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Friendly with Words: A Literacy Program to Improve Social Communication and Self Confidence in Children with Special Needs

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Abstract: Social literacy programs play a crucial role in the psychological and social development of children with special needs, including emotional support, information, and tangible support from family, teachers, and peers. This support helps children with special needs adapt to school and builds self-confidence. Communication is also a crucial skill in establishing social relationships, especially with peers. This study aims to examine the effectiveness of the "Friendly with Words" literacy program in improving social communication and self-confidence in children with special needs (ABK). This program is designed as a form of literacy-based learning intervention through creative phoneme games and mini-dramas that encourage increased verbal articulation, spontaneous speaking, and confidence in public speaking. This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design involving one fifth-grade ABK student at SDN 101 Sukakarya, Bandung City. Data collection techniques were carried out through observation, interviews, and documentation, while data analysis used interactive and thematic analysis techniques. The results showed that the "Friendly with Words" program was able to improve students' verbal articulation skills, speaking fluency, and self-confidence in social interactions. Structured literacy activities have been proven effective in developing children's expressive skills, understanding, and interpersonal communication. This study concludes that literacy-based learning and planned social interactions can strengthen the social-emotional development of children with special needs and serve as a model of good practice for inclusive education in elementary schools.

Keywords: Literacy, Social Communication, Self-Confidence, Children with Special Needs, Inclusive Education

INTRODUCTION

Literacy is a fundamental skill crucial for shaping the character and competitiveness of the younger generation in the era of globalization (Lynch et al. 2024). Literacy mastery encompasses more than just reading and writing skills, but also the ability to understand, interpret, and critically process information (Zhao et al. 2021). For students with special needs, the challenge of strengthening literacy becomes more complex due to differences in

characteristics, communication barriers, and limited access to adaptive learning resources (Muliasari et al. 2026).

Literacy issues among students with special needs remain a challenge in various special needs schools and inclusive elementary schools (Kupang 2026). Recent research shows that the read-aloud method has proven effective in improving basic literacy, both in slow learners and children with mild intellectual disabilities and in the context of differentiated learning in inclusive classrooms (Tsz et al. 2022). In addition to improving reading skills, reading aloud also impacts students' listening skills, communication skills, and learning motivation (Technologies 2020).

Conversely, strengthening inclusive literacy requires collaboration, the use of adaptive teaching materials, and strategies tailored to individual student needs (McNicholl et al. 2019). Shared reading activities, dialogic literary gatherings, and discussion-based learning have been shown to improve communication and social skills in children with special needs (Blewitt et al. 2021). Furthermore, the importance of teachers, ongoing training, and a welcoming learning environment are key supporting factors for the success of literacy programs (Mujahidah et al., 2021; Sari et al., 2026).

Social communication is a fundamental skill that is crucial in human life, especially for school-aged children who are in a rapid stage of social and emotional development. For children with special needs (CSN), the ability to communicate is not just a means of exchanging information, but also a tool for building social relationships, recognizing emotions, and fostering self-confidence. However, in reality, many children with special needs face barriers in social communication aspects, such as articulation difficulties, limitations in verbal expression, and a lack of spontaneity and courage to speak in front of others (Hassani et al. 2022). In the context of inclusive education, social communication skills play a broader role. The interaction between children with special needs and their peers is key to creating an inclusive and supportive learning environment (Volman and Gilde 2021). Therefore, a learning strategy is needed that not only emphasizes cognitive aspects but also integrates the balanced development of social, emotional, and language skills. One effective approach to achieving this goal is through structured literacy programs based on social interaction (Roldán et al. 2021).

This research is very important for providing practical guidance to educators and parents in supporting the growth and progress of children with special needs. This approach is also supported by Bronfenbrenner (1979), who developed a theory of social development from an ecological perspective. Therefore, this program not only involves children in literacy activities but also creates an environment that supports positive social interaction (Moriña and Biagiotti 2021). Literacy is no longer understood merely as the ability to read and write, but also encompasses the ability to understand, interpret, and express ideas thru various forms of communication (Meletiadou 2022). A literacy approach in the context of special needs education allows children to naturally develop social communication skills thru fun, meaningful, and contextual activities. The "Friends with Words" program is designed to address this need by utilizing phoneme games and mini-dramas as a medium to practice verbal articulation, speaking spontaneity, and build self-confidence (Rotschild 2025).

According to Lev Vygotsky's (1978) theory of social development, learning occurs thru social interaction, where children develop their language and cognitive abilities thru dialog and collaboration (Marino et al. 2023). This principle is reinforced by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979), who viewed child development as being influenced by interacting ecological environments, ranging from the closest environment (microsystem) to the broader system (macrosystem) (Barua et al. 2022). In the context of this research, the "Friends with Words" literacy program was implemented within the school's microsystem, involving teachers, peers, and a supportive learning environment. Activities in this program are focused on two main components: 1. Creative Phoneme Games, which aim to improve verbal articulation and fluency thru sound

and word recognition. 2. Role-Based Mini-Dramas, which encourage children to speak confidently, express their feelings, and actively participate in structured social situations (Smith, Bylica, and Martin 2024). The expected outcome of the program implementation is not only to improve social communication skills but also to strengthen children's self-confidence in interacting with friends and teachers. As Bandura (1997) emphasized, self-efficacy has a significant influence on children's courage in facing communication and social challenges in the school environment (Fernández-villardón, Valls-carol, and Alcantud 2021). Thus, literacy can be a gateway to fostering broader social-emotional competencies (Un 2021).

This research was conducted at SDN 101 Sukakarya, Bandung City, an inclusive elementary school committed to providing adaptive educational services for children with special needs. The research focus is directed toward one special needs student who exhibits social communication difficulties and low self-esteem. Thru in-depth case studies, this research is expected to provide a concrete picture of the effectiveness of the "Friendly with Words" program as a literacy-based intervention model that can be implemented in inclusive schools. Through this research, it is hoped that a deeper understanding of how literacy activities can be used as a means of social-emotional development for children with special needs will emerge. The findings from this research are also expected to be an important contribution to inclusive educational practices in Indonesia, especially in developing literacy-based curricula that are empathetic, interactive and oriented towards the individual needs of students.

METHOD

This research study uses a qualitative approach with a single case study design. This approach was chosen because it aims to understand the phenomenon in depth and contextually regarding the subject of children with special needs who experience social communication barriers. The research was conducted at SDN 101 Sukakarya, Bandung City, an inclusive elementary school that accommodates regular students and students with special needs. The focus of the research was directed at one student with verbal communication barriers and low self-confidence in social interactions. The research subject was a student with the initials NFZ, a class V (five) student who was identified as having difficulties with verbal articulation and speaking spontaneity. Subject selection was carried out purposively based on the results of observations and recommendations from the class teacher. According to Patton (2002), the purposive sampling technique allows researchers to select the most informative cases to achieve an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon being studied.

The research location was chosen because this school implements an inclusive system with the support of special assistant teachers (GPK) and a fairly active literacy-based learning program. A school environment that is responsive to children with special needs is an ideal context for implementing the Friendly with Words program. Data were collected through three main techniques: Participatory Observation, conducted to observe NFZ's communication behavior and social interactions during teaching and learning activities and during the implementation of the literacy program. Observations focused on aspects of speaking skills, spontaneous conversation, and expressions of confidence. In-depth Interviews were conducted with class teachers, peers, and parents to obtain information about changes in NFZ's behavior and communication development before and after the program intervention. Documentary data in the form of daily progress notes, children's assignments, and photos of activities during the program were used as supporting evidence and data triangulation. The implementation of the "Friendly with Words" program lasted for four weeks, with a frequency of two meetings per week. Each session lasted approximately 45 minutes and involved class teachers, GPK, and several peers as activity supporters. Data validity was strengthened by triangulation of sources (teachers, parents, peers) and triangulation of methods (observation, interviews, documentation) to ensure the validity of the research results (Sugiyono, 2019).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

The initial identification stage showed that the research subject, NFZ, had difficulty in word articulation and phonemic awareness. NFZ often used short sentences, spoke with a hesitant tone, and took a long time to respond to questions from teachers or friends. Based on the results of the classroom teacher assessment and field observations, NFZ's social communication barriers were influenced by two main factors: (1) limited mastery of certain phoneme sounds (such as /r/ and /s/), and (2) low self-confidence in speaking in public. In learning situations, NFZ tended to be active only when the topic of conversation was related to his personal interests, such as reptiles. Meanwhile, in group activities, NFZ was more silent or waited for invitations from friends. This condition indicates the need for targeted interventions based on fun activities so that NFZ felt safe to express himself.

The program was implemented in eight meetings over four weeks. The two main types of activities carried out are: Creative Phoneme Games: Children recognize, imitate, and match phoneme sounds through picture cards, phonetic claps, and word guessing games. The teacher uses multisensory techniques (hearing, sight, and body movement) to strengthen sound recognition. Role-Based Mini Dramas: Children are allowed to play simple characters according to their interests, for example, being a “reptile keeper” or a “veterinarian.” During the exercises, the teacher encourages children to speak spontaneously and express emotions.

This program is supported by the involvement of the class teacher and peers as social facilitators. At the end of each session, the teacher provides positive feedback to strengthen the child's self-confidence. Observations show a significant improvement in NFZ's social communication skills after participating in the program. The following is a summary of the changes shown in Table 1:

Table 1. Changes in Behavior and Progress of Children

Observation Aspects	Before Program	After Program
Verbal Articulation Often	Often unclear and choppy	More clear, able to pronounce difficult phonemes such as /r/
Spontaneity	Passive Speaking, rarely initiates conversations	Able to start simple dialogues without prompting
Expression and Intonation	Monotonous, minimal facial expression	More expressive, able to adjust intonation
Self-Confidence	Hesitates when asked to speak in front of friends	Dare to appear and actively participate in mini dramas
Social Interaction	Depends on Teachers	More independent and able to communicate with peers

Based on table 1, the class teacher reported that after the program, NFZ was more involved in class discussions and showed an increased interest in reading. He began bringing his own picture books and trying to imitate the dialogue of the characters in the stories, something he rarely did before. 1. Interview Findings From the interviews with teachers and parents, several important statements were obtained teachers stated that play-based literacy activities made children “more alive” and motivated to talk, parents saw changes in the child's attitude at home, especially in his courage to tell stories and greet family members, peers also began to interact more actively with NFZ because the drama activities created a fun atmosphere of togetherness.

These interview results reinforce that the program not only has an impact on improving verbal skills, but also expands the child's social network in the context of an inclusive school.

The results of the observation show significant improvement in the child's communication skills and social behavior after participating in the program. Before the program was implemented, the child's verbal articulation skills were still unclear and disjointed. Many phonemes were difficult to pronounce, so the child's speech was often not well understood by peers and teachers. After participating in the program, the children's pronunciation became clearer and more regular, and they were even able to pronounce phonemes that were previously difficult, such as the /r/ sound. This indicates an improvement in the children's articulatory control and phonemic awareness.

In terms of spontaneity in speaking, children who were previously passive and rarely initiated conversations began to show initiative to speak. They began to be able to engage in simple dialogue without direct encouragement from the teacher, for example by asking questions, commenting on objects around them, or responding to their friends' statements. This change indicates that the children's confidence in communicating has increased, while also demonstrating progress in their expressive language skills.

Changes were also apparent in their expression and intonation. Before participating in the program, the child spoke in a monotonous tone and with minimal facial expressions, making it difficult to convey emotions or meaning. After the program, the child began to show more lively expressions, with variations in intonation appropriate to the context, such as a rising tone when asking questions or emphasis when expressing feelings of joy or surprise. The child also began to dare to show facial expressions appropriate to the content of the conversation.

The child's confidence in performing in front of friends also increased. Previously, the child appeared hesitant, looked down, or spoke softly when asked to speak in front of the class, but now the child appears more confident. He can speak more firmly and even actively participates in group activities such as mini-dramas or simple role-playing games. This courage shows that the child is becoming more comfortable in social situations and is proud of his abilities.

In addition, in terms of social interaction, children who previously always depended on teachers to communicate began to show independence. They were able to communicate directly with their peers without waiting for the teacher's instructions, both in class activities and games. Children appeared to participate more actively, were able to maintain simple conversations, and exhibited more adaptive social behavior, such as sharing, waiting for their turn, and cooperating. Overall, the changes that have occurred illustrate an integrated improvement in the child's verbal, expressive, and social communication skills. The program implemented not only helps children in terms of language, but also strengthens the emotional and social aspects that support the learning process and daily interactions at school.

Discussion

This study demonstrates the effectiveness of the Bersahabat dengan Kata program in developing social communication skills among children with special needs.. Phoneme-based activities help children recognize sound patterns, while mini-dramas provide a realistic social context for practicing communication (Yenduri et al. n.d.). This approach aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) Social Constructivism theory, which emphasizes the importance of social interaction as a primary means of language and thinking development. In phoneme activities, children learn through direct experience supported by the teacher as scaffolding (Dalgaard 2022). This process allows children to develop new abilities that were previously unable to be achieved independently. These results are also consistent with Piaget's (1972) view that children learn through concrete activities and meaningful play experiences.

Children's self-confidence increases because literacy activities provide a space for expression without the pressure of formal assessment. This aligns with Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy, which states that self-confidence grows from experiences of small successes

recognized by the environment. Appreciation from teachers and peers creates a positive emotional climate that stimulates children's participation. Furthermore, literacy-based learning provides opportunities for children to understand and express feelings through language. As Bruner (1983) stated, language is a child's primary tool for negotiating meaning and building their social identity.

The Friendly with Words program demonstrates that literacy can function as a tool for social inclusion. Through reading, speaking, and role-playing, children not only learn language but also learn to be part of a learning community (Zupardo et al. 2023). These findings support UNESCO's (2017) notion that literacy should be seen as a social right and a foundation for children's participation in society. In the context of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory, the program's success is due to the positive synergy between elements of the microsystem (teachers, peers), mesosystem (home and school support), and exosystem (inclusive school policies). This demonstrates that consistent environmental support is important to the success of educational interventions for children with special needs.

For Inclusive Education Practices, the findings of this study provide implications for schools and teachers in designing empathetic, interactive, and literacy-based learning activities. Educators are encouraged to pay attention not only to students' academic performance but also to their social and emotional growth. of students. The “Friendly with Words” approach can be adapted at various grade levels by adjusting the child’s ability level. For example, for children with more severe disabilities, teachers can modify activities using visual media, hand puppets, or simple interactive applications. The results of this study also open up opportunities for the development of an inclusive literacy curriculum in elementary schools that combines phonemic activities, storytelling, and dramatic expression as a unified social-communicative learning.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the “Friendly with Words” literacy program has proven effective in improving social communication and self-confidence in children with special needs. Through creative phoneme games and mini-dramas, children showed improvements in verbal articulation, spontaneous speaking, and courage to perform in public. The structured and fun literacy approach creates a supportive learning environment, fosters a sense of security, and strengthens social interactions between children, teachers, and peers. This program is evidence that literacy-based activities can be used as a social-emotional intervention strategy in inclusive schools.

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