

## **The DIR/Floortime Approach to Enhance Communication Skills of Autism Student in Inclusive Elementary Schools**

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### **Abstract**

This research aims to explore the DIR/Floortime approach implemented by teachers to enhance the communication abilities of children with autism in inclusive elementary schools. The type of research used is a qualitative descriptive design with a case study method. The subjects of this study were teacher who teach children with autism attending an inclusive school, at Lazuardi GCS Elementary School in Depok City. The results of the research indicate that the DIR/Floortime approach carried out by teachers involves using a play-based approach conducted on the floor (floortime). This method provides opportunities for students to engage, enhance self-confidence, and foster a sense of blending in for children with autism with their environment.

**Keywords:** Autism, DIR/Floortime, Inclusive education, Elementary school



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### **INTRODUCTION**

Inclusive education has been regulated by the government through Law Number 20 of 2003 in Article 32 and Minister of National Education Regulation Number 70 of 2009. This law stipulates the provision of opportunities for children with special needs to obtain education in regular schools. This special education service is a follow-up to UNESCO's 1994 declaration on the ideology of inclusive education internationally. Inclusive schools integrate the needs of children with disabilities and those with special intelligence and talents into a systemic unity within regular schools (Sagala, 2022). Comprehensive support is required for the implementation of inclusive schools, including support for teaching staff, support services for learners with special needs, individual learning assessment outcomes, parental involvement, inclusive education policies, mixed classroom spaces, and support services for learners with special needs (van Kessel et al., 2021). Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) experience disorders that encompass cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and social area (Dessiningrum, 2017). Scientists have not definitively identified the cause of autism, but it has been firmly established as neurological rather than interpersonal, although the specific brain disturbances are not yet known (Ralph & Lle, 2007). Various disorders occur within ASD, affecting perception, cognition, language, and deviating social behaviors. While some patterns of disturbance are relatively consistent among individuals with ASD, there is considerable variation in the severity of symptoms displayed (Hallahan, Kauffman, Pullen, 2014). According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V) in 2013, criteria for diagnosing ASD include limitations in communication and social interaction, restricted and repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, and activities, with symptoms manifesting in early childhood. Due to the diverse psychological and behavioral characteristics of individuals with ASD, researchers have developed three prominent theories to identify the main causes of ASD: (1) executive function weaknesses, (2) weak central coherence, or (3) theory of mind (Hallahan, Kauffman, Pullen, 2014). The increasing prevalence of ASD needs to be anticipated with specific interventions to prevent the development of other comorbid mental disorders in the future

(Simonoff et al., 2008). Children with ASD need to be taught how to understand, regulate emotions, recognize, and modify their thoughts and behaviors (Hu & Lee, 2020) through cognitive-behavioral interventions to enhance their understanding and emotional regulation (Wong et al., 2015) in a more natural school environment (inclusive schools).

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

The type of research used is qualitative research. Qualitative research is a research process that generates descriptive data in the form of narrative conclusions about observed behaviors, phenomena, or attitudes (Crowe et al., 2011). This study utilizes a qualitative descriptive approach with a case study research type. The subjects in this research are teachers who teach ASD student attending an inclusive school, at Lazuardi GCS Elementary School. In the interviews, several open-ended questions were prepared, particularly regarding their perceptions and experiences in handling ASD student at school. Follow-up questions were also asked to clarify some information. All conversations were recorded through field notes and recording devices. To analyze the data, all interviews were transcribed meticulously. After reading the transcriptions several times, different themes emerged. These themes were indexed with various highlighted colors and noted on the margins. The themes were organized into a diagram to explore possible relationships among them. The initial writing was then submitted to the participants to ensure its accuracy and validity. Some corrections from the participants were incorporated to produce the final draft (Wahyuningsih & Lestari, 2023).

## **RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Lazuardi GCS School has declared itself as an inclusive school since its establishment in 2000. This means that Lazuardi GCS School has been an inclusive school before the government made it mandatory. Children with special needs, with various specificities, are accepted in this school. Special needs children, when integrated and treated equally with other children, will show positive impacts on their development (Novianti, 2019), enabling their creative potential to be expressed with the right assistance and self-development opportunities. The school already possesses adequate resources and infrastructure for inclusive education. Each special needs child (ABK) is accompanied by a Special Education Teacher (GPK). All teachers and stakeholders have undergone training and understanding as an inclusive school, and the culture of inclusive education is evident in this school. The school is also equipped with a special therapy room named the Rainbow Room, serving as one of the therapy services that facilitate the needs of both internal and external students.

One of the ASD students in Lazuardi GCS Elementary School is in the third grade. This child is identified as having autism, but there is no specific diagnosis from a specialist, making it challenging to clearly classify the type of autism the child is experiencing. The student is accompanied by a Special Education Teacher (GPK) throughout the learning activities at school. Behaviors commonly exhibited by individuals with autism include minimal communication, using only 2-3 words to explain many concepts, unclear pronunciation, occasional hyperactive behavior, being absorbed in their own world, enjoying solitude, often leaning their body against those around them, extreme sensitivity to loud noises, and requiring frequent interventions in daily activities. The communication abilities of this ASD student align with the statement by Colle, Baron-Cohen, Wheelwright, & Van Der Lely (2008), which indicates that some individuals with ASD can express themselves using age-appropriate vocabulary and grammar but often face challenges in using language socially. Hallahan, Kauffman & Pullen (2014) state that a significant number of individuals with ASD have a very low desire to communicate, and an estimated 50% do not use any language at all. Social language usage issues are also experienced

by individuals with ASD, making it difficult to identify information that affects how they express themselves and respond to others in social interactions (Hu & Lee, 2020). ASD children often speak in a flat tone, sometimes speaking too loudly or too quickly or slowly, having difficulty taking turns in conversation, talking to themselves, or frequently repeating the same things. These challenges often result in many school-aged children with ASD being unable to actively engage in social interactions at school (Bauminger, Shulman, & Agam, 2003).

Inclusive education for ASD demands that teachers adapt to the learning styles of children because the characteristics of ASD often involve limited interests in a particular topic, requiring intensive and often separated learning from their peers (Gunn & Delafield-Butt, 2016; Humphrey & Symes, 2013). Students with ASD are also considered more challenging to actively engage in school compared to students with other special needs (House of Commons Education and Skills Committee, 2006). Inclusive education for ASD is necessary because, according to the latest teaching theories, ASD requires an emphasis on the most natural human interaction. ASD development thrives through natural interaction with peers in cooperative learning groups in regular mainstream education classes (Hallahan, Kauffman & Pullen, 2014). The diverse characteristics and needs of ASD individuals result in no single program or method suitable for all. The inclusive education intervention for ASD, as conveyed by the inclusive education coordinator at Lazuardi GSC Elementary School, currently used the DIR/Floortime model. The Developmental Individual Difference Relationship-Based (DIR) method, often referred to as the floor time method (DIR/Floortime), requires the involvement of adults interacting with ASD individuals through games and other preferred activities. This approach emphasizes the occurrence of reciprocal interaction between two participants, whether verbal or nonverbal (Dionne & Martini, 2011; Mercer, 2017). DIR/Floortime also focuses on developing social communication capacity. Children with ASD must play an active role in the communication and language development process during interactions, thereby stimulating and optimizing natural pronunciation abilities during speech as well (Pradini, 2016). Based on these statements, inclusive education, especially in addressing ASD, requires teachers to adapt to the learning styles of the children.

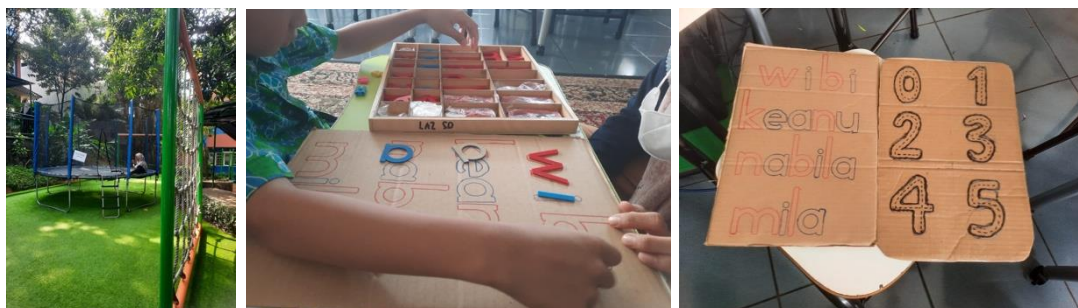
The implementation of the DIR/Floortime model approach conducted by the Special Education Teacher (GPK) involves a play stimulation program for the child to help develop cognitive and emotional aspects optimally. The play activities carried out by the GPK are not just for fun and relaxation; instead, they follow the child's lead, incorporating the child's ideas and interests. The GPK and the school team design various programs in the form of games. One demonstrated activity is regular sports activities involving all students with special needs (ABK), organized in the form of games. Cognitive ability handling to meet the learning targets for letter and number recognition, which may differ from the class standards, is also done in the form of games. The GPK prepares various learning media for letter and number recognition, both self-made and available resources. ABK actively participates in all activities, and the GPK continuously strives for communication with the ABK. Activities are conducted in a relaxed manner while sitting on the floor, following the principles of DIR/Floortime (Dionne & Martini, 2011). Communication is also done as an effort to position the ABK as a leader in the activities. The ABK is consistently given choices for activities to enhance motivation and interest in carrying out the tasks. Motivation involves discovering what the child naturally likes and then building upon those interests and motivations (Dr. Stanley Greenspan, 2007). In this context, the GPK mentions that the ABK only joins the class after morning play activities and motor skills exercises, such as playing on the trampoline and sitting on synthetic grass. An example of an activity is when the student is given the choice of whether they want to play a puzzle (syllable recognition) first or want to do number thickening (number recognition) first. The

implementation of the floor time model can help improve the receptive language of ASD (Biasa, 2011) and increase the vocabulary of autistic children after the application of the floor time method (Pradini, 2016).

Some progress in handling children with special needs (ABK) includes specific behaviors, such as the ABK moving their hands as a sign for peers to move away and pointing when requesting to move to another room. Warning signals given by the ABK to others in response to a stimulus through nonverbal means, such as staring or pointing, occur due to communication disorders and social skills deficits in autism (Adamson, Bakeman, Deckner, & Ronski, 2009; Clifford & Dissanayake, 2008; Murray et al., 2008). Another action taken by the Special Education Teacher (GPK) is introducing textures and types of foods, such as bananas, that are avoided by the ABK. Some individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) exhibit hyperresponsivity or hyporesponsivity to specific stimuli in their environment (Ben-Sasson et al., 2009) and have a higher level of food rejection, lower interest in various types of food, including fewer preferences for fruits and vegetables (Barnes et al., 2019). The inclusive school culture is also evident here, where repetitive behaviors, including flapping wings or spinning, which are often prohibited due to potential disturbance to others (Patriquin, MacKenzie, & Versnel, 2020) do not occur. The GPK is more tolerant of accepting stereotypical ASD movements, and classmates also appear comfortable accepting the child's behavior.



**Figure 1. Regular Sports Activities Involving All Students With Special Needs**



**Figure 2. Game-Based Learning Activities**

## Discussion

The discussion contains the results of research and scientific discussion. The discussion contains an explanation of regulations and facts. Analysis according to the problem approach chosen by the author. In addition, the comparison must also be explained with the results of other researchers who have almost the same topic. Research results and findings must be able to answer the research problem formulation in the introduction section. Use factual and relevant references. Articles must produce novelty or novelty both from a theoretical and a practical point of view. The discussion contains at least: (1) (what/how elements) has the data presented been processed (not raw data), set forth in the form of tables or figures (choose one),

and given easy-to-understand information? Write down the findings or findings, but don't discuss the discussion here; (2). (the why element) in the discussion section, there is a link between the results obtained and the basic concepts and/or hypotheses. In some fields of science, we even have to discuss molecular aspects at the level of study. The discussions made must be supported by real and clear facts; and (3) (what else element) whether there is conformity or conflict with the results of other people's research.

## **CONCLUSION**

Based on the results of the research, the DIR/Floortime method implemented by the Special Education Teacher (GPK) emphasizes play activities and positions the learners as leaders in each activity. Children with special needs (ABK) actively engage as leaders by choosing activities, thereby increasing their motivation to participate. Through the DIR/Floortime model, the GPK encourages the developmental process of ABK based on enjoyable interactions, relationships, and connections between the child and the environment. The GPK also involves parents, teachers, and other school stakeholders to support optimal development. Active and emotionally engaging interactions during activities are performed so that children strive to express their desires and emotions creatively and meaningfully. Through these activities, ABK will begin to understand the characters of others, practice understanding whether their attitudes are accepted or rejected by the environment. ABK is also trained to express various ideas through play, understand emotions, so that children can practice thinking realistically and logically and express their emotions while playing. This involves the emotional aspect of an activity.

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