



## Optimizing teachers' role in developing responsibility as a social skill of autistic children in inclusive schools

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**Abstract.** Autistic children often face challenges in various aspects of social skills, particularly in demonstrating responsibility including difficulties in understanding emotional expressions, building relationships, and adapting to social norms. Inclusive education plays a crucial role in fostering their social skills, with teachers serving as primary facilitators. This study aims to explore the strategies teachers employ in guiding autistic children and identify the challenges encountered in inclusive kindergarten settings. A descriptive qualitative research method was utilized, incorporating observation, interviews, and document analysis. The data analysis process consists of three main stages, namely data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The findings reveal that teachers implement various strategies, such as role-playing, social storytelling, and positive reinforcement, to enhance the social skills of autistic children. However, several challenges persist, including limited specialized training, difficulties in balancing attention between regular and special needs students, and classroom management complexities. Therefore, greater support from schools and parents is essential to establishing a more inclusive and conducive learning environment that promotes the social development of autistic children.

## Introduction

According to the American Psychiatric Association, autistic children often experience challenges in social aspects, particularly in developing responsibility skills, such as difficulty understanding emotional expressions, building interactions, and adjusting to prevailing social norms. Despite these challenges, autistic children have the potential to improve their abilities through inclusive education that provides fair and equal opportunities for every student, regardless of physical, mental, or emotional differences (Khomalasari & Indah Lutfiatin, 2024). According to Wulandari & Hendriani (2021), inclusive education is based on the principle of providing fair and equal opportunities for every student to develop optimally, regardless of physical, mental, intellectual, social, or emotional differences. In this case, teachers play a crucial role in establishing and maintaining a learning environment that supports diversity, allowing all students to actively participate in every learning activity.

Early childhood is a critical developmental stage for children, including those in inclusive settings, to develop social interaction skills. At this phase, children begin to learn to solve problems independently through various social experiences (Nadlifah, 2016; Purnadewi & Widana, 2023). Therefore, an educational approach that is fun, inspiring and challenging is necessary for children to actively participate in learning. In addition, a supportive learning environment also plays an important role in providing opportunities for children to be creative and develop independence in accordance with their physical and emotional development (Afiyanti Putri, 2024). Thus, optimizing children's social skills is a fundamental aspect in supporting their overall growth and development.

The social skills of children aged kindergarten and PAUD are still relatively low as seen from the behaviors that arise, such as difficulty in working together, the tendency to be selfish, and the lack of ability to resolve social conflicts. This is reinforced by Dwi Pratiwi & Yuminar Priyanti (2024) which states that some children show discomfort in interacting with certain friends, while others prefer to play alone and are reluctant to accept the presence of friends in their activities so that this condition is even more complex for autistic children who often experience obstacles in understanding and responding to social norms in the surrounding environment.

The results of a preliminary study conducted at My Little Island Kindergarten showed that autistic children in an inclusive environment have two-way communication skills. However, they still experience problems in understanding the rules and ethics of communication, such as difficulty ending conversations when the other person shows signs of wanting to stop, often interrupting conversations without paying attention to their turn, and difficulty in obeying the rules set by the teacher. For example, when the teacher states that playtime is over, some autistic children insist on continuing their activities without heeding the instructions. This difficulty in understanding and adapting to rules not only affects their relationship with the teacher, but also with peers in group activities that require turn-taking and waiting skills.

In this context, the role of the teacher becomes crucial in guiding autistic children to develop better social skills. Teachers not only function as teachers, but also as facilitators who create a conducive social environment so that autistic children can learn to interact more effectively (Apriliyani et al., 2024). In addition, according to Dian Rahmawati et al. (2024), teachers also have the responsibility to provide consistent guidance in helping autistic children complete tasks, interact with friends, adjust behavior, and participate in various school activities.

This idea aligns with Vygotsky's social development theory which emphasizes that learning occurs in a social environment through interactions with more knowledgeable or competent individuals. In the context of inclusive education, interactions between autistic children, teachers and peers play an important role in developing children's social skills. The teacher acts as a facilitator who provides the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which is the zone of proximal development that allows children to learn with the help of adults or more capable peers. In this zone, children are encouraged to do activities that initially cannot be done alone, but become possible with the right help and guidance.

Furthermore, Vygotsky's theory as explained by Etnawati (2022), introduces the concept of *assisted-discovery learning*, where learning becomes more effective within a person's socio-cultural context. Through interaction with the social and physical environment, children gain knowledge and skills from direct experience and guidance from those around them. This shows the importance of active involvement of teachers and peers in assisting children with autism, so that learning is not only academic but also includes their social and emotional development.

In practice, applying this theory in inclusive classrooms requires teachers to actively observe children's initial abilities, identify their developmental potential, and design appropriate interventions through a collaborative approach (Widana et al., 2023). Teachers not only deliver materials, but also create an atmosphere that supports positive interactions and mutual learning among students. Activities such as group work, educational games, or paired discussions provide opportunities to optimize children's ZPD. Thus, Vygotsky's theory offers a strong basis for implementing humanistic and adaptive learning strategies, especially in the context of diverse student needs such as in inclusive education.

Based on the above discussion, this study aims to analyze the role of teachers in developing social skills of autistic children in inclusive classrooms through an approach based on Vygotsky's social development theory, with the hope of contributing to educational practices that are more inclusive, adaptive, and centered on the needs of learners.

## Method

This research is field research with a qualitative descriptive approach, namely research where the data is expressed in verbal form and analyzed without using statistical techniques. According to Wijaya, et al. (2023) descriptive research aims to analyze and understand specific situations, conditions, or other aspects which are then presented in the form of research reports. From this explanation, this approach was carried out by researchers to observe, explore, and describe directly the interactions that occur in the classroom, including the strategies carried out by teachers and the challenges they face in guiding autistic children. Descriptive qualitative research is particularly suitable for capturing naturally occurring phenomena without researcher intervention, thus enabling rich and in-depth data collection. This method allowed the researcher to explore aspects that cannot be measured quantitatively, such as social interactions, children's responses to teaching strategies, and classroom dynamics within an inclusive setting.

The research was conducted at Malang city, East Java. The research subjects included the manager or principal, teachers, learners, and parents of learners at the educational institution. The study focused on children aged 4-5 years diagnosed with autism disorder. Participants were selected through purposive sampling method, whereby individuals with relevant experience and understanding of the phenomenon under study were chosen to ensure the collection of meaningful and contextualized data. This approach was expected to provide a comprehensive picture of the social interactions of autistic children and the role of teachers in fostering their development.

The data collection method in this research is through three main techniques, namely observation, interviews, and document analysis (content analysis). Participatory observation was conducted with the researcher acting as a teacher's assistant to gain a deeper understanding of how teachers optimize the social skills of children with autism and how children respond to the strategies implemented. Non-participatory observations were also conducted to obtain data on children's conditions, the school environment, available facilities, and other aspects related to the learning situation at school. Meanwhile, the interview technique was used to gather information from the principal, class teachers, and parents to understand children's social interactions, obstacles faced, and strategies applied by teachers in optimizing children's social skills. Documentation was used to collect data on the history and organizational structure of the school, as well as the condition of students, teaching staff, and school staff.

The collected data were analyzed using a qualitative approach, consisting of three main stages, namely data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. At the data reduction stage, relevant information was selected, categorized, and simplified in line with the research objectives.

The reduced data were then presented in the form of descriptive narratives to describe the patterns of social interaction of autistic children and the learning strategies applied by teachers. Finally, conclusions were drawn by interpreting the research results based on relevant theories and concepts to gain a deeper understanding of the optimization of autistic children's social skills in the school environment. Data validation was conducted through triangulation techniques by cross-checking information from various sources and methods to ensure the credibility and accuracy of the research findings.

## Results and Discussion

### **Responsibility skills as part of social skills in learning activities for students with autism**

In practice, researchers observed the development of social skills in autistic children in inclusive classes with a particular emphasis on responsibility as a crucial component of those skills. The subject of observation was one autistic child allowing a deeper exploration of individual development. According to Caldarella and Merrell in [Katoro & Hertinjung \(2020\)](#), social skills consist of five main aspects, namely self-management, assertive behavior, interaction with peers, compliance, and academic achievement.

Observations were made by paying attention to how children communicate with teachers and peers, both verbally and nonverbally related to aspects of peer relationships. The researcher noted the extent to which the subject was able to greet, respond to questions, and use facial expressions or gestures to convey his wishes. From the initial observations made by the researcher, it was found that subjects often have a strong focus on topics or things they like, making it difficult to divert their attention to other ongoing activities in the classroom. This can lead to difficulties in adapting to more flexible learning schedules and social interactions. Although the subjects are able to communicate, their understanding of social norms in conversations and daily activities still needs to be improved so that they can interact more effectively with their surroundings.

In the aspect of self-regulation, especially with the ability to be responsible, the subject is still in a developmental stage which is seen in various aspects of classroom activities. When researchers conducted observation activities in group learning, subjects often needed additional guidance to understand and carry out their tasks. When given instructions, this student sometimes struggles to immediately process and carry out tasks without re-direction from the teacher or peers. In addition, in terms of waiting for their turn, this student still needs repeated reminders from the teacher in order to follow the rules in social interaction. He tends to want to do things immediately without understanding the concept of waiting or sharing roles with his friends. This can cause difficulties in group activities, especially when coordination and cooperation are required in completing a common task. For example, when washing hands before eating, the subject often wants to go straight to the sink without waiting in line, even though there are other friends who have already waited.

However, in certain conditions, the subject has shown good progress, especially in maintaining and tidying up learning tools and cutlery. He began to understand the importance of maintaining cleanliness and order after using equipment in class and when eating. For example, after finishing drawing or using stationery, he is able to put things back in place with little or no reminders from the teacher. Similarly, when eating, he can clean up the cutlery quite independently, showing awareness of his responsibility for the surrounding environment. The subject is also beginning to understand the concept of classroom rules, such as knowing what can and cannot be done. He shows compliance with basic rules, such as not taking things without permission, not talking while the teacher is explaining, and waiting for his turn before speaking in class discussions which is relevant to the compliance aspect. The formation of children's behavior develops along with their

adjustment process. In accordance with the opinion [Marjan et al. \(2020\)](#) where through certain adjustments, children gradually begin to reduce their dependence on parents and strive to become more independent, especially in adapting to their social environment, including at school.

In the aspect of academic achievement, the subject showed positive development despite some challenges ([Citrawan et al., 2024](#)). He was able to follow learning activities quite well and showed understanding of the material taught, especially in activities that were structured and in line with his interests. The subject also has a good memory for information that interests him, so in certain subjects, he is able to do tasks faster than his friends. Observations also show that the subject has developed several aspects of assertive behavior (assertion) in his social interactions in the inclusive classroom. The subject began to show courage in expressing opinions and communicating with teachers and peers. If previously the subject tended to be passive and only responded when spoken to, now the subject has the courage to ask questions to the teacher, ask for help when experiencing difficulties, and express disagreement in a way that is more polite and in accordance with social situations. Overall, both in assertive behavior and academic achievement, the subject has made significant progress, although he still needs support in several aspects in order to be more optimal in an inclusive classroom environment.

### **Social challenges faced by students with autism**

The challenge still faced in this aspect is how the subject manages the expression of his emotions when facing disagreements or when his wishes are not immediately fulfilled. Sometimes, the subject still shows impulsive behavior, such as insisting on his opinion without considering other people's points of view. Therefore, the teacher continues to provide assistance by teaching more flexible communication strategies and empathy in interacting with peers. In addition, the subject struggled in learning processes that required maintaining focus, especially on tasks that were not in line with his interests. When a given activity does not attract his attention, he is more easily distracted by other stimuli around him, both from the classroom environment and from his own thoughts. This results in delays in completing tasks and difficulties in maintaining concentration for longer periods of time. The subject also still requires guidance in organizing academic tasks. Difficulty in following instructions sequentially makes him need more assistance to understand the steps in completing tasks, especially those involving more complex stages of thinking. For example, in copying material from the blackboard, he often missed some important parts or had difficulty in copying completely and neatly. Likewise, in working on problems, the subject tends to skip the steps of solving which should be done systematically, so that the final result is not always as expected.

In general, these findings show that although autistic children experience barriers in social skills, support from the school environment, such as assistance from teachers and interaction with peers, plays a crucial role in supporting their development. This is reinforced by ([Vahedi, n.d.](#)) who states that aspects of social skills, such as compliance with rules, assertive behavior, and relationships with peers, are key factors in the success of autistic children in academic and social settings.

### **The role of teachers in guiding the social interaction of children with autism**

In an inclusive classroom environment, teachers have a crucial role in helping children with autism develop better social skills. According to ([Margaret Aurelia et al. 2024](#)), children with low social skills tend to show passivity, have a lack of self-confidence, and need guidance in developing initiatives in social interaction. Therefore, teachers not only act as academic educators, but also as facilitators who guide autistic children in understanding and applying social rules that apply in the school environment.

Based on the results of observations and interviews with classroom teachers, one of the approaches used to develop the social skills of autistic students by using the role-playing method. In this



activity, the teacher creates a real-life simulation, such as in learning about vehicle recognition, the teacher puts students in a situation at the train station to provide hands-on experience that can help students understand complex social concepts. In addition to learning about the types of vehicles and their functions, this activity allows autistic students to develop various social skills, including communication, interaction with peers, following rules, as well as understanding the concept of queuing and transactions. In addition, in classroom learning activities the teacher plays a role in creating a conducive and interesting environment for students. This can be seen during class where the teacher applies learning strategies by presenting an interactive and fun learning atmosphere by inviting students to sing to introduce new concepts, rearranging seating positions to be more flexible and support social interaction, and integrating games that are relevant to the learning material. For example, teachers invite students to sing songs about vehicles, such as cars, trains and planes, while showing pictures or miniatures of these vehicles. The song not only helps students remember the types of vehicles, but also trains them to follow the rhythm and direction of the teacher. This approach not only increases student engagement in the learning process, but also helps autistic students to be more comfortable in adapting to the classroom environment. This is in line with (Arianti, 2017) which states that when the learning process is well designed, the material taught can be more easily understood by students so that they are more motivated and interested in exploring the material provided by the teacher.

Another approach that is seen is the use of a positive reinforcement system. Teachers can give praise, rewards or positive feedback whenever children show progress in their social interactions. For example, if a child successfully shares a toy or invites a friend to play, the teacher can give appreciation that encourages the positive behavior to continue to develop. Another example is when the subject is able to answer questions or complete tasks well, the class teacher will give appreciation or reinforcement by saying, "Great, kid! You did good. Let's try again to understand more!" In this way, students become more confident and accustomed to learning independently and focusing on achievement. From these findings, it can be said that a classroom environment filled with positive support can help reduce anxiety and increase student participation in learning. These findings are reinforced by (Nurcahya & Hadijah, 2020) who state that providing reinforcement during learning creates a pleasant classroom atmosphere and increases learning effectiveness, thus encouraging students' motivation and improving their learning outcomes.

Classroom teachers also teach social skills explicitly through group discussions or telling stories about social situations that are common in the school environment. For example, teachers can read stories about how to ask for help politely or how to take turns in playing. Afterwards, students can be invited to practice these skills in a simple simulation. This approach helps autistic children to understand social concepts in a more concrete way and can be applied in everyday life. Not only that, this approach also provides a better understanding of social rules where the subject becomes more confident in interacting with peers without always relying on adults. For example, after hearing a story about how to greet friends at school, the subject began to try to greet his friends on his own initiative. Research conducted by (Apriresti & Sosialita, n.d.) also explains that through specially designed stories, children can learn to understand social rules, express themselves more clearly, and improve communication skills in the school environment and outside the classroom.

With these strategies, teachers not only build an inclusive learning environment, but also help children with autism develop social skills that are important for their lives in and out of school. This shows that the success of inclusive learning depends not only on academic methods, but also on the social support provided in the learning process.

### **Challenges by Teachers**

Based on findings from the research site, most teachers in inclusive classrooms come from a general education background and lack specialization in handling children with special needs (ABK). Consequently, they encounter various challenges in adapting teaching methods to meet the needs of all students, both regular students and those with special needs. These teachers are generally accustomed to conventional teaching approaches that are more suited to regular students, making it particularly challenging for them to adjust their instructional strategies to accommodate autistic children and other students with special needs. This aligns with the findings of (Mukti et al. 2023), which highlight that general education teachers in inclusive settings still struggle to provide individualized services for students with special needs and to fully understand their characteristics. As a result, the learning provided tends to be general and uses monotonous methods, so it has not been able to encourage the development of students' abilities optimally. In addition, teachers in inclusive classrooms must also divide their attention between regular students and students with special needs.

Additionally, in an inclusive classroom environment, teachers must divide their attention between regular students and those with special needs, including autistic children. This challenge arises because each student has unique learning needs. For instance, autistic children require additional guidance in understanding social rules and group work mechanisms, while regular students also need direction and support to ensure effective learning. When teachers focus more on autistic students, regular students may feel neglected or struggle to follow instructions, ultimately affecting their motivation and engagement in the learning process.

Psychological and emotional factors also pose significant challenges for teachers (Suhardita et al., 2024). Managing a diverse group of students with varying needs can lead to considerable emotional and mental strain. Teachers are required to maintain a high level of patience, possess strong communication skills, and effectively manage the classroom. Moreover, the demand to create an inclusive learning environment often adds an extra burden, particularly when teachers do not receive adequate support from teaching assistants or sufficient resources.

Overall, the challenges faced by teachers in inclusive classrooms include a lack of specialized expertise in handling students with special needs, difficulties in balancing attention between regular and special needs students, and psychological and emotional challenges in managing a heterogeneous classroom. Therefore, comprehensive training, expert support, and more effective classroom management strategies are essential to ensuring the successful implementation of inclusive education.

### **Environmental Support in Enhancing the Social Interaction of Autistic Children**

Environmental support plays a crucial role in improving the social interactions of autistic children in inclusive settings. Key factors contributing to their social development include support from family, teachers, and the surrounding social environment. Autistic children who receive social support from their peers are better able to adapt to classroom rules and social activities. Positive peer interactions, such as playing together, working in groups, or engaging in casual conversations, can boost their confidence in communication and participation in school activities. Observations indicate that in more complex social situations, such as group play or discussions, peers play a vital role in encouraging autistic children to engage, thereby gradually enhancing their social skills. For instance, when working together on animal drawings, peers provide clear instructions like, "Try drawing this part" or "Let's make a butterfly shape from clay." This helps autistic children understand group work dynamics and develop their social skills. These findings are supported by (Rifa'i et al. 2019), who state that peer support in school environments serves as an emotional

support system for autistic students, helping them navigate various challenges and emotional difficulties they may encounter during the learning process.

From a facilities perspective, schools have provided various resources to support inclusive learning, such as sensory-friendly classrooms, STEM Montessori rooms for concrete concept comprehension, interactive libraries, motor activity spaces, and play areas as zones for social interaction. Additionally, schools offer diverse learning media (visual, auditory, and kinesthetic) to accommodate students with different learning needs. Classroom lighting and acoustics are also designed to minimize distractions, creating a more conducive learning environment for students with sensory sensitivities. The availability of these facilities indicates that schools are not only focused on academic aspects but also prioritize comfort, accessibility, and effective learning experiences for all students in accordance with inclusive education principles.

Parents also play a critical role in fostering the social skills of autistic children. As explained by (Yulianti et al. 2024), parents act as primary facilitators who are responsible not only for fulfilling their child's basic needs but also for implementing behavioral intervention strategies that help develop social skills and independence. Interviews with parents of the study's subjects revealed that simple home strategies, such as modeling positive behaviors throwing trash in the bin and organizing learning materials after use are effective. This approach aligns with Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), which emphasizes the importance of positive reinforcement and observational learning in social skill development. When these behaviors are consistently reinforced in various situations, children begin to understand that their actions have consequences and that they play a role in maintaining order in their surroundings.

A responsive and supportive environment, both at home and school, provides opportunities for autistic children to develop daily life skills and gradually overcome social challenges. This is consistent with the findings of (Adelita et al., n.d.), who assert that positive environmental support significantly contributes to long-term social skill development in children. Therefore, fostering an environment that supports the independence of autistic children from an early age is essential in helping them reach their full potential.

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### **Limitations of the study**

This study has several limitations that should be noted in relation to optimizing the role of teachers in improving the social skills of autistic children in inclusive kindergarten settings. One of the primary limitations is the restricted subject scope, as the research involved only one autistic child in a specific inclusive school environment. Consequently, the findings are more descriptive of individual development and cannot be generalized to the entire population of autistic children with varying characteristics. Additionally, the limited duration of the study posed a challenge in observing the in-depth progression of children's social skills. The adaptation process and social skill development, such as compliance and self-management, require an extended period to yield more stable and significant results. Therefore, this study provides only an initial overview of the subject's social skill development within a specific timeframe without measuring the long-term impact of the strategies implemented by teachers.



## Conclusion

This study confirms that the role of teachers in enhancing the social skills of autistic children in inclusive kindergarten settings is crucial. Teachers serve not only as academic educators but also as facilitators of social interaction, helping autistic children understand social norms, communicate with peers, and adapt to the school environment. Various strategies have been implemented by teachers, including role-playing, storytelling using social stories, positive reinforcement systems, and the creation of a supportive learning environment. All these strategies have been shown to gradually improve the social skills of autistic children. Despite ongoing challenges, such as difficulties in maintaining focus, understanding social rules, and the need for additional support, the findings indicate that support from teachers, peers, and the school environment positively impacts the social development of autistic children. Thus, optimizing the role of teachers in inclusive education is a critical aspect of helping autistic children develop social skills, boost self-confidence, and build more effective interactions within school and society.

Based on the findings, it is recommended that teachers in inclusive kindergarten settings continue to optimize their role in guiding the social skills of autistic children through more structured and sustainable approaches. Additionally, collaboration between teachers, parents, and other educators should be strengthened to ensure consistency in social skills development both at school and at home. Schools are also encouraged to continuously foster an inclusive and autism-friendly environment by adapting facilities and providing broader opportunities for children to engage and socially adapt. Future research is suggested to explore more specific intervention methods and assess their impact in greater depth, enabling the identification of the most effective strategies for improving the social skills of autistic children in inclusive educational settings.

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