



## Social Skills of Students with Disabilities at Elementary Level in Inclusive School Setting

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.18415/ijmmu.v6i1.489>

### **Abstract**

Social skills evidently played an important role for students to develop their lives as individuals and members of society, citizens and members of mankind. The objectives of this research were to find out the level of social skill among students with disabilities at the elementary level in inclusive school and to discover the dispersion of social skills level of students by their disability categories. Data were collected from teachers to rate the social skills students with disabilities using a 4-point Likert questionnaire. The research findings indicated that students with disabilities' mean score were 44.45 from minimum 30 and maximum 63, which is closest to the minimum. The levels of social skills' student with disabilities tend to the fair to very poor level (82.5%). Effective social skills instruction, such as intensive social skills training is required to enhance the level of social skills of students with disabilities in inclusive school.

**Keywords:** Social Skills; Students with Disabilities; Inclusive School Setting; Bullying-Related Social Skills

### **Introduction**

The goal of education is to prepare and develop the lives of children as individuals and members of society, citizens and members of mankind. Children with disabilities are also members of society and have the right to remain within their local communities. In order to be an active member, children with disabilities require special support for education and other related services. Indonesian Law guaranteed all children with disabilities receive a quality education, including in the form of inclusive education system which has been implemented in Indonesia since 2003.

In inclusive education, schools are responsible to provide equal opportunities for all students to develop their abilities and talents individually and in cooperation with others. Schools then become a place where children not only learn academics but also how to get along with their peers and older people. As Bouillet & Kudek-Mirošević (2015) stated that the inclusive dimension of education is lost, if we consider school as institutions which deliver only knowledge rather than student' social outcomes. For

some children getting along with others and developing their social skills can be a hard task, especially for children with disabilities.

Social skills are the skills which allow us to interact positively with others. Gresham & Elliot (1984) defined social skills as socially acceptable learned behaviors that enable a person to interact with others in ways that elicit positive responses and assist in avoiding negative responses. They also noted that social skills refer to the learned social behavior. Children are exchanging information and adjust their understanding one another when interacting with others. Through this process, they learn essential social values from others and their surroundings required for their future life.

Many research highlighted that deficits in social skills are present in students identified as having special needs. Children with disabilities are defined as those who have with physical, emotional, mental, intellectual, and/ or social impairment. The lack of appropriate social skills exhibit by children identified as learning disabilities, autism, emotional and behavior impairments, intellectual impairments, and attention deficit/hyperactivity disorders tend to have lower social skills. (Kavale & Mostert., 2004; Cheung., Siu, Brown., 2017). As for visually impaired students they were also having difficulty in social interaction (Salleh & Zainal., 2010). Social skills deficits appear to be an integral part of the life of students with disabilities in certain category.

Lack of social skills evidently leads to the development of many negative internal behaviors. Children with social skills deficits may face psychological challenges in their present and later life. Previous research observed that the social skills' deficiencies will eventually lead to poor academic achievement, failed to achieve their social functioning, peer rejection, social withdrawal and isolation (Davies., Cooper., Kettler., & Elliott., 2014). Furthermore, children with social skills deficits are also more likely experiencing anxiety, depression (Welsh., Parke., Widaman., & O'Neil., 2001), and bullying (Garner & Hinton., 2010). Whilst, children within school-aged spend major of their time in school where interacting and getting along with their peers are important.

Children with disabilities are more likely involved in bullying because of their behavioral characteristics associated with their disabilities (Rose et al., 2012). Behavioral problems and poor social skills are some of the factors that put children with disabilities at an increased risk of being bullied. Research has speculated that specific domains of social skills contribute to bullying in children with disabilities. Jenkins, Demaray, and Tennant (2017) concluded that there are four domains of social skills which contribute to bullying, namely empathy, assertive behavior, cooperation, and self-control.

This study was an effort to evaluate the social skills of children with disabilities in relation to bullying at the elementary level in inclusive school setting. In the present study we posed the following objectives; (a) to find out the level of social skill among students with disabilities at the elementary level in inclusive school; and, (b) to discover the dispersion of social skills level of students by their disability categories.

## ***Methodology***

### ***Participants***

The sample consisted of five inclusive elementary schools within Surakarta City area. The data collected from 40 first to sixth graders classified as having different categories of disabilities. The sample included males (50%) and females (50%) students with age between 6-16 years (Mean=10,2).

### **Data Collection Instrument**

This quantitative research was collected data through a survey. Social skills of student were rated by special education teacher using a 4-point Likert scale (1 = “Very Bad” to 4 = “Good”) questionnaire. The instrument consisted of 24 items and assessed four dimensions of social skills proposed: Empathy, Assertive Behavior, Cooperation, and Self-Control.

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to assess the validity and reliability of the instrument. The modification indices of the CFA suggest that 8 items eliminated. All four dimensions of bullying-related social skills have an acceptable level of convergent validity. The result of testing the convergent validity revealed good convergent validity. The average variance extracted (AVE) score of each constructs were greater than 0.5; Empathy=0.575, Assertive Behavior=0.580, Cooperation=0.657, Self-Control=0.660. The assessment for reliability was based on the composite reliability. A value of  $CR \geq 0.6$  is required. The value of CR of this instrument were more than 0.7; Empathy=0.793, Assertive Behavior=0.792, Cooperation=0.918, Self-Control=0.881. It indicated that the convergent validity and reliability of bullying-related social skills questionnaire was achieved. In addition, scores on the internal consistency of social skill questionnaire demonstrated adequate reliability with coefficient alpha= 0.868.

### **Findings**

The data collected is mostly in quantitative form from 40 students with disabilities. The frequency and percentage distributions were used to represents the characteristics of students with disabilities involved in this study.

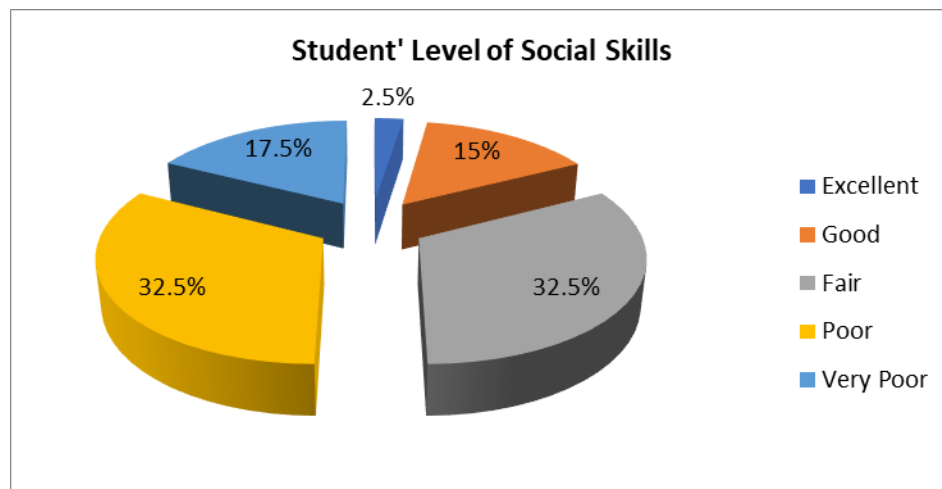
**Table 1** Students' characteristics

| Characteristics | Category                  | Frequency | Percent |
|-----------------|---------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Disabilities    | Slow Learner              | 14        | 35      |
|                 | Visually Impaired         | 2         | 5       |
|                 | Hearing Impaired          | 3         | 7.5     |
|                 | Intellectual Disabilities | 9         | 22.5    |
|                 | Physically Impaired       | 2         | 5       |
|                 | Learning Disabilities     | 3         | 7.5     |
|                 | Autism                    | 5         | 12.5    |
|                 | Down Syndrome             | 2         | 5       |
| Age             | 6-8                       | 9         | 22.5    |
|                 | 9-11                      | 21        | 52.5    |
|                 | 12-16                     | 10        | 25      |

Table 1 shows the frequency of students in each of the eight specified disability categories, including slow learner; visually impaired, hearing impaired, intellectual disabilities, physically impaired, learning disabilities, autism, and Down syndrome. Students with slow learner comprised a fairly large proportion (35%), students with intellectual disabilities comprised 22.5%, and 12.5% of the total respondents are children with autism. The mean age of students is 10.2, students with age between 9-11 years old comprised more than half of the total respondents (52.5%).

### ***Social Skills of Students with Disabilities***

The descriptive of the data were calculated to describe the data and give an idea of averages and dispersion. The Likert scale consisting 16 items with four options, social skills of students with disabilities can be categorized as Very Poor ( $<36.6$ ), Poor ( $36.6 \leq X < 43.2$ ), Fair ( $43.2 \leq X < 49.8$ ), Good ( $49.8 \leq X < 56.4$ ), and Excellent ( $\geq 56.4$ ). The following are the graphic results of the analysis of the level of social skill among student with disabilities at the elementary level in inclusive school setting.



**Fig. 1** General analysis result of social skills student with disabilities

As shown in Figure 1, social skills of students with disabilities range from very poor to excellent category. The distribution shows that from 40 respondents, 17.5% (N=7) of the respondents were on Very Poor level, 32.5% (N=13) categorized on Poor level, another 32.5% (N=13) was on Fair level, 15% (N=6) of them categorized on Good level, and the rest 2.5% (N=1) was on Excellent level. In general, the levels of social skills' student with disabilities tend to the fair to very poor level (82.5%).

**Table 2** Descriptive statistics of student' level of social skills

| Units              | Value |
|--------------------|-------|
| Minimum            | 30    |
| Maximum            | 63    |
| Mean statistic     | 44.45 |
| Standard Deviation | 6.809 |

We also computed the aggregated scores as mean scores on all four social skills dimensions. Table 2 are present the descriptive statistics related to the social skill level of students with disabilities at the elementary level in inclusive school in Surakarta City area. Results show that students with disabilities' mean score were 44.45 from minimum 30 and maximum 63, which is closest to the minimum. This indicated that generally, students with disabilities have a minimum level of social skills.

### *Differences in Student' Social Skills by Disability Categories*

We next examined the level of social skills students by disability categories. The social skills scores categorized into five; Very Poor, Poor, Fair, Good, and Excellent. The percentage for each category and each disability categories presented in Figure 2.

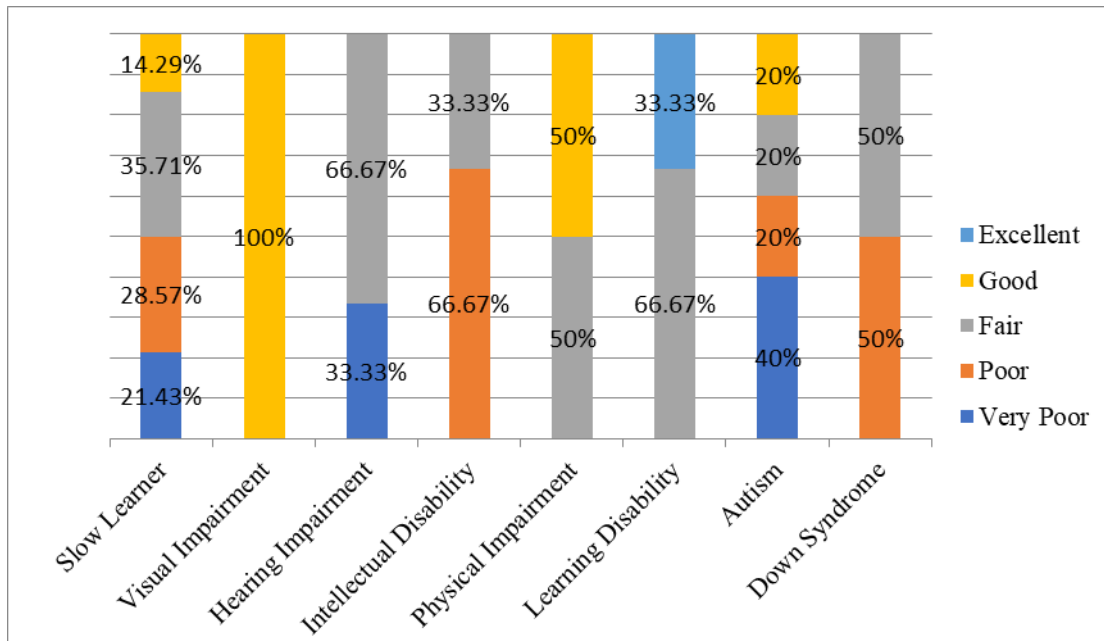


Fig. 2 Social skills dispersion by disability categories

According to the teacher reports shown in Figure 2, it is known that the majority of students with autism (40%) have very poor social skills. Students with hearing impairment and slow learner comprised a fairly small proportion in each category (33.33% and 21.43%, respectively). Whilst, students possessed poor level of social skills with a large percentage are students with intellectual disability (66.67%) and students with Down syndrome (50%). Four of fourteen students (28.57%) with slow learner and one of five (20%) student with autism also have a poor level of social skills. The majority of students with hearing impairment and learning disability (66.67% respectively) are within the fair level of social skills. 50% of students with Down syndrome, 35.71% slow learner students, 33.33% students with intellectual disability, and 20% of students with autism also have a fair level of social skills. Students categorized as having visual (100%) and physical impairment (50%) mostly showed good social skills. Furthermore, two slow learner students (14.29%) and one student with autism (20%) also had good social skills. Thus, 33.33% of students with learning disabilities involved in this study have an excellent level of social skills.

The research findings indicate that students with visual impairment, physical impairment, and learning disability tend to have social skills from fair to an excellent level. Whilst, students categorized as slow learner, intellectual disability, autism, and Down syndrome tend to have fair to a very poor level of social skills.

## ***Discussion***

The result of data analysis in this study shows that students with disabilities at the elementary level in inclusive school setting were having a minimum level of social skills. These research findings are worrying because the social skills' levels of student with disabilities tend to fall between fair level and very poor level. The findings of this study are not surprising because they are in line with the results of other studies regarding the level of social skills of students with disabilities.

The lack of appropriate social skills mostly demonstrated by students within the categories which exhibit externalizing behavior, such as autism, intellectual disability, slow learner, and Down syndrome. This result is in line with Cheung, Siu, Brown (2017), who found that persons with ASD may have difficulty in making friends as one of the assertive behavior, and total lack of facial expressions as one of the empathy skills. Yeo & Teng (2015), also suggested that ASD have social skills deficits fall under the areas of behavioral and affective. Students with autism are characterized by their social skills difficulties. ASD students are lacking in social communication, they hardly express their feeling. The level of ASD students mostly lower than the typically developing peers their age. Students with intellectual disability have limitations in cooperative behaviors and social skills (Dastgahi., Kashi., & Shameli., 2013). Students with another intellectual disability also have limited social skills. The result of this study indicated that the social skills of slow learner students also have poor social skills. Students with borderline intellectual disabilities or slow learner are having problems with the development of adequate social skills. This result is in line with Schalock et al. (2010), they stated that slow learner students are characterized by a lack of social skills.

As for students with visually and physically impaired tend to have good social skills. This result is different with the study of Salleh & Zainal (2010), they found that students with visual impairments were having difficulty in social interaction. Children with impaired vision face difficulty in social interaction and making contacts due to lack of visual input (Ishtiaq et al., 2016). When it comes to the physically impaired students, the social skills development challenges often comes from other people (stigma, stereotypes, and prejudice).

One of the ideas of inclusive education system is to give opportunities for students with disabilities for developing a social relationship. It is believed that peer interactions would foster the development of social skills. But the challenges faced by students with disabilities were, many of these students do not have the capacity to develop social skills without extra support and practice. Planning and implementation of educational process for the student with disabilities in inclusive school reveal that academic objective receives the most attention, while the development of social and emotional are rarely included. Effective social skills instruction should be given in many forms regarding individual needs of students with disabilities. Intensive social skills training are required to enhance the level of social skills of students with disabilities in inclusive school.

## ***Conclusion***

Based on the result of the discussion, it can be concluded that students with disabilities at the elementary level in inclusive school setting tend to have minimum social skills. Characteristics manifests by disability categories could be a factor affecting the level of students' social skills. Therefore, serious attention and extra support are required to be given to students with disabilities to enhance their social skills. This research is limited that it only included a relatively small sample of students with disabilities in each category from Surakarta City area. The data collection instrument was only using a questionnaire, and no qualitative approach was applied.

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