation showed that the three subjects of children with autism had different communication patterns according to their level of social ability. Children with mild autism show higher communication initiative than children with moderate autism.

- In general, the communication patterns that emerge are:
- Limited responsiveness to verbal communication from teachers and peers,
- Faster response to visual cues such as hand gestures or images,

Communication tends to be one-way, such as answering questions but rarely asking back-to-back questions.

Table 1. Frequency and type of communication displayed during 5 observations

Subject Name	Age	Dominant Forms of Communication	Interaction Frequency/Day	Response to Peers	Response to Teachers
Rio	8 th	Simple verbal + cues	8–10 times	Short answer	Follow the instructions
Nadine	9 th	Visual cues + gestures	5–6 times	Dodge or stay silent	Follow the instructions
Aurel	7 th	Non-verbal dominant (gesture)	3–4 times	Rarely responding	Slow response

From the table above, it can be seen that children's communication with autism is still limited, and the dominance of non-verbal communication has an effect on their limitations in establishing social interactions naturally. The results showed that the communication patterns of children with autism in inclusive schools tended to be limited and dominated by simple non-verbal or verbal communication. These findings are in line with opinion (First et al., 2023) in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5-TR) which states that one of the main characteristics of children with autism is difficulties in social interaction and communication, both verbal and non-verbal.. From the observations, children with autism respond more easily to visual cues than complex verbal communication. This is in line with research (Schreibman et al., 2015) which confirms that children with autism generally have a stronger visual learning tendency than auditory learning. In other words, they understand the visible message better than the one just heard. In addition, the children's communication tends to be one-way and lacks initiative. They respond more often when they are talked, but rarely initiate interactions on their own. These findings support the theory of Language Pragmatics according to (Owens, 2020) which states that children with autism

experience limitations in pragmatic function, namely the ability to use language according to social contexts. With these conditions, teachers and peers need to provide the right stimulus to build children's communication courage.

2. Barriers to Social Skills Development

Research found several major inhibiting factors in the development of social skills of children with autism in school, including:

- Difficulty understanding complex spoken language, so children often respond late.
- A tendency to avoid crowds or new social situations, which makes them passive in group activities.
- Lack of peer understanding of how to interact with children with autism, so communication is often cut off halfway.
- A crowded classroom environment sometimes makes children easily distracted and lose focus on communication.

The results of teacher interviews showed that without visual support or special mentoring, these children tended to withdraw from social interactions. The study found that social skills barriers to children with autism mainly stem from two main factors: the child's internal limitations (difficulty understanding spoken language and social anxiety) and external environmental factors (class crowds, lack of peer understanding). These findings are in line with research (Aldred et al., 2004) which states that children with autism tend to have difficulty interpreting social cues such as facial expressions, voice intonation, and body language, so they need intensive guidance in crowded social situations. The tendency of children to avoid new social situations found in this study is also supported by the theory of Sensory Overload in autism studies. According to (Suarez, 2012), a school environment that is too noisy and crowded can trigger sensory stress in children with autism, which then leads to social withdrawal. Therefore, schools need to create a more controlled social environment so that children feel safe to interact. Lack of peer understanding is also a real obstacle in the communication process. These findings corroborate the results of the research (Carter et al., 2005) which confirms that social support from peers plays a major role in the success of the social integration of children with autism in inclusive schools. Without education and empathy from peers, communication often breaks down or doesn't continue naturally.

3. Communication Strategies That Support Social Skills

In addition to finding barriers, this study also identified effective communication strategies to develop social skills for children with autism, including:

- Use of visual media such as picture cards or communication boards to clarify messages.
- Assistance by special assistant teachers (GPK) to guide children to understand certain social situations.
- Peer support or peers who are trained to be a bridge of communication in the classroom and while playing.
- Positive reinforcement such as praise or stickers whenever the child succeeds in taking a communication initiative or responding well to a friend.

Table 3. Frequency of Children's Social Interactions After Three Weeks of Implementation

Subject Name	Initial Interaction Frequency/Day	Interaction Frequency After 3 Weeks/Day	Forms of Communication Change
Rio	8–10 times	15–18 times	Begin to dare to greet your friends first
Nadine	5–6 times	10–12 times	Respond faster to calls to play
Aurel	3–4 times	7–9 times	Start using simple words when answering

From the table, it can be seen that after the communication intervention, the child's social skills showed a significant improvement. This emphasizes the importance of a supportive school environment with the right communication strategies for children with autism. The results of this study show that the use of communication strategies such as visual media, GPK mentoring, peer support, and positive reinforcement can significantly increase the frequency of children's social interactions. The increase in communication frequency from the first to the third week of the study confirmed that structured and consistent communication strategies were effective in encouraging social skills of children with autism.

These findings are in line with the Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) approach which emphasizes the importance of positive reinforcement in forming new behaviors (Cooper et al., 2007). Every successful communication that is given praise or a simple reward encourages the child to repeat the same social behavior more often. In addition, peer involvement as a communication bridge has been proven to help children interact more quickly outside of formal learning sessions. These findings are in line with research (Kamps et al., 2017) which emphasizes the effectiveness of peer-mediated intervention in improving the social abilities of children with autism in inclusive schools. The use of visual media such as picture cards and communication boards also has a positive impact. This is in accordance with the principle of Visual Supports which is widely used in the TEACCH (Treatment and Education of Autistic and Related Communication-Handicapped Children) program, which emphasizes that visual information is easier for children with autism to process than verbal instruction alone (Mesibov et al., 2005). Overall, the combination of the right communication strategy with the support of an inclusive school environment can help children with autism experience more optimal social skill development.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that communication dynamics have an important role in the development of social skills of children with autism in an inclusive school environment. The results show that the communication patterns of children with autism tend to be limited, dominated by non-verbal or simple verbal communication, and lack of initiative. Children respond more easily to visual cues than complex verbal instructions, and most communication is one-way. This suggests that children with autism need structured communication support in order to actively participate in social interactions at school. The main obstacles to the development of social skills for children with autism in school include difficulty understanding spoken language, a tendency to withdraw from crowded social situations, and a lack of peer understanding of how to interact with them. Environmental factors such as classroom noise and lack of proper communication strategies can exacerbate this condition, so that children are more likely to experience communication disconnections and difficulty establishing social relationships. However, this study also shows that the implementation of appropriate communication strategies can have a significant positive impact on the development of children's social skills. The use of visual media, the assistance of special assistant teachers, peer involvement as a communication bridge, and positive reinforcement have been proven to increase the frequency of children's interactions from day to day. Over a three-week period, children showed progress in the courage to greet, respond to playful invitations, and use simple language when communicating. Thus, it can be concluded that the development of social skills of children with autism in school is greatly influenced by the dynamics of effective communication. A combination of structured communication strategies, a supportive environment, and collaboration between teachers, peers, and parents is the key to the success of the socialization process of children with autism. This research confirms the importance of an inclusive approach that focuses not only on academic learning, but also on sustainable social interaction so that children with autism can fully participate in school life.

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