

THE ROLE OF PEERS IN SUPPORTING THE LEARNING OF STUDENTS WITH VISION DISABILITIES IN INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

Blind students in inclusive college classes face various challenges, especially in accessing visual materials and actively participating in the learning process. Based on these problems, this study aims to examine the role of peers in supporting the learning of students with visual impairments in higher education environments. This study uses a qualitative, phenomenological approach to explore the subjective experiences of non-disabled students who accompany blind students. The subject of the study was a student in the Special Education Study Program who actively assisted his blind friend with academic and social activities in an inclusive class. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and observations, then analyzed using the interactive analysis model of Miles and Huberman. The results showed that peers provided support across academic (e.g., explaining visual materials and providing digital notes), emotional (e.g., increasing self-confidence), social (e.g., serving as a discussion partner), and technical (e.g., campus navigation) domains. The conclusion of this study shows that peers play a significant role in creating an inclusive learning environment, supporting academic success, and strengthening social relationships among blind students in higher education.

Keywords: blind students; inclusive learning; peers; social support.

Abstrak

Mahasiswa tunanetra di kelas inklusif perguruan tinggi menghadapi berbagai tantangan, terutama dalam mengakses materi visual dan berpartisipasi aktif dalam proses pembelajaran. Berdasarkan permasalahan tersebut, penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji peran teman sebaya dalam mendukung pembelajaran mahasiswa dengan hambatan penglihatan di lingkungan pendidikan tinggi. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode fenomenologi untuk menggali pengalaman subjektif dari mahasiswa non-disabilitas yang mendampingi mahasiswa tunanetra. Subjek penelitian adalah seorang mahasiswa Program Studi Pendidikan Luar Biasa yang secara aktif membantu teman tunanetranya dalam kegiatan akademik dan sosial di kelas inklusif. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam dan observasi, kemudian dianalisis menggunakan model analisis interaktif Miles dan Huberman. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa teman sebaya memberikan dukungan yang mencakup aspek akademik (seperti menjelaskan materi visual dan menyediakan catatan digital), emosional (meningkatkan rasa percaya diri), sosial (menjadi teman diskusi), dan teknis (navigasi kampus). Simpulan dari penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa peran teman sebaya berkontribusi signifikan dalam menciptakan lingkungan belajar yang inklusif, mendukung keberhasilan akademik, serta memperkuat relasi sosial mahasiswa tunanetra di perguruan tinggi.

Kata kunci: dukungan sosial; mahasiswa tunanetra; pembelajaran inklusif; teman sebaya.

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INTRODUCTION

Education is a long journey that becomes inseparable from human life, from conception through life. Aisyah (2014) added that every individual, male or female, child or adult, with or without special needs, has the right to education. The government is pushing for equal education, focusing not only on normal children but also on children with special needs. Regarding the national education system, Law Number 20 of 2003, Article 5, paragraph 1, states, "Every citizen has the same right to receive a quality education." The education system is an institution with a significant responsibility to provide the best educational services for all future generations of the nation.

Currently, inclusive education inspires children with special needs to maximize their potential in the classroom, alongside normal children in general. According to the principles of inclusive education, all students, regardless of their diverse abilities and backgrounds, are recognized as part of the school community (Peebles & Mendagio, 2014). The inclusive education system is stipulated in the Minister of National Education Regulation No. 70 of 2009 concerning Inclusive Education for Students with Disabilities and Potential Intelligence and/or Special Talents, which explains the implementation of inclusive education and its students. Beyond the Minister of National Education Regulation, both government systems and various declarations worldwide have regulated the implementation of inclusive education systems at the tertiary level. This is done to achieve the quality of education stipulated in the Salamanca Declaration, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Minister of Research, Technology, and Higher Education Regulation No. 46 of 2017, Article 31 of the 1945 Constitution, and the Law on the Enforcement of Human Rights.

The establishment of inclusive education at various levels of education, up to higher education, is considered to have provided extraordinary benefits, especially for individuals with special needs. They benefit not only in the form of equal opportunities in education, but also in the form of equal opportunities for education. Students' needs are met according to their level of need, for example, positive attitudes develop through interactions with friends and peer collaboration (Jauhari, 2017). Schools are institutions and significant assets responsible for producing the nation's next generation of qualified individuals. Special schools provide various facilities for students to achieve optimal development according to their level and type. In reality, various challenges exist in supporting children in achieving their development. These challenges include children with special needs who are visually impaired, who often withdraw from interacting with their peers, yet are academically competent. These challenges can lead to a lack of confidence in blind children.

This visual disability can pose various challenges in various aspects of their lives. This is in line with Hoover's opinion (in Okonkwo et al., 2017), who identified several challenges for blind people adjusting to sight loss. Furthermore, there are challenges frequently faced by blind people, including educational, social, emotional, and health challenges. According to (Omede & Tenimu, 2013), blind people experience difficulties in seeing, which requires the use of special learning methods or adaptations to materials and the need for special equipment for learning. All of these challenges can be

anticipated through educational services, guidance, and mentoring so that any challenges that arise can be addressed as early as possible.

Research by Kurniawati, Faizah, and Ulifa (2018) found that having friends who support children with special needs is an effective educational approach, motivating them to learn. This will benefit both regular students and students with special needs, as well as the environment, society, and education. The aforementioned research aligns with that of Novita and Resnia (2017), who stated that social support is crucial, especially for individuals with physical disabilities, as it can provide additional assistance with daily activities. Thus, peer support creates a sense of belonging with a shared friend, enabling them to engage in activities filled with creativity, mutual support, comfort, and security, and fostering a sense of identity for each individual.

Based on the above description, it can be concluded that peer social support plays a crucial role in the social well-being of blind individuals. Support is not only received from parents; support from peers is also crucial for blind students. This allows individuals to feel more accepted and valued by others. Especially for blind students, they really need social support from their peers to help them improve their academic potential at university.

METHOD

This research employed a qualitative case study approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the role of peers in supporting the learning of students with visual impairments in inclusive higher education classrooms. The study subjects consisted of students with visual impairments actively attending lectures at a state university in Surakarta, as well as peers directly involved in the mentoring process, both academically and socially. Participants were selected purposively based on their active involvement in inclusive learning activities.

The research procedure began with observations of the campus environment to identify relevant subjects. Subsequently, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with students with visual impairments and their peers using an interview guide developed based on the research objectives. In addition to the interviews, the researchers observed interactions among the subjects during the learning process and collected supporting documents related to the university's inclusive education policies and practices.

The primary instruments used in this study were a semi-structured interview guide and an observation sheet. The interview guide included questions about the forms of peer support, students with visual impairments' experiences receiving support, peers' perceptions of their role, and factors influencing the effectiveness of the support. Observation sheets were used to record interactions and support that occurred during the learning activities. The data obtained was analyzed thematically, starting with transcribing interviews, coding data, identifying common themes, and drawing conclusions. Data validity was maintained through source triangulation and participant confirmation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Peers play a crucial role in supporting student learning in inclusive classrooms through various forms of academic, emotional, and practical support. Academic support often takes the form of assistance understanding course material, sharing notes, or assisting with group assignments. Peers also frequently provide emotional support, including encouragement and building self-confidence in students with special needs. Sarafino (2011) defines social support as encompassing informational, emotional, and instrumental assistance that can contribute to individual well-being. Therefore, this type of support facilitates students with visual impairments' adaptation and optimal learning.

Motivation is a form of concern from peers for students with visual impairments, which helps create an equitable learning environment. Most students voluntarily participate actively in mentoring their peers without coercion through local institutions. Davis (1994) argues that empathy, both cognitive and affective, is a key driver for individuals providing assistance to others. Support that begins with empathy tends to be genuine and sustainable. Therefore, it is crucial for the university environment to foster empathy among all students.

The role of peers is crucial, but its implementation faces several challenges. This is evidenced by a lack of understanding of the needs of students with visual impairments and the emergence of negative stereotypes. Most students feel hesitant when interacting with peers with visual impairments. This hesitancy stems from concerns about communication errors. Goffman (1959), in his symbolic interaction theory, explains that individuals often manage social impressions during interactions, which can influence openness and comfort. This lack of understanding can hinder inclusive interactions. Therefore, a more comprehensive approach is needed within the university environment to ensure the sustainable structure of peer roles.

CONCLUSION

Based on research, peers play a crucial role in supporting the learning of visually impaired students in inclusive higher education classrooms. Peers play a significant role in supporting the learning of visually impaired students in inclusive higher education classrooms. The support provided encompasses academic, emotional, social, and technical aspects, which directly impact the increased participation, self-confidence, and academic success of visually impaired students. The presence of peers not only facilitates the learning process but also creates an inclusive, empathetic, and collaborative environment. While challenges such as stereotypes and a lack of understanding of the needs of visually impaired students persist, these can be addressed through a systematic approach and increased awareness within the higher education environment. Therefore, the active involvement of peers needs to be continuously encouraged to strengthen inclusivity and equality in higher education.

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