

The role of mentoring regular school teachers for students with down syndrome (autism) at Ama Ori/Passo public elementary school



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ABSTRACT

Teachers play a pivotal role in shaping the fabric of society as both intellectuals and exemplars for their students. Within this role, they serve as guides for children with disabilities, including those with Down syndrome, who encounter various physical, intellectual, mental, and sensory challenges over time while navigating their environments. This study focuses on children aged 10-11 with special needs, particularly Down syndrome, receiving education in mainstream schools, a prevalent occurrence in Ambon, especially at Ama Ori/Passo public elementary school. Utilizing qualitative methodology, this research involved direct interviews with teachers and gathering relevant literature. The findings underscore the vital role of mentoring regular teachers in supporting children with Down syndrome. Accompanying and educating these students demands unique competencies from educators, distinguishing it from teaching students without special needs. Understanding the concept of special needs education (ABK) serves as the cornerstone for teachers in this role. This understanding, complemented by effective instructional strategies tailored to individual needs, fosters dynamic learning environments conducive to the growth of children with special needs. Educators derive immense satisfaction from witnessing their students achieve targeted learning outcomes. However, encountering student difficulties prompts reflection on teaching practices and necessitates adjustments to instructional approaches. By recognizing the distinct needs of students with Down syndrome and providing targeted support through mentorship, educators can facilitate meaningful educational experiences and foster inclusive learning environments within mainstream schools.



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1. Introduction

The teacher holds a pivotal role in shaping the nation's development, serving as an exemplar for students and guiding their intellectual growth. It suggests that teachers are not merely educators who impart knowledge and skills to students [1]; rather, they serve as influential figures who significantly contribute to the shaping of a nation's future [2]. Teachers are portrayed as exemplars or role models for students. They set an example through their behavior, values, and dedication to their profession [3]. By embodying qualities such as integrity, diligence, and compassion, teachers inspire students to emulate these virtues, thus contributing positively to the social fabric of the nation [4]. Teachers are depicted as facilitators of intellectual growth. Beyond academic instruction, they nurture critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving skills in students [5]. Through their guidance and mentorship, teachers empower students to reach their full intellectual potential [6], preparing them to become competent and engaged citizens capable of contributing meaningfully to society [7]. Educators

face significant challenges in nurturing their students' development within the school environment [8].

The major challenge educators face in fostering student development within the school environment encompasses a variety of factors that can hinder effective teaching and learning processes. Some of the key challenges include; (1) Diverse Student Needs: Students come from diverse backgrounds with varying levels of abilities, learning styles, and socio-economic circumstances [9]. Meeting the individual needs of each student while ensuring equitable access to education poses a significant challenge for educators [10]; (2) Limited Resources: Schools often face resource constraints, including insufficient funding, outdated teaching materials, and inadequate facilities. These limitations can impede educators' ability to provide quality instruction and support services to students [11]; (3) Classroom Management: Maintaining a conducive learning environment requires effective classroom management techniques. Educators must address issues such as student behavior management, disciplinary actions, and maintaining order in the classroom, which can be demanding and time-consuming [12]; (4) Engaging Students: Capturing students' interest and motivation to learn is a continuous challenge for educators. With distractions from technology, social media, and other external factors, educators must employ innovative teaching strategies to engage students and make learning relevant and meaningful to their lives [13]; (5) Assessing Student Progress: Evaluating student learning and progress accurately can be challenging due to the diverse ways in which students demonstrate understanding and mastery of content. Educators must use a variety of assessment methods and tools to effectively measure student achievement while providing constructive feedback for improvement [14]; (6) Keeping Pace with Change: The education landscape is constantly evolving, with new technologies, teaching methods, and curriculum standards emerging regularly. Educators must stay updated on current trends and best practices in education to ensure they are adequately prepared to meet the evolving needs of their students [15].

Their multifaceted role encompasses not only teaching and mentoring but also providing valuable learning resources, guidance, and advisory support [16]. Teachers serve as companions in supporting children with disabilities, particularly those with conditions such as Down syndrome, characterized by prolonged physical, intellectual, mental, and sensory limitations [17]. Autism, a specific condition within this spectrum, manifests in distinct behavioral patterns such as persistent hand movements, unusual communication responses, or aggression [18]. The characteristics of autism, including social difficulties, communication challenges, and peculiar interests or behaviors, typically emerge during childhood [19]. Despite this, children with autism at Ama Ory/Passo public elementary school receive limited support due to the school's uniform curriculum and absence of specialized educators. This study underscores the necessity of providing comprehensive support, including psychological and educational assistance, to students with disabilities like autism. Given the lack of specialized teachers in mainstream education, these children require additional attention and resources to thrive academically and psychologically, both at home and in school.

2. Method

The qualitative research methodology utilized in this study is selected to delve deeply into the nuances and complexities of the subject matter, aiming to provide rich and detailed insights into the phenomenon under investigation [20]. Qualitative research is well-suited for exploring the experiences, perceptions, and perspectives of individuals, making it particularly valuable for understanding the experiences of teachers and students in the educational context [21]. By employing a qualitative approach, the study seeks to capture the depth and breadth of the participants' experiences, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the research topic. In addition to the qualitative approach, the researcher also incorporates a library research method. This involves systematically searching and analyzing existing literature relevant to the research topic. By reviewing scholarly articles, books, reports, and other academic sources, the researcher gains a comprehensive understanding of the theoretical framework, previous research findings, and key concepts related to the study [22]. The library research method

serves to contextualize the current study within the broader academic discourse and provides a foundation for further inquiry.

Researchers conducted interviews with teachers from Ama Ory/Passo public elementary school. Interviews serve as a primary data collection method, allowing the researcher to directly engage with participants and gather firsthand accounts of their experiences, perspectives, and practices. Semi-structured interviews are often employed in qualitative research, enabling flexibility in questioning and facilitating in-depth exploration of specific themes or topics of interest. Through interviews, the researcher aims to capture the diverse perspectives and insights of teachers regarding the research subject, thereby enriching the qualitative data set. Furthermore, the researcher supplements the primary data collected through interviews with secondary data obtained from literature sources. This dual approach to data collection enhances the depth and comprehensiveness of the study by triangulating information from multiple sources. By integrating insights from both primary and secondary data sources, the researcher can corroborate findings, identify patterns or discrepancies, and gain a more holistic understanding of the research phenomenon. The literature review also serves to validate and support the interpretations drawn from the primary data, enhancing the rigor and credibility of the study [23].

3. Results and Discussion

Children aged 10-11 years with special needs who receive education in regular schools represent a phenomenon commonly observed in Ambon, particularly at Ama Ory/Passo public elementary school. These children, who continue their education at the elementary school level, are integrated into mainstream classes. Specifically, Ama Ory public elementary school has reported several cases of children in this age group with special needs, particularly in classes 4 and 5. Research conducted in 2023 identified disruptive behaviors among students at this school, with 7 cases of autistic Down syndrome detected, comprising 3 boys and 4 girls. The presence of such behavioral disorders, particularly associated with Down syndrome, poses significant challenges for educators and parents alike. Children with special needs, commonly referred to as 'ABK,' exhibit differences in various aspects such as mental, physical, sensory, and communication abilities. These differences manifest in various ways, including verbal and nonverbal communication, self-resilience, and the ability to engage in and derive enjoyment from activities [24]. Children with special needs encompass a spectrum of conditions, extending beyond mere limitations or obstacles outlined in DSM V guidelines [25]. Clinical diagnosis in childhood may reveal various disorders, including but not limited to mental retardation and autism spectrum disorder (ASD). ASD refers to a neurobehavioral disorder affecting individuals' daily behaviors, often manifesting signs observable as early as the third year after birth, although some cases may present symptoms from birth.

Based on several studies, disruptive behavior disorders can be clinically diagnosed in early childhood [26]. Children with such clinical disorders require specialized treatment, particularly in the educational context. The subsequent challenge lies in organizing education to address the specific problems and needs faced by these students. Early childhood children with special educational needs necessitate tailored educational programs designed to meet their unique requirements. These programs are crafted to accommodate the individual characteristics and potential of each student. As research progresses on optimal educational services for children with special needs, three learning settings are deemed appropriate: segregation, integration, and inclusion. Inclusive education, in particular, entails providing the same learning settings for children with special needs as for other children [27]. Inclusivity extends beyond mere coexistence in the same class; it demands equal opportunities for learning. Therefore, the mere placement of children with special needs in regular classes does not necessarily signify inclusive education within the institution. Children with special needs thrive in environments with minimal pressure or threat to their learning process, aligning with the fundamental concept of the least restrictive environment (LRE) [28]. LRE underscores the significance of maintaining a sense of security for children with special needs as they engage in the learning process. Notably, these children often experience anxiety in new situations and may have low self-confidence, particularly in achieving academic or skill-related objectives.

Hence, the learning environment for children with special needs is designed to ensure the child's comfort and security. Consequently, educators and administrators must prioritize the fundamental components of an effective school. According to Pedder *et al*, these essential components include vision, mission, and institutional management; educators (teachers); the learning environment (curriculum, plans, media, learning evaluation, and various other infrastructural aspects); and parental involvement [29]. Adhering to these elements serves as a guiding framework for daily educational endeavors. The elements of vision and mission offer educators a clear direction in conducting their instructional activities. However, when a regular elementary school, which defines itself as such, admits students with special needs, the educational landscape undergoes a shift. This prompts questions regarding the educational directives and initiatives undertaken by teachers and administrators in such institutions. Given the paramount importance of fostering a positive learning environment for children with special needs, the primary inquiry of this research revolves around the approaches adopted by regular elementary school educators in Ama Ory to provide learning support for their students with special needs. The anticipated outcomes of this research hold potential significance for educators and policymakers in the educational domain, particularly at Ama Ory/Passo public elementary school. The findings aim to contribute to the fulfillment of the rights of 10-11-year-old students with special needs and to aid teachers and support staff in delivering optimal educational services, thereby nurturing talents and fostering the interests of all children.

3.1. Clinical symptoms that are often found in autistic children

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition characterized by a wide range of symptoms that typically manifest in early childhood [30]. These symptoms vary widely in severity and presentation, leading to the term "spectrum." Some of the common clinical symptoms often observed in autistic children include [31]: (1) Impaired social interaction: Autistic children often struggle with understanding and reciprocating social cues, which may lead to difficulties in forming and maintaining relationships. They may have limited eye contact, show little interest in sharing experiences or emotions with others, and struggle to engage in conversations or play with peers; (2) Restricted and repetitive behaviors: Autistic children may display repetitive movements, gestures, or speech patterns, such as hand-flapping, rocking, or repeating phrases or words (echolalia). They may also develop rigid routines and rituals, becoming upset or distressed if these routines are disrupted. Additionally, they may exhibit intense interests in specific topics or objects, focusing intensely on them to the exclusion of other activities; (3) Communication challenges: Many autistic children experience delays or difficulties in developing language skills. They may have limited vocabulary, struggle with understanding and using language effectively, or have difficulty initiating or maintaining conversations. Some children with ASD may rely on alternative forms of communication, such as gestures, pictures, or assistive devices; (4) Sensory sensitivities: Autistic children often have heightened or diminished sensitivity to sensory stimuli, such as sound, light, touch, taste, or smell. They may be hypersensitive to certain sensations, becoming overwhelmed or distressed by loud noises, bright lights, or certain textures. Conversely, they may seek out or be indifferent to sensory input, such as seeking out deep pressure or spinning objects; (5) Difficulty with transitions and changes: Autistic children may struggle with transitions, whether from one activity to another or from one environment to another. They may become anxious or upset when routines are altered or when faced with unfamiliar situations. Predictability and consistency can be important for reducing stress and anxiety in these children. It's important to note that the presentation of autism symptoms can vary widely among individuals, and not all children with ASD will exhibit all of these symptoms. Additionally, co-occurring conditions such as intellectual disability, ADHD, anxiety, or depression may further complicate the clinical picture. Early identification and intervention tailored to the individual needs of each child are essential for promoting optimal development and improving outcomes for autistic children.

3.2. The Role of Regular Teacher Assistance for Students with Special Needs (Autism)

Teachers at Ama Ory/Passo public elementary school play several crucial roles in providing services to students with special needs, particularly autism. These roles encompass various aspects of teaching, support, collaboration, and advocacy, ensuring the holistic development and success of students with autism. Teachers collaborate with special education professionals

and support staff to develop and implement individualized education plans (IEPs) for students with autism [32]. They adapt teaching strategies, materials, and assessments to meet each student's unique learning style, strengths, and challenges. Additionally, teachers provide differentiated instruction, scaffolding support, and personalized learning experiences to achieve academic, social, and behavioral goals. Teachers also implement positive behavior support strategies to encourage appropriate behavior and manage challenging behavior in autistic students. They establish clear expectations, routines, and visual supports to facilitate predictability and reduce anxiety. Moreover, they teach self-regulation skills, social-emotional competencies, and problem-solving strategies to help students navigate social situations and regulate their emotions effectively. In terms of developing communication and social skills, teachers facilitate the improvement of communication and social skills in autistic students through explicit instruction, modeling, and practice opportunities. They utilize visual supports, social stories, role plays, and peer-mediated interventions to enhance communication, social interactions, and peer relationships. Creating an inclusive classroom environment that fosters meaningful social relationships and encourages peer acceptance and understanding is also emphasized [33].

Furthermore, teachers create sensory-friendly classrooms and learning environments that accommodate the sensitivities and sensory preferences of autistic students. They minimize sensory distractions, provide sensory breaks, and offer tools and sensory accommodations to support sensory regulation and engagement in learning activities [34]. Collaboration with occupational therapists and other specialists is crucial to address sensory processing difficulties and encourage sensory integration [35]. Teachers collaborate closely with families, special education team members, therapists, and other professionals to coordinate services and supports for students with autism [36]. They advocate for the individual needs and rights of autistic students, ensuring access to appropriate accommodations, services, and resources. Encouraging inclusive practices, positive attitudes, and acceptance of diversity within the school community fosters a culture of inclusion and a sense of belonging for all students [37]. Overall, teachers at Ama Ory/Passo public elementary school play a central and indispensable role in providing comprehensive and effective services for autistic students. Through their dedication, expertise, and commitment to student success, teachers create supportive, inclusive, and enriching learning environments where all students can thrive and reach their full potential. Ama Ory/Passo public elementary school, situated in Passo village, hosts a student body totaling 270, comprising 150 boys and 120 girls. Among these students, 7 have special needs, including autism. The research findings reveal that the enrollment period poses significant challenges for educators and administrators. Besides grappling with administrative and financial issues, educators must navigate interactions with parents seeking to enroll their children with special needs at Ama Ory public elementary school. The process of admitting students with special needs marks the initiation of a learning support journey that educators will undertake over the ensuing years. Educators perceive this process as protracted and arduous.

3.3. Teacher assistance for students with special needs at Ama Ory public elementary school

1) Negative Perception

Educators perceive that children with special needs may face challenges in participating effectively in regular classroom learning. They encounter difficulty in engaging these children in planned classroom activities. Such assertions are commonly expressed by educators, underscoring perceived discrepancies in the abilities demonstrated by these children compared to their peers of the same age. Educators often emphasize the challenges or apparent inability of children with special needs to adhere to class rules and complete assignments. This phenomenon is particularly prevalent in classrooms that include students with special needs. These children often struggle to comprehend and follow verbal instructions.

2) Role Monitoring Efforts

The role of a companion (educator) for children with special needs, particularly those aged 10 - 11 years, undoubtedly necessitates educators to adeptly manage them. This role, as a teacher accompanying special needs students, markedly differs from that of a teacher without such students. Effectively fulfilling the role of a companion for young children with special needs

demands employing specialized behaviors to address each child's unique requirements. Consequently, comprehending the concept of *ABK* (children with special needs) serves as the primary foundation for accompanying teachers. This comprehension is further enriched by teachers' proficiency in tailoring appropriate learning approaches for students with special needs. Thus, possessing fundamental understanding and skills in applying pedagogical methods becomes pivotal in actualizing the role of a companion throughout the learning journey of young children with special needs.

3) *Self-awareness and Hope*

For an educator, the greatest satisfaction arises when their students successfully attain the predetermined learning outcomes. However, if students fail to achieve these objectives, educators may experience disappointment and perceive it as a personal failure. In instances where planned learning outcomes are not met, educators are compelled to engage in reflective practices, reassessing the efficacy of their instructional strategies and learning plans. Such reflection inherently entails educators harboring aspirations for opportunities to enhance their knowledge and refine their skills in effectively accommodating children with special needs in classroom settings. This aspiration reflects the educator's commitment to delivering enhanced learning experiences for their students.

4. Conclusion

Down syndrome, and in this context, autism, is a condition that manifests either from birth or typically by the age of 3-5 years. Education for individuals with these conditions may present challenges, but they persist in their educational endeavors. In the research context of Ama Ory/Passo public elementary school, it was observed that some autistic children attend regular schools rather than special schools (*SLB*). The role of teachers in regular schools is pivotal, not only for typically developing children but also for those with autism. Teachers provide additional assistance in terms of academics, psychology, and fostering an inclusive environment that does not discriminate against students with special needs, including those with autism.

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