Implementation of Inclusive Education Policy: Study of Handling Student with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in Elementary School

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Abstract

This research aims to describe the implementation of inclusive education policies for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). This research is a narrative type qualitative research, data collection is carried out by interviewing class teachers, Special Assistant Teachers (GPK), GPK coordinators, and school principals at the Lazuardi GCS Elementary School in Depok City, observing, and reviewing documents. The data collection techniques used are interviews, observation, documentation, and Focus Group Discussion (FGD). Data analysis is applied through thematic analysis and content analysis. Testing the validity of the data is carried out by testing credibility through member checking to find out how far the data obtained is in accordance with what is stated. provided by the data provider, The research results show that this school has implemented an inclusive education policy by serving various children with special needs including ASD using a combination of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) and DIR-Floortime approaches to understand and change a person's behavior while DIR-Floortime an approach to emotional development through play activities. The supporting factors needed in handling ASD are the availability of good teachers, facilities, policies, assessment techniques, and parental support. The challenge in handling ASD in inclusive schools is the provision of resources and training to maintain competent teachers and all stakeholders in implementing inclusive education for children with ASD.

Keywords: *Autism Spectrum Disorder* (ASD), Inclusive Education, Policy

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mendeskripsikan pelaksanaan kebijakan pendidikan inklusif bagi anak Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Penelitian ini merupakan penelitian kualitatif jenis naratif, pengumpulan data dilakukan dengan mewawancara guru kelas, Guru Pendamping Khusus (GPK), koordinator GPK, dan kepala sekolah di Sekolah Dasar Lazuardi GCS Kota Depok, observasi, dan telaah dokumen. Teknik pengumpulan data yang digunakan adalah wawancara, observasi, dokumentasi, dan Focus Group Discussion (FGD. Analisis data digunakan melalui analisis tematik dan analisis isi. Pengujian keabsahan data dilakukan dengan cara uji kredibilitas melalui membercheck untuk mengetahui seberapa jauh data yang diperoleh sesuai dengan apa yang diberikan oleh pemberi data. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan sekolah ini telah melaksanakan kebiajkan pendidikan inklusif dengan melayani berbagai anak berkebutuhan khusus termasuk ASD menggunakan kombinasi teknik Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) dan DIR-Floortime. ABA pendekatan untuk memahami dan mengubah perilaku seseorang, sementara DIR-Floortime sebuah pendekatan untuk perkembangan emosional melalui kegiatan bermain. Faktor pendukung yang

diperlukan dalam penanganan ASD adalah ketersediaan guru, sarana, kebijakan, teknik asesmen, dan dukungan orang tua yang baik. Tantangan dalam penanganan ASD di sekolah inklusif adalah penyediaan sumberdaya dan pelatihan agar dapat menjaga kompetensi guru dan seluruh stakeholder dalam menjalankan pendidikan inklusif untuk anak ASD.

Kata Kunci: *Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Kebijakan, Pendidikan Inklusif*

INTRODUCTION

The practice of inclusive education in Indonesia has developed rapidly since 2003 and to date, there are more than 36,000 educational units providing inclusive education (Fatmawiyati & Permata, 2023). However, the implementation of inclusive education still faces various obstacles (Florian, 2019; Florian & Beaton, 2018; Mendoza & Heymann, 2024; Singal, 2019; Stepaniuk, 2019) such as lack of support for infrastructure from the government (Andrews et al., 2021; Sharma & Sokal, 2015, 2016) lack of teachers, rigid curriculum, lack of community support for inclusive education and limited time for GPK to teach ABK because GPK doubles as class teacher, subject teacher or guidance counselor (Hakiman et al., 2021; Machrus & Desmita, 2019) and difficulties in facilitating various children with special needs (ABK). One type of ABK is ASD children who are considered very complex and poorly understood. Children with ASD are considered more difficult to engage with other students with special educational needs (Cook & Ogden, 2022; Goodall, 2019; Hummerstone & Parsons, 2021; Kuutti et al., 2022; Mamas et al., 2019; Perlado Lamo de Espinosa et al ., 2021).

Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are often misunderstood and considered strange because they do not understand other people's social cues. The main causes of ASD are related to weaknesses in (1) executive function, (2) weak central coherence, or (3) theory of mind (Pullen, 2014). Even though some of the disturbance patterns are the same in ASD sufferers, there are many variations in symptoms that are shown with varying levels of severity (Pullen, 2014). The prevalence of ASD is increasing day by day (Riany et al., 2016). In Indonesia currently, according to the kesmas.kemkes.go.id page, there are 5,530 ASD individuals with an addition of 500 people every year. This increase shows the increasing need for treatment of children with ASD.

One of the inclusive schools that handles ASD children is SD Lazuardi GCS in the city of Depok. Since its inception, the school has established itself as an inclusive school by accepting various student characters and various types of children with special needs (ABK) including ASD without a selection process. Using the First Come First Serve principle, all students with various student characteristics can be accepted as long as the student quota has not been met. Each class has ABK in various categories equipped with accompanying ABK teachers. Inclusive education services for ASD students are difficult (Jury et al., 2021; Martin et al., 2021) considering that the characteristics of ASD are very diverse and more difficult than other special needs. This school has quite a long experience in handling ABK including ASD so it needs to be explored to serve as inspiration for other inclusive school managers. Various methods and strategies have been used, especially in dealing with ASD children, such as Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) and DIR-Floortime.

The ABA method is a form of behavior modification which relies heavily on external reinforcement, both positive and negative (operant conditioning). ABA is intended to change or reduce behavior, improve language, communication, social skills, attention, etc., in children with ASD. The main principle of ABA follows behaviorist theory which states that behavior is caused by external stimuli in the environment which is why rewards (external) will strengthen a behavior, and punishment (external) will inhibit a behavior (Sandoval-Norton & Shkedy, 2019). DIR Floortime is a developmentally, individual differences and interaction-based intervention program commonly used for children with ASD. Floortime which means interactive play or time on the floor aims to support children's emotional development, which is also interpreted as play therapy which aims to

develop social relationships between children and adults. This activity specifically refers to the DIR/Floortime method, which is usually carried out through games and on the floor so it is called "floortime" (Dionne & Martini, 2011).

Several previous studies related to handling ASD in schools include the first research regarding improving the communication skills of children with ASD through the similarity of perceptions of teachers and parents (Folostina et al., 2022). The two studies are about the impact of the ABA method on children with ASD in improving cognitive, language, social/communication outcomes, problem behavior, adaptive behavior, emotionality, autism symptoms, and quality of life (Gitimoghaddam et al., 2022). Thirdly, research on the implementation of DIR-Floortime is to improve communication (Purnomo, n.d.). Fourthly, research on the implementation of DIR-Floortime is to improve learning outcomes (Barghi et al., 2024). Fifthly, research regarding DIR-Floortime is to improve socio-emotional development (Boshoff et al., 2020).

In this study, researchers are focused on using a combination of approaches or methods because from the results of several studies only one approach or method is used. This is based on the assumption that there is no single method that has been proven to be the most effective for treating children with ASD (Balasco et al., 2020; Deb et al., 2020; Klinger et al., 2021; Provenzani et al., 2020). Therefore, the use of multiple methods and continuous adaptation to ASD needs is required.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research is qualitative research which utilizes narrative research as an investigative strategy. Qualitative research provides researchers with the opportunity to interpret data focusing on participants' experiences and ideas (Busetto et al., 2020; Thompson Burdine et al., 2021; Tomaszewski et al., 2020; Tumen Akyildiz & Ahmed, 2021) and explain those experiences by collecting stories and writing narratives. The research subjects are selected through a sampling technique in the form of purposive sampling consisting of class teachers, special education teachers, special education coordinators, and school principals who had more than 10 years of experience. The researcher himself has a very close relationship with the school and the teachers because they have been part of the school for approximately 19 years so they have sufficient understanding to analyze the data obtained.

Data collection techniques are carried out using in-depth semi-structured interviews, observation, and audiovisual material (photos and videos). Data analysis is carried out using thematic techniques (Li & Seale, 2007; Thompson Burdine et al., 2021) and content analysis (Elisondo & Vargas, 2019; Tomaszewski et al., 2020; Tumen Akyildiz & Ahmed, 2021) is used to analyze interview data and transcribed memos. The data validity test is carried out using a data credibility test through member checking activities, namely initial writing is submitted to participants to ensure its accuracy and validity. Several corrections from participants are included to create the final writing (Wahyuninsih & Lestari, 2023).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Handling ASD at Lazuardi GCS Elementary School as One of the Implementations of Inclusive Policies

The implementation of inclusive education at SD Lazuardi GCS is reflected in the characteristics of the students at the school. SD Lazuardi accepts and facilitates (ABK) various categories. This shows that there are various types of crew members who join the same class as other regular students. The various types of ABK that can be found today are ASD, Down Syndrome, ADHD, Learning Difficulties. According to information, this school also handles students who have visual, hearing, movement and emotional disorders. This school has experienced handling ABK with various obstacles for approximately 22 years, so it can be said to be very experienced.

At the start of entry, all students will go through an observation process to see their characteristics and intervention needs. The results of the observation will determine students into the category of regular students or special needs students, including the type of student with special needs and the intervention they need. Based on the results of observations, basic abilities, needs and assistance needed, including for regular students, will also be known. For ABK, the results of observations are used as the basis for the intervention program that will be developed. All ABK programs are carried out under the coordination of a school unit called Pelangi Lazuardi which is led by an expert in the field of child development.

As a form of implementing the inclusion policy, SD Lazuardi serves children in the ASD category and can currently be found in class III. These students' treatment and programs are slightly different because they are considered to have their own difficulties. The student is currently registered as a grade III elementary school student. According to GPK 1, students have never attended kindergarten/PAUD level when registering, so a school preparation program is required when ABK students enter, as stated by GPK 1 below:

> "......When registered here, Ananda K should have gone to kindergarten first because she hadn't attended school at all before. Since the quota for children with special needs in kindergarten is full, the school recommends that you immediately join elementary school with a special agreement. At that time, let alone interacting, your child's communication was very minimal, he couldn't even carry out toilet activities, including conveying his wishes to defecate and urinate. At that time, Ananda was still using diapers every day..." (Interview, 2023).

Based on the results of the Pelangi team's observations at the start of elementary school, ASD K is categorized as a student with special needs with a regular class approach assisted by a special accompanying teacher and still needed assistance with being withdrawn to the Pelangi room. The program in grades I and II focuses on increasing independence in daily activities such as toileting. Other abilities that are developed are the ability to communicate verbally, practice recognizing letters, and numbers. Involvement with class activities is still very limited, considering that children still need a lot of special time to practice verbal communication skills, recognizing letters and numbers, as well as other habits.

In III class, ananda has shown various improvements in performance compared to when you first registered. Ananda can now do activities without diapers and has the initiative when he wants to defecate. Ananda can now go to the toilet and clean himself independently. Ananda can also interact even without speaking. Ananda also has the initiative when he wants to defecate and can go to the toilet and clean herself. Friends around him do not hesitate to remind or direct this ASD child to help with the toilet training process.

Ananda's communication skills are motionlessly very limited and only utters a few words, but Ananda has shown that he can interact with actions such as pointing, looking in a certain direction. Actions shown as a form of response as another form of communication. Ananda can also show refusal or agreement with special actions/movements. One example of the attitude shown is that occasionally the words "jajajajaj..." come out. from crew members while tugging on GPK's clothes. According to GPK, this is a signal from ABK to invite them to the UKS room which is located around the classroom corridor. Several times the crew members uttered the words "jajajajaj...." but for different signals. Every time the words spoken by the child with ASD are not clear, the teacher and friends reinforce them by pronouncing the correct words that the child with ASD should say.

Special actions or behavior is shown by K students in response to his friends. When the K student is surrounded by friends, he shows a movement of waving his hands as a sign of asking his friends to move away. On another occasion, Ananda also invites GPK to point to another room that is using air conditioning when it feels hotter in the classroom. The process of involving friends in class is felt to be the most effective way to help the socialization skills of children with ASD. The

acceptance and help of classmates is very effective.

Figure 1. Involving Peers when Learning

Ananda's current development standards and cognitive abilities are still different from class standards. Ananda still needs practice to improve gross motor and fine motor skills. Ananda still needs supervision to play safely and comfortably with peers. Ananda still needs to be directed to practice recognizing the names of objects around him, numbers and letters. Writing preparation exercises, learning attitude readiness, and learning to respond are also quietly a concern. Your involvement in regular classes is immovably limited because of need a lot of individual space to achieve the targets set as stated in GPK 2 below:

"In the daily program, ABK only joins the class at around 09.00 because in the morning they are used for sensory motor training activities, one of which is playing on the trampoline and sitting on synthetic grass. Morning activities are also aimed at draining energy so that when ABK enters the class, they will be calmer. The crew members are still aggressive by hitting and scratching the GPK when they are not calm. ABK only joins the class during sports lessons, congregational prayers, lunch, and activity units carried out after 09.00 in the morning (after motor and sensory training). Meanwhile, after prayer and lunch, the crew will take part in therapy activities at Pelangi..." (Interview, 2023).

Figure 2. Activity before entering class to train motor skill through trampoline activities and talking on synthetic grass

ASD Treatment Strategies and Treatment Impact

Handling of ASD in school already looks structured and comprehensive. Starting with an observation process during recruitment to explore ASD's assets and limitations. After receiving sufficient information, GPK will coordinate with class teachers, coordinators, and school principals to prepare an Individual Education Program (IEP). GPK has a good background and ability in preparing IEPs supported by a routine training system so that GPK can handle ASD nicely. The results of preparing the IEP are then discussed and agreed upon with the parents.

In preparing the IEP, the main focus of attention on the basic needs of ASD, as stated by the NA class teacher that "At the beginning of the year, GPK usually together with me as a class teacher will prepare an IEP program that best suits the needs of ABK. This IEP will later be discussed and agreed upon between the school and parents. It is very possible for change to occur if the results of the discussion feel that change is needed" (Interview, 2023).

Meanwhile, according to the NA class teacher, the main concern is as follows;

"ABK profiling is highly adapted to meet the needs of the school environment. Needs identification is carried out by GPK using a checklist containing a list of indicators based on environmental needs. The program determined is truly adapted to student development by prioritizing children's interests and needs rather than teacher or GPK instructions and is enhanced through play activities. To determine and measure the success of implementing DIR-Floortime, ensure first that ABK have fulfilled the 6 basic competency levels before moving on to competency. more complex" (Interview, 2023).

According to the therapist coordinator's explanation, the method currently applied in treating ABK, especially ASD, is and continues to try other methods that are more appropriate to their needs. One of the differences between DIR-Floortime and ABA is the use of instructions. When implementing ABA, instructions are often given concisely and briefly, such as: calm down, stay still, use, walk (only one or two vocabulary words) due to the assumption that ABK has a language barrier. However, for DIR-Floortime, ABK communication is more complex and natural, as that of other children who do not have speech impediments. This is observed when the researcher's observations notice the GPK coordinator communicating with AB who shows refusal when invited to class by GPK NS. The crew members are seen shouting and pointing elsewhere in response to rejection. The coordinator invites communication as the following, "Protest, do you still want to play outside? That's all for now, now it's time to go to class." According to the Coordinator, this approach has changed from before, which usually only responded by saying, "It's time for class" (Interview, 2023).

The AG Coordinator also said that after the implementation of DIR-Floortime, ABK more often looked happy, showing big smiles and sparkling eyes (more relaxed, closer and flexible according to the DIR-Floortime principles). The involvement of crew members in determining activities is visible throughout the observation process. The communication process is carried out continuously at every change of activity. All activities are carried out through the game method and are carried out in a more relaxed manner by sitting on the floor.

Collaboration Process with parents

The development of ABK since entering elementary school until now in grade III has shown extraordinary development thanks to the good cooperation between the school and parents. The preparation and monitoring of the development of ABK at home and at school is carried out based on the results of discussions between the two. There is a monitoring time and format that is agreed upon and carried out together. Understanding of the entire school community, both teachers and other staff including other students, becomes a unified environment that supports the development of children with ASD.

One of the collaborative programs carry out between GPK and parents is when GPK considers that ABK still has high anxiety and is hypersensitive to a texture such as bananas. This is in line with

the information given by parents that ABK does not like fruit. Therefore, a fruit eating program is carried out, especially eating bananas. Introducing various kinds of vegetables and fruit, including bananas, including a diet program agreed with parents. This program is implemented in parallel between the school and parents, written down in a monitoring sheet, and evaluated together periodically.

Figure 3. Example of a Monitoring Document for Parent and GPK Collaboration

The ASD treatment at Lazuardi Elementary School is carried out using DIR/Floortime intervention combined with ABA. A combination of both is seen when providing intervention to students with ASD. There is an offer of reward and punishment (behavior modification through initial methods) in the activity, but it is delivered through a democratic approach such as through a democratic communication approach and packaged in a fun activity. For example, during activities before entering class, students are invited to play on the trampoline, then sit on synthetic grass to discuss activities that should be followed next. When an ADS student refuses to go to class they are offered an additional 5 minutes - 10 minutes. When students do not comply with the agreed time, the teacher leaves ABK with the hope that ABK will follow the teacher to class. The teacher's ability to negotiate with ASD students, including the choice of methods used is very important. Greater teacher self-efficacy is needed in teaching and addressing ASD behaviors is needed (Folostina et al., 2022; Hsiao & Sorensen Petersen, 2019; Hummerstone & Parsons, 2021; Larraceleta et al., 2022). The ability to recognize and develop programs to interact with ASD is a key aspect of good practice in relation to education for ASD (Conn, 2018), because findings show that there is not enough strong evidence regarding the effectiveness of one type of intervention approach compared to another.

The success of the method utilized is also visible from other students' acceptance of the existence of ASD students. The category of ASD children at Lazuardi Elementary School has general characteristics such as having very low interest in communicating, and almost not using any language (Zohoorian et al., 2021) so they often do so through nonverbal means such as staring or pointing (Kariippanon et al. al., 2018; Ramos-Cabo et al., 2019). In general, children with ASD who engage in repetitive behaviors, including flapping their wings or spinning, are often prohibited from performing these behaviors because they are socially unacceptable or disruptive to others (Patriquin et al., 2020). In contrast to the findings during observations, GPK is more tolerant of accepting ASD stereotyped movements, it even appears that classmates are quietly comfortable accepting the child's behavior and directing them to appropriate behavior. One of the attitudes shown by students when ASD students point and flap their wings conveys "it's hot, isn't it? Do you want to go to an air-conditioned room?" This is in accordance with the DIR-Floortime principle which relies on an open communication process and a pleasant atmosphere in handling the program.

The approach method applied cannot be separated from the role of parents. One of the

programs carried out together with parents is the fruit and banana eating program. This is in accordance with the characteristics of ASD children in general where some ASD people experience hyperresponsiveness to certain stimuli in their environment (Balasco et al., 2020; Zohoorian et al., 2021) have higher levels of food rejection, interest in various types of food lower levels, including interest in a smaller variety of fruit and vegetables (M. Barnes et al., 2019; N. Barnes et al., 2014; Fletcher et al., 2018). Inclusive education with good parental cooperation will be a positive opportunity to develop the potential of children with ASD. Parental support for inclusive education programs is one opportunity for successful treatment of ASD (Dawson-Squibb et al., 2020; Jennett et al., 2017; Su et al., 2020). Collaboration between schools and parents can be done in various ways, starting from jointly planning programs, monitoring and jointly evaluating the success achieved. Through this activity, teachers and parents jointly implement the program both at home and at school and complete a monitoring form as material for discussions on further program improvements.

Understanding the stakeholders at SD Lazuardi is one of the successes in implementing inclusive education that has been carried out so far. A variety of educational provisions must be maintained in order to appropriately meet diverse needs (Leifler et al., 2021). Greater teacher self-efficacy is needed in teaching and dealing with ASD behavior so that special training for handling ASD is needed (Folostina et al., 2022; Hsiao & Sorensen Petersen, 2019; Hummerstone & Parsons, 2021; Larraceleta et al., 2022). The ability to recognize and develop programs to interact with ASD is a key aspect of good practice in relation to education for ASD (Conn, 2018), because findings show that there is not enough strong evidence regarding the effectiveness of one type of intervention approach compared to another. The implementation of inclusive education requires all staff to have a clear and shared understanding of the goals and expectations of the inclusive education that will be implemented (Eldar et al., 2010; Horrocks et al., 2008), and this must be supported by management (Horrocks et al. , 2008) including providing appropriate training (Humphrey & Symes, (2013). Without changes in attitudes and approaches throughout the organization, treatment of children with ASD will fail (Humphrey & Symes, 2013; Hyman et al., 2020; Mumbardó-Adam et al., 2021)

CONCLUSION

The Lazuardi School as an inclusive school has implemented an inclusive education policy by accepting ABK students with various categories including ASD. This school also has experience in treating various categories of ASD so many intervention methods are used. The most prominent method is DIR/Floortime Intervention combined with the Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) method. Building an inclusive culture, including supporting factors for successful handling of ASD in inclusive schools, is carried out through establishing a system of cooperation with parents and a good process of developing the abilities of teachers and all stakeholders.

Research on the models and approaches used to treat ASD in inclusive schools needs to be followed up with longer and in-depth research with more diverse ASD categories to obtain more precise information. Considering that the ASD category also has a fairly wide range, further research needs to be done on other types of ASD.

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