

## Developing self-development skills in autistic children at Sidikalang State SLB

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims to describe the implementation of the self-development program for autistic children at Sidikalang State Special School (SLB Negeri), including the teaching strategies applied, challenges encountered, and efforts undertaken to address those challenges. A descriptive qualitative approach was employed, with teachers and autistic students serving as research subjects. Data were collected through observations and in-depth interviews and analyzed using descriptive techniques. The findings reveal that the self-development program is systematically integrated into scheduled learning activities to foster students' independence in daily living skills. Teachers implement various strategies, including structured teaching, visual media, modeling, repetitive practice, positive reinforcement, and collaboration with parents. The implementation process, however, faces several challenges, such as difficulties in understanding instructions, limited attention span, repetitive behaviors, low motivation, and inadequate facilities. To overcome these barriers, teachers simplify instructions, provide direct demonstrations, utilize engaging visual media, consistently reinforce positive behaviors, and strengthen communication with parents. The study concludes that a structured and consistent self-development program supported by appropriate instructional strategies and active parental involvement can effectively enhance the independence of autistic children in performing daily activities.

**Keyword:** self-development; autistic children; independence; learning strategies; SLB

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Education is a conscious and planned process designed to help students develop their potential, including knowledge, attitudes, and skills, enabling them to live independently and responsibly. More broadly, education takes place not only in schools but also within families and communities. It encompasses learning processes, guidance, and experiences that shape a person's personality.

All human beings naturally have various needs, including children with special needs. One of these needs is education. By fulfilling their educational needs, children with special needs are expected to be able to care for themselves and become independent rather than relying on others. Children with special needs (ABK) are children with unique characteristics that differ from those of other children. In other words, they may experience mental, emotional, physical, or developmental disabilities. ABK includes children with visual impairments, hearing impairments, intellectual disabilities, physical disabilities, emotional and behavioral disorders, autism, learning difficulties, and behavioral problems.

Interaction between students with special needs and teachers requires continuous communication, including a process of mutual motivation. Barriers and challenges in these interactions often arise from misunderstandings between teachers and students with special needs. On the other hand, teachers provide support by creating inclusive learning environments that facilitate students' educational development. The dynamics of interpersonal interactions between teachers and students with special needs, including

communication difficulties, are influenced by the presence of both regular students and students with special needs in inclusive classrooms (Sibarani, 2024).

Autism is a developmental disorder that affects communication skills, social interactions, and individual behavior (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Children with autism often experience difficulty performing daily activities independently, such as eating, dressing, and maintaining personal hygiene. Independence is a crucial aspect of child development because it is closely related to the ability to adapt to social life (Hallahan & Kauffman, 2014). Poor self-development skills in children with autism can lead to a high level of dependence on others. Therefore, special schools have a strategic role in developing self-development skills through systematic and structured programs. Self-development programs are designed to help children achieve independence through repeated and gradual practice (Delphie, 2006). Several studies have shown that the use of appropriate methods, such as visual learning and repetitive practice, can improve self-development skills in autistic children (Hume et al., 2012; Wong et al., 2015). Therefore, this study was conducted to examine the development of self-development skills in autistic children in special education schools.

Mangungsong (2009) also stated that students with special needs are children who require modifications to school assignments, learning methods, and other related services aimed at developing their potential or capacity to the fullest. Ormrod (2009) stated that students with special needs are students who differ from their peers and require practical materials and support to facilitate their adaptation. Some characteristics of students with poor social skills include the inability to adapt their behavior to different situations and conditions, difficulty controlling aggressive behavior, and socially unacceptable behavior. The term *students with special needs* refers to learners who require assistance tailored to their abilities and limitations to develop their full potential. Therefore, autistic children also need specialized educational services to help them become independent individuals who are capable of taking responsibility for themselves.

## 2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to provide an in-depth understanding of the implementation process of a self-development program for autistic children at Sidikalang State Special School (SLB Negeri Sidikalang). The study was conducted at Sidikalang State Special School over a period of approximately three months, from January to March 2024. The participants consisted of three teachers who work with autistic children and five autistic students participating in the self-development program. Informants were selected using a purposive sampling technique, in which individuals who were considered knowledgeable and directly involved in the implementation of the self-development program at the school were chosen.

The focus of this study included the implementation of the self-development program, the strategies employed by teachers to develop self-development skills in autistic children, the obstacles encountered during program implementation, and the efforts made to overcome these obstacles. Data were collected through direct observation and in-depth interviews. Observations focused on self-development activities, such as eating, dressing, and maintaining personal hygiene. In-depth interviews were conducted with teachers to obtain information regarding the teaching methods and strategies used, the challenges encountered, and the solutions implemented in carrying out the self-development program.

The collected data were analyzed using the qualitative data analysis model proposed by Miles and Huberman, which consists of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. To ensure the validity of the data, the researchers employed source and technique triangulation by comparing information obtained from observations and interviews with the informants. In addition, member checking was conducted with the informants to verify that the findings accurately reflected the actual conditions in the field.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### A. *Implementation of the Self-Development Program for Autistic Children at Sidikalang State Special School*

Self-development activities are designed to help individuals, especially children, develop the ability to function independently without relying on others, particularly in self-care and daily living skills. These skills include maintaining personal hygiene, eating, dressing, and performing other daily activities. At Sidikalang State Special School (SLB Negeri Sidikalang), self-development activities aim to foster independence among autistic students. The self-development program is incorporated into the school learning schedule and is conducted for two hours per week. Common activities include teaching students how to brush their teeth, wash their hands, clean the classroom, tie their shoelaces, and eat independently without assistance.

Teachers provide step-by-step instructions and adopt an individualized approach tailored to each child's abilities. Each activity is practiced repeatedly and progressively to strengthen learning outcomes.

Furthermore, teachers provide direct demonstrations (modeling) before asking children to perform the activities independently, as this method has proven to be more effective for autistic learners.

### **B. Teacher Strategies in Developing Self-Development Skills**

In implementing the self-development program for autistic children at Sidikalang State Special School, teachers employ various strategies that are adapted to the characteristics and individual needs of the students. These strategies include:

#### 1) Structured Teaching

Structured teaching is a systematically designed strategy that organizes self-development activities into clear, consistent, and sequential steps that are easy for autistic children to understand. In practice, teachers organize each activity based on the principles of orderliness, explicit instructions, and planned repetition. Each self-development skill, such as hand washing and dressing, is explained using simple and understandable language.

Furthermore, structured teaching is supported by the use of consistent activity schedules, both visual and verbal, to provide predictable routines. A clear structure helps reduce confusion and anxiety among autistic children. As a result, when learning activities are easier to understand, children's ability to focus also improves.

Teachers must also ensure that the learning environment is comfortable and conducive so that students can participate more effectively. Through this approach, learning becomes more organized, encourages positive habits, and gradually enhances children's independence.

#### 2) Use of Visual Media

The use of visual media is a highly effective strategy in teaching self-development skills to autistic children because they generally process visual information more effectively than verbal instructions. Visual media help children understand, remember, and follow the steps involved in self-development activities. Such media may include pictures, activity cards, symbols, photographs, or visual schedules that systematically illustrate the sequence of activities. In self-development learning, visual media serve as practical guides that enable children to complete tasks without relying solely on verbal instructions from teachers.

Furthermore, visual media help reduce anxiety and improve children's concentration by making activities more predictable and structured. Consequently, they not only facilitate the learning process but also play an important role in enhancing the independence and self-confidence of autistic children in carrying out daily activities.

#### 3) Modeling Method (Providing Direct Examples)

The modeling method is a learning strategy that involves providing children with direct demonstrations of the self-development activities they are expected to perform. In this approach, the teacher acts as a model by demonstrating each step of an activity concretely so that autistic children can observe and imitate it. Modeling is particularly effective because autistic children often learn more successfully through observation (observational learning) than through verbal explanations alone. Therefore, teachers demonstrate each activity clearly, slowly, and repeatedly to facilitate children's understanding.

For example, when teaching children to put on their shoes, the teacher first demonstrates how to position the shoes correctly, insert the feet, and adjust them properly. Afterward, the child is encouraged to imitate the demonstrated steps with guidance when necessary. Teachers may combine modeling with other techniques, such as prompting (providing assistance) and fading (gradually reducing assistance), to promote independence. Modeling can also involve peer modeling, in which children learn by observing classmates who have already mastered the targeted skill, thereby increasing motivation and self-confidence.

#### 4) Drill and Repetition

Drill and repetition is a learning strategy that involves practicing a skill continuously and consistently until it becomes a habit for autistic children. This strategy is essential because autistic children generally require more time to understand, remember, and master new skills than typically developing children. Therefore, repetition plays a central role in the self-development learning process.

Practice is carried out routinely in similar situations to help children recognize activity patterns and remember the sequence of steps. For example, handwashing activities are conducted at the same time and in the same location using consistent procedures, enabling children to develop a stable and structured understanding.

Furthermore, drill and repetition strengthen memory, improve accuracy and independence in performing activities, and reduce errors during task completion. Through focused and continuous practice,

children gradually become capable of performing self-development skills independently, thereby achieving the primary objective of developing independence.

#### 5) Positive Reinforcement

Positive reinforcement is a learning strategy that involves providing appreciation or rewards whenever children display the expected behavior, particularly while performing self-development activities. The purpose of this strategy is to strengthen positive behaviors and encourage children to repeat them consistently.

Reinforcement may take various forms, including verbal praise (e.g., "Good job" or "Excellent"), nonverbal expressions such as smiles or applause, small rewards, or opportunities to participate in preferred activities. The type of reinforcement should be tailored to each child's interests and characteristics to maximize its effectiveness. Positive reinforcement should be provided immediately after the child successfully completes the expected activity so that the relationship between the behavior and its consequence is clearly understood. Consistency in providing reinforcement is also essential for promoting positive behavioral development.

As children's abilities improve, reinforcement can gradually be reduced to encourage intrinsic motivation rather than dependence on external rewards. Thus, positive reinforcement not only enhances children's motivation and self-confidence but also contributes significantly to fostering independence in self-development activities.

#### 6) Collaboration with Parents

Collaboration between teachers and parents is a crucial component in developing self-development skills in autistic children because the learning process extends beyond the school environment and must be consistently reinforced at home. Through effective collaboration, children receive continuous stimulation that supports the optimal development of their skills. Parents play an important role in reinforcing the activities taught at school, including independent eating, dressing, maintaining personal hygiene, and other daily living skills. Consistency between school- and home-based learning helps children understand and master these skills more effectively.

Furthermore, effective communication between teachers and parents is essential for monitoring children's progress. Teachers can provide information regarding children's abilities, achievements, and challenges encountered at school, while parents can share observations about their children's development at home. Through this ongoing communication, both parties can determine the most appropriate strategies based on each child's individual needs. Consequently, collaboration between teachers and parents makes the development of self-development skills more focused, consistent, and effective, ultimately enhancing the independence and overall quality of life of autistic children.

### **C. Barriers to Self-Development**

In implementing self-development programs for children with autism, various obstacles may affect the effectiveness of the learning process. Therefore, teachers need to understand these challenges in order to determine appropriate strategies for overcoming them.

#### 1) Difficulty Understanding Instructions

Children with autism often experience difficulties understanding instructions, particularly those that are verbal or abstract. As a result, they may struggle to follow the steps involved in self-development activities correctly. Therefore, it is important to use simple and clear language supported by visual media to make instructions easier to understand. Since autistic children often have difficulty maintaining attention during communication, instructions should be delivered gradually and systematically to facilitate comprehension.

#### 2) Limited Attention Span

Autistic children generally have a limited attention span, making them easily distracted by their surroundings. This condition can hinder the learning process, particularly when activities require sustained focus through multiple stages. A conducive learning environment with minimal distractions is essential for improving children's concentration. Since environmental factors significantly influence the learning process of autistic children, teachers should provide a comfortable, organized, and supportive classroom environment.

#### 3) Repetitive Behavior

Repetitive behavior is a common characteristic of children with autism and can become a barrier to learning. Children often focus repeatedly on specific activities, making it difficult to redirect their attention to the self-development tasks being taught. Such behaviors may include hand flapping, spinning objects, or repeatedly performing certain actions without a clear purpose.

These repetitive behaviors often arise as responses to anxiety, boredom, or specific sensory needs. Therefore, teachers need to understand the underlying causes before determining appropriate management

strategies. Rather than simply attempting to stop the behavior, teachers should redirect children toward more functional activities.

To address this challenge, teachers can implement behavior management strategies such as providing positive reinforcement when children successfully shift their attention, using appropriate distractions, and gradually redirecting them to self-development activities. In addition, structured alternative activities can be provided to meet children's needs without disrupting the learning process. Through appropriate and consistent management, repetitive behaviors can be minimized, enabling children to participate more effectively in self-development activities and gradually achieve greater independence.

4) Lack of Motivation

Some autistic children demonstrate limited interest or motivation in self-development activities, particularly when these activities are perceived as difficult or uninteresting. This may result in reluctance or refusal to participate in learning. Therefore, strategies such as positive reinforcement and the use of engaging instructional media are needed to increase children's motivation and participation.

5) Limited Facilities and Infrastructure

Insufficient supporting facilities, including learning aids and visual media, also present obstacles to the implementation of self-development programs. Such limitations may reduce the effectiveness of learning by restricting opportunities to provide concrete and meaningful learning experiences for autistic children.

Overall, these challenges create difficulties for teachers in achieving the objectives of self-development learning. Consequently, creativity, patience, and appropriate instructional strategies are required to ensure that the learning process remains effective and responsive to children's needs.

**D. Efforts to Overcome Barriers**

To overcome the various obstacles encountered in implementing self-development programs for autistic children, teachers apply several strategies tailored to the individual needs and characteristics of each child. These efforts are implemented systematically and consistently to ensure the effectiveness of the learning process.

1) Using Simple and Easy-to-Understand Language

Teachers deliver instructions using short, clear, and concrete sentences to facilitate children's understanding. The use of simple language helps reduce confusion, while verbal instructions are often accompanied by gestures or visual aids to reinforce comprehension.

2) Providing Direct Demonstrations

Teachers directly demonstrate each step involved in self-development activities, such as washing hands or getting dressed. These demonstrations are performed slowly and repeatedly, allowing children to observe and imitate the actions more easily. This strategy is particularly effective because autistic children tend to learn through observation.

3) Using Engaging Learning Media

Teachers utilize learning media such as pictures, activity cards, and other visual materials to capture children's attention and maintain their focus. Engaging media also help children understand the sequence of activities in a more concrete and meaningful way.

4) Providing Consistent Positive Reinforcement

Teachers provide praise or other forms of appreciation whenever children successfully complete self-development activities. This reinforcement aims to increase motivation and strengthen positive behaviors. Consistency in providing reinforcement is essential to help children develop and maintain appropriate habits.

5) Collaborating with Parents

Teachers maintain regular communication with parents to ensure that self-development exercises are also practiced at home. Parents play an important role in reinforcing the habits taught at school, allowing children to receive continuous and consistent stimulation across different environments.

These efforts are implemented continuously to minimize obstacles and to support the optimal development of self-development skills in children with autism.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings, the self-development program at Sidikalang State Special School (SLB Negeri Sidikalang) has been implemented in a structured manner to enhance the independence of autistic children in performing daily activities. The program is carried out through various activities supported by instructional strategies such as structured teaching, the use of visual media, modeling, drill and repetition,

positive reinforcement, and collaboration between teachers and parents. The implementation of these strategies enables students to develop self-development skills according to their individual abilities.

The findings also indicate that the implementation of the program continues to face several challenges, including difficulties in understanding instructions, limited attention span, repetitive behaviors, low learning motivation, and inadequate supporting facilities. These challenges are addressed through the use of simple and understandable language, direct demonstrations, engaging visual media, consistent positive reinforcement, and ongoing communication and collaboration with parents.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that the success of the self-development program is strongly influenced by the appropriateness of the instructional strategies employed, the support provided by the school environment, and active parental involvement in fostering children's independence. Future studies are encouraged to investigate the effectiveness of each instructional strategy in greater depth using a broader range of participants and research settings. This study is limited by its relatively small sample size and its focus on a single special school, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other educational contexts serving autistic children.

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