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Social Inclusion and Self-Actualization of Individuals with Autism: The Role of a Community Running Program

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Abstract: *Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) face persistent challenges in social interaction and communication, which may hinder their self-actualization. In Indonesia, these challenges are further compounded by limited access to inclusive environments and ongoing social stigma. This study examines the role of a community-based running program as an inclusive space that supports social interaction and self-actualization among individuals with ASD. A qualitative case study approach was employed, involving eight participants, including adults with ASD, parents or caregivers, and community organizers. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participatory observation, and document analysis, and analysed using the Miles and Huberman interactive model with triangulation to ensure validity. The findings indicate that participation in the running community contributes to improved social interaction, increased confidence, and greater engagement in meaningful activities. Community organizers play a critical role as social mediators, facilitating inclusion and supporting interaction between individuals with ASD and the broader community. The study also proposes a step-by-step model for developing inclusive running programs and highlights the potential of community-based approaches as cost-effective complements to clinical intervention. These findings suggest that inclusive social communities can serve as sustainable and replicable platforms for supporting the self-actualization of individuals with ASD in naturalistic settings.*

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder; Inclusion; Inclusive Social Community; Self-Actualization

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1. INTRODUCTION

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) continues to exhibit a rising prevalence globally, including in Indonesia, underscoring the urgent need for robust and inclusive support systems. Current estimates indicate that between 660,000 and 1.5 million children in Indonesia carry an ASD diagnosis, with broader projections reaching approximately 2.4 million individuals across the spectrum — figures that signal a substantial and growing demand for inclusive educational and social environments.

In response to the growing prevalence of ASD, Indonesia has enacted inclusive education policies aimed at promoting equitable access and meaningful participation for individuals with special needs, including those with ASD. Grounded in the principle of non-discrimination, these policies mandate that educational institutions accommodate neurodiverse learners within mainstream settings, reflecting a broader national commitment to social equity and human rights (UNICEF, 2013). Nevertheless, implementation remains considerably constrained. A persistent gap exists between policy aspirations and practical realities, particularly with respect to bridging formal educational settings and community-based initiatives that facilitate authentic social participation in everyday life (Epstein, 2001). Many schools continue to lack the infrastructural capacity, trained personnel, and pedagogical frameworks necessary to support individuals with ASD effectively, resulting in inclusion that is nominal rather than substantive (Intan, 2019).

A principal barrier to effective inclusion is the persistence of social stigma. Individuals with ASD are frequently misunderstood or marginalised within both educational and community contexts, curtailing opportunities for meaningful social interaction, undermining self-confidence, and restricting personal development (Goffman, 1963). Stigma not only affects the individuals themselves but also shapes the attitudes of peers, educators, and community members, thereby perpetuating exclusionary social dynamics (Ginting, 2014). Addressing this challenge necessitates approaches that extend beyond direct individual support to actively contest societal misconceptions through sustained and purposeful social engagement (Brown, 2020; Smith & Jones, 2018). Inclusive community-based participation, in particular, holds considerable promise as a mechanism for normalising neurodiversity, fostering mutual understanding, and dismantling the attitudinal barriers that continue to impede genuine social inclusion for individuals with ASD (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Dunst et al., 1994).

Community-based programmes represent a promising and underexplored pathway toward genuine inclusion. Participatory activities such as inclusive running communities create naturalistic social environments in which individuals with ASD can engage meaningfully with neurotypical peers, thereby reducing social barriers, enhancing visibility, and contributing to more equitable social dynamics.

This study is theoretically grounded in Maslow's hierarchy of needs, specifically the concept of self-A actualisation — understood, in the context of ASD, as the progressive development of self-confidence, social agency, autonomy, and the realisation of individual potential within everyday life.

Despite growing scholarly attention to inclusive practices, empirical research examining how informal, community-based activities contribute to the self-actualisation of individuals with ASD remains limited, particularly within the Indonesian context. Accordingly, this study aims to investigate how a community-based running programme functions as an inclusive space that supports social interaction, participation, and self-actualisation among individuals with ASD.

2. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore the lived experiences of adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and the role of a social running community in supporting their self-actualisation. This design was selected to enable an in-depth understanding of social interactions, dynamics, and contextual factors within a naturalistic, real-life setting.

The study was conducted within the RUN community, a general social running group that adopts an inclusive approach and welcomes neurodiverse individuals. This site was purposively selected due to its active involvement of individuals with ASD and its diverse, ongoing activities that facilitate organic social interaction. Crucially, as the community was not established exclusively for individuals with ASD, it provides a contextually rich environment in which to examine inclusion within a non-segregated, naturalistic

setting. Eight participants were involved, comprising three adults with ASD, three parents or caregivers, and two community organisers. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on active community engagement, with variations in age, gender, and social background considered to capture diverse perspectives. Sample size was determined by data saturation, whereby no new themes emerged from subsequent data collection.

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, non-participatory observation, and document analysis. Interviews explored participants' experiences, motivations, and perceived benefits of community involvement. To ensure autism-friendly procedures, the researcher employed clear and concrete language, permitted flexible response time, and conducted interviews in settings chosen by participants for their comfort. Visual and contextual prompts were utilised where necessary, and caregivers were present in some instances to support communication whilst maintaining the centrality of perspectives of individuals with ASD. These adaptations were designed to reduce anxiety, enhance comfort, and ensure authentic self-expression.

Non-participatory observation was conducted over six months, encompassing routine and non-routine activities including running sessions, social gatherings, group travel, and informal interactions. The researcher maintained a non-interventionist observational stance, systematically recording field notes to capture social interaction patterns, participation levels, communication dynamics, and forms of community support.

Document analysis further incorporated community records, activity documentation, and visual materials such as photographs, with multiple data sources enabling triangulation and enhancing the credibility of findings.

Data validity was established through methodological and source triangulation, member checking, and an audit trail. Member checking confirmed the accuracy and authenticity of findings, whilst the researcher engaged in sustained reflexive practice to minimise interpretive bias.

Data analysis followed Miles and Huberman's interactive model, encompassing data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Coding and categorisation were conducted systematically, followed by thematic organisation to support interpretation. Conclusions were drawn iteratively and continuously verified throughout the analytical process, ultimately yielding key themes pertaining to social inclusion, participation, and self-actualisation.

Given the involvement of vulnerable participants, ethical considerations were rigorously observed. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with additional support from parents or caregivers where required. Participants were fully apprised of the study's purpose, their right to withdraw at any time, and the confidentiality of their data.

All identities were anonymised through the use of pseudonyms, and data collection was conducted in a respectful, flexible, and non-intrusive manner to minimise potential psychological discomfort, particularly for participants with ASD.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The analysis generated several interrelated themes that illustrate how participation in a social running community supports the self-actualization of adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). These findings are derived from the triangulation of interviews, non-participatory observations, and document analysis, providing a comprehensive understanding of both individual and social dynamics within the community context.

1. Community Support and Social Interaction Development

Participation in the running community was associated with observable improvements in social interaction among individuals with ASD. At the initial stage, interactions were primarily limited to familiar individuals, such as parents, caregivers, or specific community members. Over time, however, participants began to engage more actively with non-ASD peers through simple greetings, participation in group conversations, and involvement in shared activities.

This progression reflects not only increased social exposure but also the gradual development of confidence and social adaptability. For instance, several participants who initially avoided direct interaction began to respond to greetings and eventually initiated brief conversations during or after running sessions. These small but consistent changes indicate a shift from passive presence to active participation within the social environment.

The repetitive and low-pressure nature of community activities enabled participants to practice communication in a natural and meaningful context. Unlike structured therapeutic settings, the community provided real-life social situations where learning occurred organically through participation rather than instruction. This aligns with previous research suggesting that naturalistic environments can be more effective in promoting generalizable social skills among individuals with ASD.

From a theoretical perspective, this aligns with the concept of self-actualization, where supportive and accepting environments allow individuals to explore and realize their potential. The findings suggest that consistent social engagement within an inclusive community can function as an informal yet effective mechanism for social skill development, particularly when supported by repetition, predictability, and social acceptance.

2. The Role of Community Organizers as Social Mediators

Community organizers played a critical role as mediators who facilitated interaction between individuals with ASD and the broader community. Their role extended beyond logistical coordination to include initiating social engagement, modelling inclusive behaviour, and providing subtle guidance during interactions.

In practice, organizers often initiated interactions by introducing participants to one another, encouraging joint participation, or maintaining inclusive group dynamics during activities. This proactive yet informal facilitation helped reduce initial social barriers, particularly for individuals who were hesitant to engage independently.

By acting as social bridges, organizers supported individuals with ASD in navigating complex and often unpredictable social situations. This mediation was especially important during early participation stages, where individuals required additional support to interpret social cues and respond appropriately. Over time, as participants became more comfortable, the level of mediation decreased, indicating increased independence.

The presence of organizers also contributed to the creation of a psychologically safe environment. This sense of safety reduced anxiety and uncertainty, which are commonly experienced by individuals with ASD in social settings. As a result, participants were more willing to engage, experiment with interaction, and remain involved over time. These findings highlight that inclusion is not solely dependent on individual readiness, but also on the presence of facilitative roles that actively shape inclusive social environments.

3. A Step-by-Step Model for Developing Inclusive Running Communities

The analysis yielded several interrelated themes illustrating how participation in a social running community supports the self-actualisation of adults with ASD, derived from the triangulation of interviews, non-participatory observations, and document analysis. Participation was associated with observable improvements in social interaction, as individuals who initially confined engagement to familiar persons gradually initiated exchanges with neurotypical peers through greetings, group conversations, and shared activities — reflecting a discernible shift from passive presence to active social participation facilitated by the repetitive and low-pressure nature of community activities. Community organisers played a pivotal mediating role, extending beyond logistical coordination to initiating engagement, modelling inclusive behaviour, and cultivating psychologically safe environments that mitigated anxiety and progressively fostered participant independence. Drawing upon these dynamics, the study proposes a replicable seven-step inclusive running model encompassing: establishing an inclusive vision; preparing neurodiversity-informed facilitators; designing flexible and non-competitive activities; enabling gradual participation; fostering organic peer interaction; maintaining routine and consistency; and integrating social, physical, and recreational elements — all without requiring specialised infrastructure, thereby ensuring adaptability across diverse contexts. The community-based approach further demonstrated value as a cost-effective complement to clinical intervention, affording continuous real-life social interaction that extends therapeutic benefits into everyday life and enhances skill generalisation, consistent with ecological perspectives in inclusive education.

Activity mapping revealed that distinct participatory experiences contributed to different self-actualisation dimensions: group running fostered confidence and routine formation; warm-up interactions improved social communication; group travel enhanced adaptability and independence; informal discussions developed expressive communication; and event participation cultivated self-efficacy and achievement. Notwithstanding these gains, challenges persisted, including initial anxiety, sensory discomfort, variable community awareness, and heterogeneous rates of adaptation among participants, collectively affirming that inclusion constitutes an ongoing and dynamic process requiring continuous efforts to strengthen facilitative roles, refine strategies, and sustain meaningful participation over time.

4. Community-Based Approach as a Cost-Effective Complement to Clinical Intervention

The findings indicate that the community-based model serves as a cost-effective and accessible complement to clinical therapy. Unlike clinical interventions that often require professional services, structured sessions, and significant financial resources, community participation relies on existing social structures and low-cost activities.

This approach reduces financial barriers by minimizing the need for specialized facilities, professional fees, and formal program enrollment. In addition, participation is typically voluntary and flexible, allowing individuals to engage without the pressure often associated with formal therapeutic environments.

At the same time, the community provides continuous opportunities for real-life social interaction, which are often limited in clinical settings due to time constraints and structured formats. This continuity allows individuals with ASD to practice and reinforce skills in authentic contexts, increasing the likelihood of skill generalization.

While this model does not replace clinical therapy, it extends therapeutic benefits into everyday life. The integration of social interaction, physical activity, and emotional support within a community setting enables sustained engagement over time. This finding is consistent with broader perspectives in inclusive education, which emphasize the importance of ecological and community-based approaches in supporting long-term development.

5. Mapping Running Activities to Self-Actualization Outcomes

To further clarify the relationship between community activities and individual development, the following table presents a mapping of running-related activities to observed self-actualization outcomes:

Table 1 maps the running activities to the observed self-actualization outcomes.

Table 1. Mapping Running Activities and Self-Actualization Outcomes

No	Running Activities	Observed Outcomes
1	Group running sessions	Increased confidence and routine formation
2	Warm-up and cool-down interactions	Improved social communication skills
3	Group travel and events	Enhanced adaptability and independence
4	Informal discussions	Development of expressive communication
5	Participation in races/events	Sense of achievement and self-efficacy

The table demonstrates that different types of activities contribute to distinct dimensions of self-actualization. Physical activities, when embedded within a social context, become a medium for psychological and social development rather than merely physical exercise.

6. Challenges and Limitations in Community Participation

Despite the positive outcomes, several challenges were identified. Some individuals with ASD experienced initial anxiety, difficulty adapting to group dynamics, and sensory discomfort, particularly in crowded or unpredictable environments. These challenges were most evident during large events or unfamiliar activities, where environmental stimuli were less controlled.

In addition, varying levels of awareness among community members occasionally led to miscommunication or reduced engagement. For example, some participants reported hesitation in interacting due to uncertainty about appropriate communication approaches. This highlights the importance of broader community awareness in supporting inclusive participation.

Participation was also not uniform across individuals. While some participants adapted relatively quickly, others required longer adjustment periods and more consistent support. This variation reflects the heterogeneity of ASD and indicates that inclusive programs must remain flexible and responsive to individual needs.

These findings emphasize that inclusion is an ongoing and dynamic process rather than a fixed outcome. Continuous efforts are needed to improve awareness, adapt strategies, and strengthen facilitative roles within the community. Addressing these challenges is essential to ensure that participation remains meaningful, supportive, and sustainable over time.

4. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This study underscores the significant role of community-based activities in supporting the self-actualisation of individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), particularly through opportunities for

meaningful social interaction, confidence development, and participation in naturalistic settings. The findings highlight the need for more deliberate and structured collaboration between schools and local sports or community-based organisations, enabling students with ASD to access inclusive, real-life environments that extend social and adaptive learning beyond the classroom. Parents likewise occupy a critical facilitating role, whether by identifying or intentionally cultivating safe spaces within public activities — environments characterised by acceptance, predictable routines, and supportive social interaction. Where such environments are not readily accessible, parents are encouraged to initiate small-scale, structured, and inclusive activities that progressively support their children's engagement with broader social contexts.

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