



The Role of Teachers in Social-Emotional Learning to Support Children with Special Needs in Inclusive Schools

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Abstract

Children with special needs still often receive discrimination even at inclusive schools. Teachers play a very important role in the learning of children with special needs. This study aims to examine the role of teachers in social-emotional learning (SEL) to support development in the primary school environment. This research uses a descriptive qualitative design. Data was collected through observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. The validity of the data is ensured through triangulation of sources and techniques. Data analysis follows the Miles and Huberman model consists of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawn. The results show that teachers have a role in teachers' social-emotional learning, including as Facilitators of Emotional Regulation, Models of Positive Social Behavior, Mediators of Social Interaction, and Supporters of Individual Emotional Needs. SEL can increase the involvement of students with special needs in classroom activities and help them manage their emotions and interact with peers. This research can provide an understanding of the role of teachers in the implementation of SEL in the context of inclusive education and become a reference for schools and educators in designing SEL strategies that are more adaptive and oriented to the individual needs of students with special needs.

Keywords: SDGS 16, Children with Special Needs, elementary schools, inclusive schools, peace and justice, SEL, teachers

1. Introduction

Teachers play a very important role in the learning of children with special needs (CSN). Teachers can facilitate learning that helps children with special needs reach their full potential [1], [2]. Teacher involvement can have an impact on the quality of learning [3]. Teachers in inclusive classrooms must be able to provide physical and non-physical access that ensures all students participate in educational activities without limitations [4]. Teachers often face challenges in dealing with children with special needs in regular classrooms [5].

The right to fair and quality education applies to all children [6], [7] including children with special needs [8]–[10]. This is in line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which emphasizes that every child has the right to learn in a safe and discrimination-free environment [11]. Inclusive education can be a key strategy to ensure every child gets a quality education in a supportive environment without discrimination. Inclusive education prioritizes diversity and equal educational opportunities for all learners regardless of their differences [12], [13]. Inclusive education attaches importance to children's right to participate without exception [14] and requiring schools to accept children without discrimination to ensure access to quality education [15]. Inclusive education supports the development of language, communication, social, academic skills [16], and fostering positive attitudes for children with special needs in the social environment [17], [18].

Currently, in Indonesia all schools are required to accept all students without exception, including Children with Special Needs. Article 31 of the 1945 Constitution and the National Education System Law affirm the right to education for all citizens without discrimination. The Government of Indonesia through the Regulation of the Minister of National Education Number 70 of 2009 has regulated and developed programs to promote inclusive education [19]. Regulation of the Minister of National Education of Indonesia No. 70 of 2009 states that each district/city must appoint at least one elementary and junior high school in each sub-district as an inclusive school, as well as a minimum of one high school per district/city [20], [21].



Social-Emotional Learning can be one of the educational approaches that focuses on developing students' social and emotional competencies. SEL is able to support the cognitive and emotional aspects of student learning [22]. SEL programs help children with special needs develop emotional competencies and social skills, which are essential for emotional development and social inclusion. Social-emotional learning can be one of the educational approaches that focuses on developing students' social and emotional competencies. SEL has 5 main components, including Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Relationship Skills, Social Awareness, Responsible Decision Making [23], [24]. An effective SEL program integrated into the school curriculum can provide appropriate learning for students [25], [26]. Research shows that SEL can contribute to academic improvement by improving students' emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills [27], [28].

However, the reality is that not all teachers understand and implement SEL in learning. This is supported by the opinion of Mithans et al. [29] that there are still many teachers who feel that they do not have adequate competence to effectively teach children with special needs. Effective SEL implementation requires specialized training and quality resources [30]. Supportive school leadership is also critical in creating an environment conducive to SEL [31]. Continuous professional development and training is important for teachers to feel confident and competent in implementing SEL [32].

In inclusive education, teachers should be able to accommodate CSN learning in learning. But in reality, learning is still equated with regular students. This is because teachers often lack the necessary training to effectively support students with special needs [33]–[35]. Public attitudes and stigma towards disability also hinder the effective implementation of inclusive education [36]–[38]. Collaboration between teachers, support staff, parents, and the community is needed to create a supportive and inclusive learning environment [39], [40].

This research is important because children with special needs need to receive appropriate social-emotional support in inclusive schools, in order to improve the quality of teaching and reduce educational gaps. In addition, the child's mental well-being is important for long-term development. The results of the research can provide data to help policymakers formulate more responsive and inclusive education policies. Research related to SEL studies has been extensively conducted, including research by Heyder [41] which examines teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education related to students' SEL in elementary school. Research by Wui [42] researched the effectiveness of SEL for children with special needs in Northern California Elementary Schools. Research on SEL strategies at the high school level [43], and the development of SEL to support children with special needs in regular schools and special schools [44]. However, there has not been much research related to the role of teachers in SEL to support children with special needs in inclusive schools. The novelty of this research lies in the exploration of the role of teachers in SEL to support children with special needs in inclusive schools. This study aims to examine the role of teachers in social-emotional learning (SEL) to support development in the elementary school environment. This research is in line with the Sustainable Development Goals goal 16, namely Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions which emphasizes the importance of inclusive education, a safe, fair, and discrimination-free learning environment, as well as the role of teachers in building a school climate that supports the social and emotional well-being of students.

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

This study uses descriptive qualitative. Descriptive qualitative is used because in this study it is important to describe research findings related to the role of teachers in SEL to support children with special needs in inclusive schools. This is in accordance with the purpose of descriptive qualitative research, which is to explore the "how", "what", or "when" of phenomena and provide detailed insights into specific contexts and experiences [45].

2.2 Research Design

The research was conducted in one of the inclusion schools in the city of Surakarta. The research was conducted in 6 classes by observing the implementation of learning in the inclusion classroom and



interviews were conducted with 6 classroom teachers and principals. The profiles of the students with special needs involved are presented in the following table:

Table 1. Types of children with special needs in inclusion schools

Types of Special Needs	Amount
Disturbances in activity and attention	1
Slow Learner	11
Mild mental retardation	9
Typical developmental disorders of speech and language	4
Autism	1
Intellectual Disability	1
Attention deficit disorder	2
Mixed behavioral and emotional disorders	2
Total	31

2.3 Data Collection

Data collection is carried out by means of observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Observations were carried out by observing the participation and involvement of students with special needs in classroom activities, interaction between peers and social inclusion, teachers' strategies in implementing SEL. Interviews were conducted in a structured manner to 6 classroom teachers and principals, as well as parents of CSN. The research questions focus on Perceptions of inclusive educational environments, perceptions of CSN, learning challenges of CSN, Strategies used by teachers to implement social- emotional learning (SEL), and support systems provided by schools and external stakeholders. Document analysis involves reviewing school policies, lesson plans, and other relevant materials to examine the frameworks and strategies used in implementing social-emotional learning.

2.4 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using an interactive model created by Miles and Huberman. Data analysis techniques include data reduction, data visualization, and conclusion drawing [46]. The data validation technique uses source triangulation techniques and techniques.

3. Result

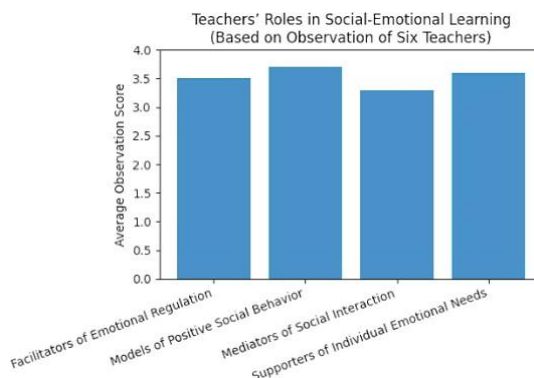


Fig. 1. Results of observation of the role of teachers in SEL

Based on the results of observations, the average score for the role of teachers in Social-Emotional Learning with details of the role of teachers as Facilitators of Emotional Regulation obtained an average score of 3.5 in the category of Excellent. The role of teachers as Models of Positive Social Behavior obtained an average score of 3.7 in the Excellent category. The role of teachers as Mediators of Social Interaction obtained an average score of 3.3 in the Good category. Meanwhile, the role of teachers as Supporters of Individual Emotional Needs obtained an average score of 3.6 in the



Very Good category. The categorization of the observation score was determined using the Likert scale interval technique with a score range of 1–4 divided into four categories with an interval of 0.75, so that a score of 1.00–1.75 was categorized as low, 1.76–2.50 was adequate, 2.51–3.25 was good, and 3.26–4.00 was very good [47].

The role of teachers as facilitators of emotion regulation is observed through the actions of teachers in helping students recognize their emotions, providing guidance to students when they are angry or anxious, teaching strategies to calm down, how teachers respond to students' emotional expressions with an empathetic and non-judgmental attitude, and providing opportunities for students to express their feelings appropriately both verbally and nonverbally. In an interview, one of the teachers stated:

“I help students recognize and express emotions by first creating a safe and supportive environment first. Then I also teach emotional vocabulary to children so that children understand the emotions that exist and know how to express them. In addition, I also set an example through the expression of positive and healthy emotions what kind of” (R1-10 Jan 2025)

The role of teachers as a model of positive social behavior is observed through the teacher's consistency to be empathetic to all students, the use of polite and respectful language in class interactions, teachers' patience in dealing with learning difficulties and the behavior of students with special needs, teachers' attitudes in respecting differences and diversity in the classroom, and the example of positive social behavior that teachers consistently display in various learning situations. These results are in accordance with the teacher's statement as follows:

“.... I always give an understanding and example of what is good and what is right to children. I always say that in this life it is very important to always be polite, honest, responsible, and respectful to others. I consistently apply it and can be internalized by children so that children are able to be empathetic and appreciate their friends” (R5-10 Jan 2025)

The role of teachers as mediators of social interaction is observed through teachers' efforts in organizing group learning activities that involve all students in an inclusive manner, encouraging interaction and cooperation between students, preventing exclusion of students with special needs, helping to resolve conflicts between students fairly and constructively, and guiding students in communicating and interacting positively in the classroom environment. The teacher stated:

“To create continuous interaction, I set clear classroom rules at the beginning and made sure all students understood the importance of mutual respect. I also ensure that there is open communication between me and the students to create a sense of security in the classroom” (R2-10 Jan 2025)

“I want to create strong bonds and increase student collaboration in participating in the classroom. I can do this by sometimes creating heterogeneous groups so that students are able to cooperate and collaborate with each other”(R6-10 Jan 2025)

The role of teachers as supporters of individual emotional needs is observed through giving attention and a personal approach to students with special needs, adjusting how to communicate according to the character and needs of students, providing motivation and emotional reinforcement consistently, teachers' efforts in creating a safe and emotionally comfortable classroom atmosphere, and teachers' concern for the emotional state of students during the learning process.

Furthermore, the role of teachers in implementing SEL can be seen in the image below:

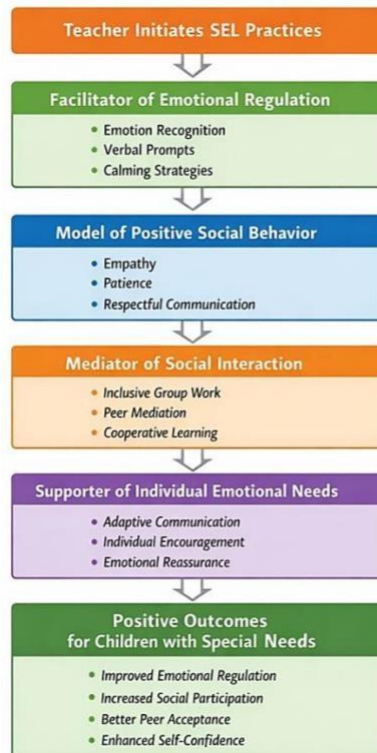


Fig. 2. Diagram of the role of teachers in SEL

Based on figure 2, it shows that the role of teachers in implementing Social-Emotional Learning in elementary schools starts from the teacher's initiative in implementing SEL practices. Furthermore, the role of teachers as facilitators of emotion regulation for students by helping to emotion recognition, verbal prompts, and calming strategies. The next flow shows that teachers function as positive social behavior models that are internalized by students with a sense of empathy, patience, and respectful communication. The next stage shows the role of teachers as mediators of social interaction that ensures the involvement and social acceptance of students with special needs by holding inclusive group work, peer mediation, and cooperative learning. This process is strengthened through individual emotional support that is responsive to the unique needs of each student through adaptive communication, individual encouragement, and emotional reassurance. This will ultimately have a positive effect on improving the social-emotional abilities and well-being of students with special needs as shown by improved emotional regulation, increased social participation, better peer acceptance, and enhanced self-confidence.

4. Discussion

Based on the results of the research, teachers clearly show good understanding and ability in implementing SEL. Teachers realize an understanding related to SEL to support children with special needs in inclusion classes with real roles. SEL is essential for the inclusion and acceptance of children with special needs [48], [49]. Teachers' understanding and implementation of SEL can significantly improve the social and academic outcomes of students with special needs [50], [51]. In the research, the role of teachers in SEL includes Facilitators of Emotional Regulation, Models of Positive Social Behavior, Mediators of Social Interaction, and Supporters of Individual Emotional Needs.

Teachers who act as facilitators of emotion regulation are characterized by teacher actions that can help students recognize the emotions they feel. Teachers who show empathy will be able to understand students' personal and social situations and respond with care and attention [52], [53]. Teachers who empathize with students can inspire and motivate students, thereby increasing achievement and satisfaction [54]. Teachers as facilitators will be able to provide guidance to students when they are angry or anxious, teach them strategies to calm down, and respond to students' emotional expressions with an empathetic and non-judgmental attitude. Teachers play an important role in recognizing the signs of anxiety by providing appropriate support [55], [56]. Teachers need to



teach and instill stress management techniques to help reduce stress and anxiety so as to restore students' focus [57], [58]. In addition, the role of teachers as facilitators is also seen in providing opportunities for students to express their feelings appropriately both verbally and nonverbally. The teacher's ability to manage one's own emotions will foster a positive emotional climate in the classroom [59]–[61]. The conscious and planned application of SEL practices makes teachers able to support the emotional regulation of students with special needs well in learning. Teachers must improve SEL teaching abilities to support students' basic psychological needs [62].

Teachers who are models of positive social behavior are characterized by the teacher's consistency to be empathetic to all students, the use of polite and respectful language in class interactions, and the patience of teachers in dealing with learning difficulties and the behavior of students with special needs. Teachers who show empathy and emotional support can affect students' social and emotional well-being [63]. Inclusive practices and supportive behavior of teachers are essential for the social and academic competence of students with special needs [64]. Positive teacher-student interaction and efforts to support students who are discriminated against can increase students' sense of community and motivation [65]. Teachers are also able to show an attitude of respect for differences and diversity in the classroom and provide examples of positive social behavior consistently. Teachers who are open and empathetic are more likely to be able to foster an inclusive environment [66]. Teachers who teach social values verbally and practically by providing real examples that students follow, thus proving the practice of SEL through the example of teachers are able to create a sustainable ecosystem and build an inclusive classroom. Teachers as role models for students must be able to show respect, empathy, and positive social interaction so that they can influence students to adopt similar behaviors [67], [68].

Teachers who act as mediators of social interaction are shown through teachers' efforts to organize group learning activities that involve all students in an inclusive manner, encourage interaction and cooperation between students, and prevent exclusion of students with special needs. Teachers can use different instruction to customize assignments and leverage peer support to ensure that all students can participate meaningfully [69]. Other studies reveal that teachers can guide students to find meaning and build shared knowledge through classroom discourse [70]. By becoming a mediator between students, teachers are able to carry out differentiated learning on social-emotional aspects. Responsive SELs can help create an equitable learning environment by considering individual differences and prioritizing empathy and social responsibility [71], [72]. Effective communication as well as student-tailored feedback are essential to creating a classroom environment that supports inclusivity [73]. In addition, teachers who are able to help resolve conflicts between students in a fair and constructive manner, as well as guide students in communicating and interacting positively in the classroom environment, will present the inclusive learning practices needed by students. Teachers who mediate conflicts fairly and constructively can easily create a positive classroom environment [74]. Teachers can foster an inclusive learning environment by embedding SEL practices into daily routines and learning [75], [76].

Teachers as supporters of individual emotional needs can be seen through teachers' concern in providing personal attention and approaches to students with special needs, adjusting how to communicate according to the character and needs of students, providing motivation and emotional reinforcement consistently, and being able to create a safe and emotionally comfortable classroom atmosphere. Teachers who provide consistent motivation and reinforcement will be able to create a classroom climate that supports and meets the emotional needs of students with special needs [77], [78]. A positive classroom climate is fostered by the support of teacher autonomy and a positive teacher-student relationship [79]. The role played by teachers can give an idea that it is important for teachers to meet the emotional needs of each student as a unique individual. By providing the emotional support needed by every student, adaptive and responsive SEL practice is able to accommodate both regular and special needs students. Effective SEL implementation requires acceptance from teachers, creative scheduling, ongoing evaluation, and ongoing leadership support [80]–[82].

The role of teachers in implementing Social-Emotional Learning in elementary schools starts from the teacher's initiative in implementing SEL practices. Teachers are responsible for the integration of SEL into students' daily experiences by building important life skills such as empathy, self-regulation, and responsible decision-making [83], [84]. Furthermore, the role of teachers as facilitators of emotion



regulation for students by helping to emotion recognition, verbal prompts, and calming strategies. Teachers play an important role in the regulation of emotions to create a conducive learning environment [85]. The next flow shows that teachers function as positive social behavior models that are internalized by students with a sense of empathy, patience, and respectful communication. Teachers' self-regulation and emotional intelligence are essential in fostering positive student-teacher relationships [86]. The next stage shows the role of teachers as mediators of social interaction that ensures the involvement and social acceptance of students with special needs by holding inclusive group work, peer mediation, and cooperative learning. For example, pairing students with special needs with proficient peers can create cooperation and support [69]. This process is strengthened through individual emotional support that is responsive to the unique needs of each student through adaptive communication, individual encouragement, and emotional reassurance. Providing emotional support is essential for the well-being of students with special needs [87], [88]. This will ultimately have a positive effect on improving the social-emotional abilities and welfare of students with special needs as shown by improved emotional regulation, increased social participation, better peer acceptance, and enhanced self-confidence. SEL encourages social inclusion and participation by improving social skills and empathy [48].

In this study, teachers are able to show different approaches according to the needs of students. SEL practice can be seen from teachers who are able to provide personal attention, adjust the way they communicate with students, provide both physical and emotional reinforcement, and are able to create a safe, comfortable, and inclusive classroom environment. So that this affects the condition of students. SEL can contribute to building CSN's confidence by creating an inclusive learning environment. Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) is recognized as an essential component of education that supports students' social, emotional, and academic development. Studies show that effective SEL programs not only improve social competencies such as cooperation, self-control, emotion regulation, and problem-solving [89], [90], but also strengthens interpersonal relationships and student decision-making [91]. So this study proves that learning for children with special needs is appropriate to be equated with regular students but can be adjusted to the needs of children through a SEL approach that is responsive to the needs of children.

5. Conclusion

This study shows that in social-emotional learning, teachers have an important role as Facilitators of Emotional Regulation, Models of Positive Social Behavior, Mediators of Social Interaction, and Supporters of Individual Emotional Needs. The results of observations and interviews show that the implementation of SEL strategies by teachers is able to increase the involvement of students with special needs in classroom activities and help them manage their emotions and interact with peers. The findings of the study also revealed that although SEL has been implemented, its implementation is still partial and highly dependent on teachers' initiatives, with the support of the school system and parental involvement not yet optimal. Theoretically, this study strengthens the understanding of the role of teachers in the implementation of SEL in the context of inclusive education, while practically the results of the research can be a reference for schools and educators in designing SEL strategies that are more adaptive and oriented to the individual needs of students with special needs. More broadly, the results of this study contribute to the achievement of SDGs 16 by affirming the strategic role of teachers in creating peaceful, fair, and inclusive elementary schools. This research is limited to one inclusive school in Surakarta City with a descriptive qualitative approach, so the findings cannot be generalized widely and require further research with a more diverse scope and methods.

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