

Research Article

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Teachers' Experiences in Teaching Independence to Children with Special Needs at School

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Abstract

Background/purpose. Children with special needs often experience limitations in their activities. Despite this, they are expected to develop independence and avoid reliance on others. Therefore, education for independence is essential for children with special needs. Unfortunately, teaching and training children to be independent is challenging, requiring experience and good practices from teachers at school. This study aimed to obtain information from teachers on teaching and training the independence of children with special needs at school.

Materials/methods. This research uses a descriptive qualitative method. The data were obtained through an in-depth interview with three inclusive school teachers in Ponorogo Regency, Indonesia.

Results. The results of this study indicated that teachers who teach children with special needs to be independent employed imitation and repetition methods. Education for independence for children with special needs is not significantly different from that of children in general. The independence taught and trained is in the form of daily activities. Patience, hard work, and cooperation with parents are essential for developing the independence of children with special needs optimally.

Conclusion. Teaching and training independence to children with special needs requires patience, hard work, and genuine effort. Teachers must be able to identify the children's special needs before teaching independence. This can be achieved through consistent daily routines and modeling positive behavior at school.

1. Introduction

Every child is expected to develop independence from an early age, including those with special needs (CSN). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) formally and explicitly recognizes the importance of achieving independence for individuals with disabilities (Quinn, 2016). Independence helps children become less dependent on others. Independence is often described as an attitude or behavior characterized by being independent and not relying on others (Fadlillah et al., 2020). Independence is the ability to control oneself to deal with situations without external assistance (Musyaropah et al., 2023). Independence can help children live their daily lives. This attitude is crucial for children with special needs, enabling them to adapt to their surroundings.

Children with special needs are often overlooked by some people, resulting in them receiving less attention and educational opportunities (Siahaan, 2022). Data from the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) in 2017 revealed that out of 1.6 million children with special needs in Indonesia, only 288,000 (18%) received government support through inclusive education (Siahaan, 2022). However, special education was formally introduced in 1981 (Chandra, 2018). Special education can be related to academics, independence, or social emotions. It can be adjusted to the conditions and needs of each child (Siahaan, 2022). With this special education, it is hoped that children will be more independent and have better social-emotional development.

The number of children with special needs, such as autism, Down syndrome, and other neurological disorders, continues to increase every year (Downey, 2016), including in Indonesia. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimated in 2003 that Indonesia had 295,250 children with special needs (Pursitasari & Allenidekania, 2019). The latest statistical data from 2021 indicated that children with disabilities aged 5-19 years accounted for 3.3% of the 66.6 million people, equivalent to 2,197,833 individuals (Al-Nur, 2023; Islam et al., 2024; Wahyudi & Latif, 2023). This condition is certainly a serious concern for all parties so that children with special needs receive educational services and have optimal development, both in terms of independence and social and emotional. Cerino (2021) emphasized the significance of introducing and promoting independence in children. Therefore, it is essential to conduct this research to gain an understanding of the process of teaching independence for CSN, which remains a significant issue for the nation and the international community.

The issue of independence for CSN remains a top priority that must be addressed in nearly all countries, particularly Indonesia. Since the 1970s, there has been a global concern regarding the equality and quality of life of children with special needs (Poh et al., 2017). The problems of independence often faced by children with special needs are a lack of social interaction in society and school, limited daily activities, developmental delays, and behavioral and emotional problems (Cavallo et al., 2009; Pursitasari & Allenidekania, 2019). These limitations cause CSN to experience difficulties while performing their daily activities, making them less confident. These limitations make their lives very difficult (Chandra, 2018). They have long-term physical or mental problems that prevent them from performing daily activities and interacting with others in the community (Cavallo et al., 2009). Therefore, independent education for CSN is very important to be carried out and socialized in schools, especially in inclusive schools. According to Bowden (2010), children with special needs, regardless of their condition, still need special education and training. The goal is to help them be more confident and able to perform daily activities without relying on others. In this context, the experience of teachers in educating and training children with special needs to achieve independence in schools is greatly needed by the community. This good experience can be a guide and reference in educating the independence of CSN. Unfortunately, studies on the education for independence of children with special needs are currently limited. For this reason, many new studies and research are needed to address the issue of independence for children with special needs promptly.

2. Literature Review

Education for independence for children with special needs is essential so they can do their activities without depending on others. The independence of CSN to be taught and trained as early as possible so that they can perform self-care well. According to Demographics, Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Disability Statistics in 2016, the ability of independent self-care for children with special needs was around 15.6%, while according to the American Community Survey (ACS), the prevalence of self-care ability in children aged 5 to 17 years with disabilities was 0.9% (Pursitasari & Allenidekania, 2019). Self-care encompasses basic tasks, including drinking, eating, and personal hygiene activities (Zarchi et al., 2018). Education for independence and self-care practice for children with special needs can improve their abilities, attitudes, and skills (Ningsih et al., 2018). Various studies show that students with special needs are sometimes the targets of violence, harassment, prejudice, and disrespect from their environment because of their disabilities (Chandra, 2018). Children with special needs have physical, mental, intellectual, and emotional disorders, so they need to receive special education (Siahaan, 2022). These limitations often cause problems of a lack of independence in children (Prinanda, 2024). They are unable to carry out daily activities and interact with others in society (Cavallo et al., 2009). Therefore, education for independence must be given to children with special needs in schools.

Teaching independence for children with special needs really requires the role of teachers and the entire school community. Teachers are vital subjects who determine the success of independent education in schools. In addition to being role models for children (Biddle, Nevarez, Henderson, & Kerrick, 2014), teachers also act as facilitators in understanding children's needs, motivators who provide emotional support and build children's social relationships, and mentors in teaching life skills and doing their tasks such as dressing, eating, and personal hygiene (Hasanah & Yulianty, 2024). For this reason, education for independence is a top priority for children with special needs. With education for independence, they can engage in their activities and not rely on others.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This descriptive qualitative study aims to explore, gather information, and understand teachers' experiences in teaching independence of children with special needs. This method was used to obtain a real and natural picture of instilling independence in children with special needs at schools. Data collection was carried out through semi-structured interviews individually with each participant who had been previously determined (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). The interview technique was chosen for its ability to provide in-depth information about the informant's experience and perspective (Turner, 2010). Through in-depth interviews, teachers can share their diverse experiences in teaching independence to children with special needs at school. The results of this study are expected to provide a general overview of teaching and training independence for children with special needs at school. They can be a good reference for teachers when carrying out learning activities and for parents in training the independence of children with special needs when at home.

3.2. Research Informant

The informants in this study were determined using a purposive sampling method. The researcher selected informants based on certain objectives and criteria (Creswell, 2008). This method was chosen because it possesses certain characteristics that enable researchers to explore and collect information tailored to the problems that each participant is asked to address. With this method, potential informants will be obtained that are in accordance with the research needs. The criteria used in determining informants in this study were teachers in inclusive schools who were still actively teaching children with special needs. To ensure their willingness to participate as research subjects,

selected teachers were asked to complete a statement letter, guaranteeing the confidentiality of their answers and personal information.

This study involved three informants from teachers of children with special needs in inclusive schools in Ponorogo Regency, East Java, Indonesia. All informants were women aged 25 to 27. The first informant (I1) was a teacher who taught children with Down syndrome and speech delay. The second informant (I2) was a teacher who taught children with social-emotional disorders, speech difficulties, and issues with eye contact. The third informant (I3) was a teacher who taught children with learning disabilities and mental disorders. The characteristics of the informants in this research can be seen in table 1 below:

Table 1. Description of informants

Informants Identifier	Age	Teaching Experiences	Special Needs of Students
I1	27	3 years	Down syndrome and speedily
I2	25	3 years	Social-emotional disorders, speech disorders, and eye contact disorders
I3	27	4 years	Slow learner and mental disorders

Description: I = Informant; 1 = number of interview informants

3.3. Data Collection Procedures

The interview process for each informant was carried out after obtaining their consent verbally or by filling out a statement letter that had been provided and signed by both parties. The interview stage began with an introduction, explaining the title and purpose of the study, and asking participants to answer questions honestly (Turner, 2010) based on their experience in teaching and training children with special needs to achieve independence in inclusive schools. The researcher also prepared a recording device and sheets of paper to record the answers to each question in the interview. This tool was used to ensure that the teachers' answer was not missed and could be recorded or documented properly. After that, the researcher conducted a semi-structured interview at the predetermined time and place. In order for the interview to run smoothly and be directed, the researcher made a list or guide to research questions.

The time required for the interview was between 30 - 60 minutes for each informant. In one day, the researcher only interviewed one informant. This is because the interview was conducted after the learning activities ended so as not to interfere with teachers in teaching children with special needs at school. Some of the main questions in the interview with research informants include: How do you identify the independence of children with special needs at school? How do you teach and train children with special needs to develop their independence at school? Why are you willing to teach and train the independence of children with special needs at school? What obstacles do you encounter when teaching and training the independence of children with special needs at school? And how do you overcome these obstacles?

3.4. Data Analysis

Qualitative analysis was used in this study by coding, categorizing, and interpreting data to explain an interesting phenomenon (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The data analysis process in this study employed the Miles and Huberman data analysis model (Ridder, 2014), which involves data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions. The steps of data analysis carried out by the researcher are as follows: first, reducing the data from interviews with all informants and identifying

the most relevant data for the research questions posed by the researcher. In this data reduction, there are five research problem focuses, including the identification of independence in children with special needs, learning activities and training to promote independence in children with special needs at school, teaching methods, and obstacles faced by teachers in teaching and training independence in children with special needs at school. To obtain truly appropriate data, the researcher confirmed several times with the informant, as there were answers that were unclear and did not directly address the problem or research question. Second, the researcher presented the data, organized by the group of answers from the informants, on sheets of paper that had been previously coded. This data presentation was designed to facilitate the researcher's description of the answers from each informant. Third, the researcher concluded the answers from the informants that were presented on the sheets of paper. In drawing these conclusions, the researcher was very careful so that there were no mistakes

4. Results

The primary objective of this study was to investigate teachers' experiences in teaching and training children with special needs to achieve independence at school. In this case, teachers describe what they experience and implement in teaching independence to children with special needs in the classroom daily. To obtain answers to these questions, the researcher conducted interviews with three teachers who had been selected as informants. From the results of the interviews, three main themes were found related to teaching the independence of children with special needs at school: (1) characteristics of children with special needs at school; (2) teacher methods of teaching and training the independence of children with special needs at school; and (3) teacher obstacles in teaching and training the independence of children with special needs at school.

4.1. Characteristics of Children with Special Needs at Schools

The informants explained the conditions and characteristics of children with special needs in schools. According to them, the characteristics of children with special needs that each teacher faces differ. Some teach children with down syndrome, social-emotional limitations, and slow learners. As stated by informants I1, I2, I3 below:

For this semester, I was assigned to teach class A. There were six children with Down syndrome. Children with Down syndrome generally have rough skin, short hands, distinctive fingers, and tend to be shy or prefer to be alone (I1).

Informant (I1) handles special needs children in class A with Down syndrome. Meanwhile, informant I2 handles special needs children in a transitional class with social-emotional disorders (mental disorders). As expressed below:

This semester, I teach a transitional class for individuals, and their grades are quite high. He will be placed in a large class, but will still be in the transitional class. I handle one child with special social-emotional needs. His characteristic is a lack of focus, and his gaze is everywhere (I2).

In line with that, the informant (I3) also handles children with special needs in a transitional class with slow learner needs. As he said below:

Currently, I teach a transitional class; the transitional class is between playgroup and kindergarten. The one I am currently teaching is face-to-face, one child. The special needs of the children I teach are slow learners. He tends to have difficulty communicating and remembering things (I3).

These various types of special needs have different characteristics. Children with down syndrome have rough skin, short hands, and prefer to be alone. Children with social-emotional limitations tend

to be less focused, and their eyes look everywhere. Slow learners are characterized by difficulty communicating and poor memory. These are some characteristics of children with special needs faced by the teachers participating in this study.

4.2. How to Teach and Train the Independence of Children with Special Needs at School

Teachers have a critical role in educating and training the independence of children with special needs. In addition to being educators, teachers also act as second parents for children at school. Teachers must be able to teach well, especially for children with special needs. The method used by teachers greatly determines the success of teaching and training independence, especially for children with special needs. Based on the results of interviews with teachers who served as informants in this study, two methods were employed: imitation and habituation. As stated by informants I1, I2, and I3 below:

Children are taught independence starting with individual tasks, such as taking off their shoes, putting down their bags, wearing a headscarf, and going to the bathroom, and all of which have been trained. Then, in this joint class, it's just a matter of continuing and getting used to it. So, this independence is taught through individual classes, which focus on helping students help themselves. If it's noisy in class, like when studying, it's distracting. I ask students to sit down and train them to take their chairs, usually by getting used to it first. In our school, habituation is practiced through various activities, including gymnastics, prayers, gross motor skills, and arranging chairs to set up the study area, which is done individually. Every day, the children are accustomed to shaking hands with the teacher, taking off their shoes, putting them on the shelf, and then shaking hands with all the teachers. After that, they attend class as usual (I1).

From the informant's (I1) explanation, it can be understood that the method used in teaching and training the independence of children with special needs is through daily habits. The activities include helping oneself with daily tasks, such as taking off shoes, putting on pants, going to the bathroom, and putting on shoes. The same thing was also conveyed by informant I2 that:

Independence is the first thing I teach my children as a foundation for their future. The independence I teach includes first toilet training, then buttoning clothes, putting on and taking off shoes, tidying up, learning to play with tools, and more. I think that is the most important thing because later in their lives, children must be more independent in taking care of themselves (I2).

The method of teaching and training independence used by informant I2 is the same as I1: through the habituation of daily activities, as stated below:

The way is to get used to daily activities immediately; for example, when the child arrives, he immediately removes his shoes and puts them away. I like to accompany and guide; if, for example, the child is not yet able to do it, I will help to move and direct his hands, because he cannot move his limbs yet. This habituation is done every day (I2).

In contrast to informants I1 and I2, informant I3, in teaching and training independence, used the imitation method in addition to also carrying out daily habituation activities, as he said below:

The main independence includes daily activities, for example, from the first time you come to take off your shoes, bag, jacket, and so on. The way to teach it is through imitation. Children imitate and the most important thing for me is repetition. So, in teaching, it is indeed slow and takes a long time (I3).

There are two main methods in teaching and training independence in children with special needs: imitation and habituation. All informants stated that independence must be continually trained, exemplified, and practiced every day. Thus, independence can be firmly embedded in children with special needs.

4.3. Teachers' Obstacles in Teaching and Training Independence in Children with Special Needs at School

Teaching and training the independence of children with special needs has different challenges and difficulty levels compared to children in general. In addition, special needs children sometimes require different levels of service and teaching models. Based on the results of interviews with teachers who were informants in this study, it was shown that the main obstacles to teaching and training independence in children with special needs were conditioning children in class and a lack of parental concern. As stated by the following informant I1:

The obstacles I experience are mostly related to the children. Some are still shy and have difficulty following instructions. Their emotions are not yet under control. Conditioning children in this manner was difficult (I2).

Informants I2 and I3 stated that the obstacles experienced were the lack of support from parents. Parents tend not to care about the programs at school, so they are not accustomed to them and are not implemented when the child is at home. As stated by them as follows:

The obstacle may be that if the child's habits at home differ from those at school, then there will be no consistency between home and school. So if it is not the same, it can make the child undisciplined (I2).

This condition makes the education for independence that has been taught and trained by teachers in schools have less than optimal results. In line with that, informant I3 said:

The obstacle for me is from the parents' perspective. It requires cooperation from parents. Until now, if I don't speak first, the parents tend to remain silent and keep quiet (I3).

Based on informant I3's explanation, cooperation and communication between teachers and parents are essential. Intense communication will provide clear information related to the development of independence in children with special needs. Additionally, effective cooperation and communication can help teachers deliver the best services for the development of children with special needs.

From the various explanations, it is very clear that the obstacles for teachers in teaching and training the independence of children with special needs are the difficulty of conditioning the child and the lack of support and cooperation from parents. Therefore, all informants hope that parents are active and care about their children, especially regarding the child's needs. Parents must also have many discussions and share information regarding the development of children at home.

5. Discussion

Children with special needs require independence education. Physical and mental conditions and limitations hamper them in their daily activities, as experienced by children with Down syndrome, intellectual disability, and slow learners. Children with down syndrome are characterized by physical limitations in the form of a short body, slightly slanted eyes, a fold of skin on the upper eyelid that covers the inner corner of the eye, a slightly wide nose bridge, very small ears, low hearing, short neck, fat and short hands, and have one straight line on the palm (Hafsah, 2020). Children with down syndrome have chromosomal abnormalities (Metavia & Widyana, 2022), so they tend to be quiet and like to be alone. In addition, their intellectual abilities are also below average for children in general.

Children with down syndrome often depend on others, especially in carrying out their daily activities, such as eating, going to the bathroom, and getting dressed. Therefore, children with down syndrome require specialized support to help them become more independent.

Unlike children with down syndrome, children with emotional disabilities and slow learners are physically in better condition. Their limitations lie in social-emotional. Children with emotional disabilities are characterized by difficulty controlling emotions, difficulty focusing, and being unable to stay in one place for a long time, as well as being academically unable to reach existing standards (Afendi, 2023). Children with emotional disabilities have problems related to the inability to control their emotions, so these children do not get a good response in their environment (Nanik, 2022). As for slow learners, their learning ability is slower than that of other students, which is indicated by low learning achievement, often submitting assignments late, and taking a long time to understand the lesson material (Ardini, 2018; Supriyani et al., 2022). Students experience difficulties during the learning process, such as difficulty recognizing letters and numbers (Nurfadhillah et al., 2022). For this reason, special assistance and services are necessary to enable them to live independently according to their respective needs.

Children with special needs, such as Down syndrome, emotional disorders, and slow learners, need to be taught and trained to be independent. For them, independence is very important so that they do not depend too much on others. Fadlillah et al. (2020) explained that independence is the initial foundation for building self-confidence, a sense of responsibility, and not being easily dependent on others. Children with special needs who are already independent will be much more confident living their daily lives. Despite their limitations, children with special needs must demonstrate an independent attitude to avoid becoming a burden to others. Children with special needs also need access to various opportunities and resources to maximize their independence (Quinn, 2016). Therefore, education and independence training must always be taught to children with special needs so that they become more confident and less dependent on others in their daily lives.

Two main methods in teaching independence in children with special needs are imitation and habituation. All informants stated that independence must continue to be trained, exemplified, and accustomed to every day. This aligns with the research of Fadlillah et al. (2020), which suggests that teaching independence to children can be achieved through habituation, role models, and storytelling. For children, teachers are role models. Positive teacher attitudes are essential for success when children with special educational needs (SEN) are placed into mainstream classrooms (Saloviita, 2020). Therefore, teachers must be able to be role models for children and always get used to positive things so that independence arises in children. Various literature states that teachers act as guides, caregivers, instructors, facilitators and role models (Biddle, Nevarez, Henderson, & Kerrick, 2014). In addition, teachers must have competence and positive interactions with children with special needs (Breeman et al., 2015).

The imitation or role-modeling method is crucial in promoting independence, particularly for children with special needs. These children need more attention from teachers because of their limitations. Children with special needs have long-term physical or mental problems that cause them to be unable to carry out daily activities and interact with others in society (Cavallo et al., 2009). Therefore, teaching and training independence in children with special needs is not easy. It requires exemplary behavior and patience from teachers and those around them. Teachers are role models for children (Biddle, Nevarez, Henderson, & Kerrick, 2014). The teacher's attitude is very important in the success of inclusion programs for children with special needs (Hastings & Oakford, 2003). Teachers can use life skills training, modeling, and positive reinforcement to help shape the independence of children with special needs (Dereje & Zeleke, 2023). Teachers must be able to demonstrate independent behavior in front of children so that they will imitate it directly or

indirectly. In line with this, teachers can act as facilitators in understanding children's needs, become motivators by providing emotional support and building children's social relationships, and become mentors in teaching life skills and carrying out their tasks (Hasanah & Yulianti, 2024).

In addition to role models, habituation is equally important for teaching and training the independence of children with special needs. Actions that are often repeated will become habits in children, including independence. An independent attitude can be as simple as washing hands before lunch, taking off shoes, and removing jackets (Lapsin, 2017). Habituation of such an independent attitude is necessary for children with special needs so that they do not always depend on others. Simple habits that teachers can implement in training children's independence are encouraging children to tidy up their toys, encouraging children to choose their toys, allowing children to practice putting on clothes by providing attractive clothes for children to wear, encouraging children to clean the table when it is dirty, and praising children if they have tried to be independent (Tassoni, 2002). If this is done routinely, it can help children with special needs to be more independent. Taylor (2010) stated that teachers can foster children's independence by treating them with love and respect, showing confidence in their abilities, teaching them to manage their own behavior and make their own decisions, and teaching them about personal responsibility. Another way to develop independence is to provide real tasks and challenges that allow children to try difficult and challenging work (Touhill, 2013). Therefore, teachers must familiarize children with daily activities and serve as positive role models for them at school.

Education and training for independence in children with special needs cannot be provided solely by school teachers. Informants stated that one of the obstacles for teachers in teaching and training the independence of children with special needs is the lack of support or cooperation from parents. Therefore, parental support is very much needed. Parents must always be actively involved and concerned about the needs and development of their children. Parents play a crucial role in the care and development of independence for children with special needs (Setiawati et al., 2021). Additionally, parents should engage in numerous discussions and share information related to their children's development at home. Good cooperation is needed between teachers, schools and parents so that the services and stimulation provided can be maximized. Without cooperation, implementing education for independence in children with special needs is challenging. According to Lapsin (2017), developing children's independence requires collaboration between teachers and parents. Parental support is essential in fostering self-care for children with special needs (Pursitasari & Allenidekania, 2019). Parental support greatly influences the success of education for independence for children with special needs (Prinanda, 2024). In addition to school, parents at home must also provide opportunities for children to carry out various daily activities independently. Other studies show that parenting style is one of the external factors that play a significant role in shaping the independence of children with special needs in terms of self-care. For that reason, collaboration between teachers and parents is very appropriate in education for independence. This collaboration will provide a program that harmonizes with children's activities at school and home. Additionally, educating children with special needs about independence can be a challenging task. It takes a lot of time, patience, and love from the surrounding environment (Pursitasari & Allenidekania, 2019). With hard work and support from various parties, it is hoped that education for independence for children with special needs will be easier to implement and have a higher chance of success.

6. Conclusion

Teaching and training independence in children with special needs requires patience, hard work, and genuine effort. Teachers must be able to identify the children's special needs before teaching and training independence. This can be achieved through consistent daily routines and modeling positive behavior at school. In addition, education for independence will not be successful if it is done by the teacher alone. Cooperation from various parties, especially parents, is necessary for education

to run optimally towards independence. By teaching and training independence, it is expected that children with special needs can build self-confidence and reduce their reliance on others.

7. Suggestion

Collaboration between parents and teachers is crucial in fostering independence in children with special needs at school. Key components of independence in children with special needs are self-confidence and positive treatment from their environment. However, this study has not yet examined the appropriate form of collaboration to train independence in children with special needs. Future researchers and practitioners must examine this form or model of collaboration, particularly to foster self-confidence in children with special needs in schools and the community.

Declarations

Author Contributions. M. Fadlillah: Conceptualization, data collection, data analysis, and drafting manuscript. Muhtahidin: Data collection, data analysis, and critical revision of the manuscript. Ratna Pangastuti: Data collection, data analysis, writing, and reviewing. Dian Kristiana: Data collection and editing of manuscript. Riandi Marisa: reviewing and proofreading.

Conflicts of Interest. The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval. Ethical procedures for research, considering the participants' voluntariness, anonymity, and informed consent, were approved by research and community service institutions of Universitas Trunojoyo Madura

Data Availability Statement. The data used in this research is confidential and thus cannot be shared with third parties.

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