



TEACHER EMPOWERMENT AS A STRATEGY IN IMPROVING THE LEARNING ABILITY OF STUDENTS WITH MENTAL DISABILITIES IN THE AUTIS SLB LABORATORY UM

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the effectiveness of teacher empowerment in improving the learning abilities of students with intellectual disabilities at the Autism Special School (SLB Autis) of the Laboratory School, State University of Malang (UM). Using a qualitative method, data were collected through interviews, observations, and documentation, and analyzed using the interactive model of Miles and Huberman. The findings indicate that continuous teacher training, the implementation of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), and the use of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) and Project-Based Learning (PjBL) methods contribute to students' improved understanding of the material. Furthermore, supervision, mentoring, and participation in external academic activities play a significant role in enhancing teacher professionalism. With structured and sustainable empowerment, the quality of learning for students with intellectual disabilities can be continuously improved, fostering a more inclusive and adaptive educational environment.

Keywords: Teacher empowerment, Students with intellectual disabilities, Inclusive education

1. Introduction

Education is a basic right for every individual, including children with special needs such as students with intellectual disabilities. Students with intellectual disabilities have characteristics and learning needs that are different from students in general, so they require a specific and planned learning approach. The need for education for children with special needs is clearly stated in Law of the Republic of Indonesia Number 20 of 2003 concerning the national education system, Chapter V, Article V, Paragraphs 1 and 2, which states: "Every citizen has the same right to obtain quality education and citizens who have physical, emotional, mental, intellectual and/or social disabilities have the right to receive special education" (Setiawan, 2019). In the context of education in Special Schools (PLB), the role of teachers is very crucial in providing educational services according to the abilities and potential of students. Therefore, efforts to empower teachers are a strategic step to maximize the quality of learning for students with intellectual disabilities.

Understanding the importance and direction of knowledge encompasses two main aspects: "knowledge and interests." In everyday life, it can be observed that ideas often play a role in guiding actions, or even serve as the basis for justifying those actions. What is referred to as rationalization at the individual level is known collectively as ideology (Pratami et al., 2023).

Children with special needs are children who significantly experience abnormalities or deviations (physical, mental, intellectual, social, emotional) in their growth or development process compared to other children of the same age, so that they require special education services (Butar et al., 2024). Mais in Sari 2023 states that learning planning for children with

special needs must be adapted to the unique characteristics of each individual so that their potential can develop optimally. The success of the learning process is greatly influenced by a good understanding of educators regarding the use of various learning media. For children with intellectual disabilities, learning media not only functions as an intermediary in the learning process, but also as a supporting tool in meeting the needs of disabilities, as well as a tool for therapy and rehabilitation. Therefore, learning media needs to be adapted to the conditions and potential of each child with intellectual disabilities.

Inclusive Education is a form of equality and a form of realization of education without discrimination where children with special needs and children in general can receive the same education (Sahrudin et al., 2023). Teacher Empowerment is a very important aspect in improving educational learning abilities, especially for children with intellectual disabilities. This empowerment aims to ensure that teachers have adequate competence in dealing with the various characteristics and specific needs of students with intellectual disabilities. Consistent teacher empowerment will help improve the quality of learning in Special Schools (Setiawan, 2019). The challenges in learning for students with intellectual disabilities are very complex and varied. Children with intellectual disabilities experience obstacles in the development of intelligence, mental, emotional, social, and physical which results in difficulties in understanding learning materials. One of the main challenges is their cognitive abilities which are below average, with an IQ below 70, which hinders academic and non-academic activities (Apriliana & Afandi, 2024).

In the implementation of segregated schools, of course, it is adjusted to the school's ability to provide the type of specialization, for example, there are some schools that only provide for one type of specialization, but currently there are many SLB that accept all types of specializations owned by prospective students. In the learning process for students, of course, still pay attention to the characteristics and learning needs required by the students. One of the specializations that almost every SLB has is a specialization for the deaf (Kasirah & Wuryani, 2024).

According to Zuhdi & Harsiwi (2024), teachers face various challenges in educating children with special needs, from managing students' emotions, building social interactions, to delivering learning materials. These children often experience rapid emotional changes, which can hinder the learning process, especially if parental support is not optimal. Furthermore, social interactions between them also become an obstacle, as some students exhibit behavior that disrupts their peers, creating a less supportive learning environment. Delivering material also requires a special approach tailored to individual needs so that the learning process can take place more effectively.

The Special Needs School for Autism Laboratory, State University of Malang (UM), is an educational institution committed to providing special services for children with special needs, including students with intellectual disabilities. To address the learning challenges faced by students with intellectual disabilities, the institution implements a series of strategies to improve teacher capacity to ensure quality educational services. Various efforts such as training, workshops, mentoring, and collaboration are carried out to strengthen teachers' pedagogical competencies in supporting the learning process. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the effectiveness of the teacher empowerment program at the Special Needs School for Autism Laboratory, State University of Malang (UM), as an effort to improve the

learning quality of students with intellectual disabilities. By exploring the empowerment mechanisms and their impacts, the findings of this study are expected to serve as a reference in the development of a more holistic inclusive education.

2. Method

This study employed qualitative research. This approach was chosen to gain a deeper understanding of the teacher empowerment process and its impact on the learning abilities of students with intellectual disabilities. According to Sugiyono & Lestari (2021), qualitative research is a research method used to investigate in natural conditions (as opposed to experiments) where the researcher acts as the primary instrument, data collection techniques are carried out through triangulation (combination), data analysis is inductive, and qualitative research results emphasize meaning rather than generalization.

The data obtained were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles and Huberman cited in Safarudin et al (2023), stating that activities in qualitative data analysis were carried out interactively and took place continuously and completely, so that the data was saturated. Activities in data analysis, namely data reduction (Data Collection), data presentation (Data Presentation), data reduction, drawing conclusions/verification (Drawing Conclusions and Verification). Learning strategies for students with intellectual disabilities include a personalized approach, life skills development, and the application of learning aids. The personalized approach ensures that each student receives material that suits their abilities and needs, so they can learn more efficiently. Life skills development focuses on motoric aspects, communication, and social interaction to increase their independence in daily activities (Akbar et al, 2024)

The research process was carried out systematically through several stages, namely planning, data collection, data analysis, and report preparation. In the planning stage, research instruments were prepared, subjects were determined, and research permits were obtained at the UM Laboratory Autism Special Needs School. Furthermore, data were collected through interviews, observations, and documentation. The collected data were then analyzed using interactive qualitative analysis techniques. The final results of the research were compiled in the form of a scientific report explaining the main findings and their implications for teacher empowerment and improving the learning abilities of students with intellectual disabilities.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Implementation of Teacher Professionalism Training and Development Program

Teacher training programs need to focus on developing four core competencies through needs analysis, innovative training (blended learning, microteaching), the formation of learning communities, and impact evaluation, supported by budget allocation and collaboration with experts to improve the quality of education sustainably (Istianah, 2019).

The training and professional development program for teachers at the UM Laboratory Autism Special School is implemented regularly through various structured and ongoing activities. Every Wednesday, an evaluation meeting is held to discuss various important aspects, such as student progress, the effectiveness of learning activities, and to share

experiences and challenges in the field. These meetings provide a forum for teachers to discuss and find solutions to problems encountered in the learning process.

In addition to routine evaluations, the school also holds workshops every few months featuring academic speakers, particularly lecturers specializing in Special Education (PLB). These workshops aim to update teachers' insights and skills in implementing the latest teaching modules, assessment strategies, and keeping abreast of popular inclusive education methods. These activities provide teachers with the opportunity to continuously improve their competencies to provide optimal educational services for students with intellectual disabilities.

Furthermore, the school provides teachers with opportunities to participate in various external and internal training programs. Selected teachers are instructed to participate in development activities, such as writing scientific papers, to enhance their professional capacity. These activities support the development of analytical skills, the ability to prepare scientific reports, and innovation in learning strategies. The principal's support in encouraging teachers to continue learning and developing creates a conducive atmosphere for improving the quality of learning at the UM Laboratory Autism Special Needs School.

3.2 Learning Methods and Approaches Adapted to Students' Individual Needs

Effective education for students with intellectual disabilities requires the implementation of learning methods and approaches tailored to individual student needs, with the Individual Learning Program (ILP) serving as the primary framework. Teachers empowered through ongoing training play a crucial role in implementing multisensory and contextual approaches and designing learning materials that integrate functional skills for everyday life. The use of assistive technology and creative media by qualified teachers can facilitate the understanding of students with intellectual disabilities, while the observation-based developmental assessment system implemented allows for accurate monitoring of learning progress. Collaboration between teachers, therapists, and parents in this individual learning approach creates a holistic educational ecosystem, thus optimizing the development of independence and the overall potential of students with intellectual disabilities (Dacholfany et al., 2023).

The learning approach at the UM Laboratory Autism Special School is individually designed based on the characteristics and needs of each student. Teachers employ various methods, such as Problem-Based Learning (PBL), Project-Based Learning (PjBL), and Contextual Learning. PBL emphasizes solving real-life problems as a learning tool, while PjBL focuses on creating projects as a means of developing students' skills. Contextual Learning is used to link learning materials to real-life situations that students can understand concretely.

Because students with intellectual disabilities have diverse abilities, teachers tailor learning strategies to meet each individual's specific needs. For example, for students with strong visual abilities, image-based learning and visual aids are preferred. This approach helps students understand concepts more concretely and concretely, making it easier to internalize information. Furthermore, teachers use fun, activity-based learning strategies to

create a comfortable learning environment and motivate students to be active participants in learning.

Methods are adjusted flexibly for each class, as student needs can vary significantly within a single class. Teachers begin lessons by creating a positive atmosphere to build student engagement before moving on to the core material. If students struggle to understand the material using conventional methods, teachers modify their approach by using more appropriate aids or alternative methods. With this strategy, it is hoped that each student will achieve significant progress according to their individual abilities.

3.3 School Support in Improving Teacher Competence through Supervision, Mentoring, and External Activities

Schools play a crucial role in improving teacher competency through an integrated approach that encompasses digital supervision, mentoring, and external activities. Technology-based learning supervision allows for more objective and timely observation and feedback, while mentoring programs provide a space for sharing experiences between senior and junior teachers. External activities such as training and seminars provide new insights into innovation in education. However, their implementation faces challenges such as teacher resistance to change, limited technological infrastructure, and the need for a more measurable evaluation system. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive commitment from schools in the form of phased training, infrastructure strengthening, and the development of clear success indicators. With the right support, these three strategies will not only increase teacher capacity to meet the demands of inclusive education but also create a culture of sustainable collaborative learning within the school environment. Ultimately, strengthening teacher competency will have a direct impact on improving the quality of learning, particularly for students with special needs who require an individualized approach (Sutrisno et al., 2024).

School support for improving teacher competency is evident through various forms of supervision, guidance, and involvement in external activities. Several teachers with specialized competencies are selected as instructors in collaboration with lecturers, such as delivering material in the Teacher Professional Education Program (PPG) or giving seminars at universities such as the University of Muhammadiyah Malang (UMM) and Malang State University (UM). These activities provide valuable experience for teachers in developing their teaching skills and sharing knowledge with the wider educational community.

In addition, the school supports teacher participation as resource persons in seminars or workshops discussing inclusive education and special education services. Through these activities, teachers not only share their experiences but also gain new insights from interactions with academics and other education practitioners. Full support from the school, including providing adequate permits and facilities, encourages teachers to actively participate in various professional development activities. As a form of appreciation, the school provides awards to teachers who demonstrate high dedication and innovation in learning. For example, teachers who have perfect attendance rates or demonstrate creativity in developing teaching materials will be awarded with incentives or other forms of appreciation. This policy aims to motivate teachers to continue to innovate, improve their

competencies, and provide the best educational services for students with intellectual disabilities.

4. Conclusion

Teacher empowerment is a key factor in improving the quality of learning for students with intellectual disabilities at the UM Laboratory Autism Special Needs School. Through a structured training program, teachers are equipped with enhanced pedagogical skills to address the challenges of learning for children with special needs. Various activities, such as workshops, regular evaluations, and external training, contribute to improving teacher professionalism and provide new insights into implementing more effective and innovative teaching methods.

In addition to training, implementing learning methods tailored to the individual needs of students with intellectual disabilities also plays a role in improving their learning outcomes. The Individual Learning Program (IPL) serves as the primary framework for tailoring teaching strategies to the characteristics and abilities of each student. Approaches such as Problem-Based Learning (PBL) and Project-Based Learning (PjBL) enable students to learn more interactively and contextually, enabling them to better understand the material at their own pace.

School support through supervision, mentoring, and teacher involvement in external academic activities also plays a crucial role in improving the quality of inclusive education. Regular supervision helps ensure the effectiveness of teaching strategies, while mentoring fosters a collaborative culture between senior and junior teachers. Participation in seminars and other academic activities allows teachers to continuously develop and adopt the latest methods in special education. With ongoing empowerment, it is hoped that the quality of learning for students with intellectual disabilities can continue to improve, creating a more inclusive and adaptive educational environment.

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