

# Evaluating the Effectiveness of a Peer-Support Program in Enhancing Mental Health and Social Skills in Inclusive Elementary Classrooms in Indonesia

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## ABSTRACT

Inclusive education in Indonesia faces challenges related to the mental health and social skills of students with special needs. Peer-support programs are increasingly recognized as a promising approach to foster emotional well-being and social competence in inclusive classrooms. This study employed a concurrent embedded mixed-methods design, with quantitative analysis as the primary approach supported by qualitative insights. A total of 80 students with special needs (aged 8–15) from inclusive elementary schools in Surakarta were selected through purposive sampling. Quantitative data were collected using the Social Skills Improvement System (SSIS), while qualitative data were gathered through interviews, observations, and open-ended surveys. A paired-sample t-test was used to analyze pre- and post-intervention differences. Quantitative findings showed significant improvements in mental health ( $M = 58.20$  to  $63.45$ ;  $t(65) = 3.87$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and social skills ( $M = 62.45$  to  $67.10$ ;  $t(79) = 3.42$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) after implementing the peer-support program. Qualitative data reinforced these results, highlighting increased self-confidence, empathy, peer collaboration, emotional safety, and reduced bullying behaviors among students. The peer-support program effectively enhanced students' social-emotional development and promoted a more inclusive, supportive school environment. While the results are promising, limitations such as the absence of a control group and short-term measurement suggest the need for future longitudinal and controlled studies. These findings support the integration of peer-support models into inclusive school practices to improve psychosocial outcomes.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education provides opportunities for all children, including children with special needs (ABK), to learn together in the same environment. One important element in inclusive education is inclusive students, who are learners with special characteristics—whether physical, intellectual, emotional, or social—that require a different learning approach compared to typical students. Inclusive students are often referred to as students with special needs. The fundamental difference between students with special needs and their peers lies in their developmental aspects and learning requirements.

However, challenges in implementing inclusive education often relate to students' social skills and mental health. Children in inclusive environments require greater support to adapt to their social surroundings and develop good mental well-being. Evidence shows that children's mental health in schools faces increasingly complex challenges. According to a UNICEF (2021) report, about 1 in 7 children aged 10–19 experience mental disorders, with anxiety and depression being the most common cases. In Indonesia, a survey by the Indonesian Ministry of Health (2022) found that around 16% of school-aged children exhibit symptoms of anxiety disorders, which can affect their academic performance and social relationships. Based on the I-NAMHS (Indonesia National Adolescent Mental Health Survey), approximately 1 in 3 Indonesian adolescents (34.8%) experience mental health issues. This means around 15.5 million adolescents in Indonesia require mental health support. Common mental health disorders among adolescents include depression, anxiety, and behavioral disorders.

Factors such as academic pressure, bullying, and lack of social support often worsen these conditions. Additionally, social skills among elementary school children are a major concern in inclusive education. Research by Wentzel & Jablansky (2020) found that children in Australia with low social skills tend to struggle in forming peer relationships and exhibit socially withdrawn behavior. Another study by Kauffman & Hornby (2025) confirmed that in inclusive education settings, children with special needs often face social communication barriers, which can hinder their learning process.

Peer-support programs have proven to be an effective approach in enhancing social interaction and mental well-being among children. Through such programs, children can learn from their peers, build empathy, and develop the necessary social skills for positive interactions. However, there is still limited research exploring the effectiveness of these programs in inclusive education environments.

In Indonesia, awareness of the importance of mental health support for elementary school children remains relatively low—whether in families, schools, or healthcare services. Unfortunately, this lack of awareness is not only evident in support practices but also reflected in the scarcity of research specifically examining mental health support for adolescents in Indonesia.

Most existing studies still focus on identifying types of disorders or the prevalence of mental health issues among adolescents, with few delving deeper into available support systems, intervention effectiveness, or the role of social environments—such as families, schools, and communities—in safeguarding adolescent mental health. Local academic literature discussing strategic approaches or culturally based support models in Indonesia is also very limited.

This research is expected to contribute to improving the quality of inclusive education by implementing peer-support programs as an effective strategy to enhance the mental health and social skills of elementary school children in inclusive settings. The findings can serve as a foundation for schools to develop similar programs, supporting the success of inclusive education in Indonesia.

Therefore, based on the background above, this study aims to analyze the effectiveness of peer-support programs in improving the mental health and social skills of elementary school children in inclusive education. The research question is: How does the effectiveness of peer-support programs differ in improving the mental health and social skills of elementary school children in inclusive education?

## 2. METHODS

This study employs a mixed-methods approach with a concurrent embedded design, a research design where quantitative and qualitative data are collected simultaneously (concurrent), but one approach dominates over the other.

In this study, the quantitative approach serves as the primary method, while the qualitative approach complements the findings by enriching and deepening the understanding of the quantitative data. The quantitative approach is used to measure the effectiveness of the peer-support program on students' mental health and social skills, whereas the qualitative approach explores the experiences of students, teachers, and program facilitators in greater depth.

This design allows the researcher not only to observe statistical changes or effects but also to understand the social and psychological context behind the data. Thus, the findings are expected to provide a holistic perspective, incorporating both numerical data and narrative insights.

### 2.1. Participants

The sample consisted of 80 elementary school students from inclusive schools in Surakarta, selected through purposive sampling. The inclusion criteria were children with special needs aged 8–15 years, classified as children with disabilities and officially identified by the school.

### 2.2. Data Collection

#### 2.2.1 Quantitative Data

This study uses the Social Skills Improvement System (SSIS) developed by Gresham and Elliott to measure children's social skills and mental health. The SSIS is a widely recognized international instrument with strong psychometric properties. For this study, an adapted and culturally contextualized Indonesian version was used.

#### 1. Validity

The validity of the SSIS in the Indonesian context has been tested in several local adaptation studies. Results indicate that the instrument has good content and construct validity. Content validity was confirmed by the relevance of the items to social skills appropriate for Indonesian cultural contexts. Meanwhile, construct validity was established through factor analysis, confirming that social dimensions such as cooperation, responsibility, empathy, and self-control can be consistently measured using SSIS items.

Adaptation studies also show that the SSIS can distinguish between children with and without special needs, as well as measure longitudinal changes in social skills, reinforcing its criterion validity.

#### 2. Reliability

The reliability of the SSIS in the Indonesian context is high, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from 0.80 to 0.92 across various subscales, both for typically developing children and those with special needs. This indicates excellent internal consistency, making the SSIS a reliable tool for assessing children's social skills in inclusive elementary school settings.

Additionally, inter-rater reliability tests (e.g., between teachers and parents) showed strong correlations, supporting the stability of assessments from multiple perspectives.

#### 3. Adaptation for the Indonesian Context

For use in Indonesia, the SSIS underwent linguistic and cultural adaptation to ensure proper comprehension by respondents (teachers, parents, or students). The adaptation process included translation, a pilot study, and revisions based on feedback from developmental and educational psychology experts.

Given its tested validity and reliability in local studies, the SSIS was deemed suitable for assessing the effectiveness of the peer-support program in improving social skills among inclusive elementary school students.

To analyze the quantitative data, a paired sample t-test was used. This test was chosen because the research design involved pre- and post-intervention measurements of the same student group. The goal was to determine whether there was a statistically significant difference between pre-test and post-test scores in students' social skills and mental health.

The paired t-test allowed the researcher to assess whether the peer-support program had a significant impact on improving students' social skills and mental health. If the significance value (p-value) was  $< 0.05$ , it could be concluded that there was a significant difference between pre- and post-intervention scores, indicating the program's effectiveness.

### 2.2.2 Qualitative Data

Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with students, teachers, and parents to explore their experiences throughout the peer-support program. Additionally, participatory observation was conducted to examine social interactions and group dynamics during program implementation. The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify emerging patterns and themes.

### 2.2.3 Ethical Considerations

To uphold ethical research principles, the researcher ensured that all procedures prioritized participants' rights, comfort, and safety, particularly since the study involved vulnerable groups (elementary school children with special needs).

Before data collection, written informed consent was obtained from parents or guardians. Consent forms were distributed through the school, and sufficient time was provided for parents/guardians to review and consider their child's participation.

### 2.3. Data Integration

Integration of quantitative and qualitative data occurred during the interpretation phase. Quantitative findings identified significant trends and changes, while qualitative findings provided contextual insights into how and why the peer-support program was effective or ineffective. Data triangulation was applied to ensure the validity and reliability of the results.

### 2.4. Implementation Procedures

1. Pre-Intervention: Initial data collection (quantitative and qualitative) to assess students' baseline conditions.
2. Intervention: Implementation of the peer-support program over one semester, involving students in group-based activities designed to enhance mental health and social skills.
3. Post-Intervention: Final data collection (quantitative and qualitative) to evaluate the program's impact.
4. Analysis and Interpretation: Quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed separately and then integrated to produce comprehensive conclusions.

## 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1. Finding

This study aims to analyze the effectiveness of the Peer-support program in improving mental health and social skills of inclusive elementary school students in Surakarta City. Data were collected through quantitative methods using questionnaires and qualitative methods including open-ended surveys, observations, and interviews.

### 3.1.1 Quantitative Results

#### a. Students' Mental Health

To evaluate the effectiveness of the peer-support program in improving mental health of inclusive elementary school students, data analysis was conducted using paired sample t-test. This analysis was performed on pre-test and post-test scores obtained from mental health measurements using the SSIS instrument.

The analysis results show a statistically significant improvement in mental health scores after students participated in the peer-support program. The following is a summary of descriptive statistics

**Table 1.** Mental Health Scores

Score	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Pre-test	58.20	6.75
Post-test	63.45	6.10
Average Difference	+5.25	-

The results of the t-test analysis showed that  $t(65) = 3.87$  with  $p < 0.01$ . The positive t-value and the p-value below 0.01 indicate that there is a statistically significant difference in students' mental health scores before and after the implementation of the peer-support program.

This finding demonstrates that the peer-support program contributed positively to improving students' mental health conditions. Specifically, the program was associated with reduced anxiety levels, increased self-confidence, and improved emotional regulation skills among the participating students.

Furthermore, the results suggest that student participation in supportive peer-based social activities can help create a more stable and emotionally secure environment. Such an environment is particularly beneficial for fostering psychological well-being, especially for students with special needs who may require additional social and emotional support.

Overall, the findings indicate that the peer-support program significantly strengthened several psychological aspects of students' well-being. This outcome is consistent with Ryff's (1989) theory of Psychological Well-being and Masten's (2021) Resilience Theory, which proposes that social support from peer environments plays an important role in enhancing children's resilience, self-acceptance, and overall psychological development.

#### b. Students' Social-Emotional Skills

This study examined the effectiveness of the peer-support program in improving social skills and mental health of inclusive elementary school students. A paired sample t-test was used to analyze differences between pre- and post-intervention scores. The analysis of pre-test and post-test scores from the SSIS (Social Skills Improvement System) instrument revealed significant improvements between measurement periods.

**Table 2.** Social-Emotional Skills Scores.

Score	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Pre-test	62.45	7.82
Post-test	67.10	6.95
Average Difference	+4,65	-

The results of the t-test analysis revealed that  $t(79) = 3.42$  with  $p < 0.01$ . The positive and statistically significant t-value indicates that there was a meaningful improvement in students' social skills after they participated in the peer-support program. This statistical evidence suggests that the intervention had a measurable effect on students' social development.

The findings demonstrate that the peer-support program positively influenced students, particularly inclusive students, by enhancing their ability to interact with peers, improving communication skills, and increasing their capacity to adapt to the school environment. Through structured peer interaction and collaborative activities, students were provided with opportunities to practice social engagement in a supportive and less intimidating context. As a result, participants became more confident in expressing themselves and engaging in cooperative learning situations.

Furthermore, the improvement in scores from the pre-test to the post-test reinforces the effectiveness of peer-support interventions in fostering a more inclusive and supportive social atmosphere within the classroom. Such programs encourage mutual understanding, empathy, and cooperation among students, which are essential components for building positive peer relationships and promoting inclusive education.

These findings are consistent with Daniel Goleman's (1995) theory of emotional intelligence and Lev Vygotsky's (1978) social development theory, both of which highlight the critical role of social interaction in learning and development. According to these theoretical perspectives, peer-based learning environments provide meaningful opportunities for students to develop social competencies, regulate emotions, and construct knowledge collaboratively. Consequently, peer-support programs can serve as an effective strategy for strengthening social skills and promoting inclusive participation in educational settings.

### 3.1.2 Qualitative Results

Qualitative data analysis was conducted on open-ended questionnaires regarding students' experiences in the Peer-support program, revealing several key themes:

1. Peer Support: Many students reported receiving help during difficulties and feeling comforted by peers.
2. School Environment Comfort: Students felt happier and safer at school due to increased solidarity.
3. Communication and Empathy: Improved speaking, listening, and emotional understanding skills.
4. Acceptance and Self-Confidence: The program fostered self-confidence and feelings of being valued.
5. Social Collaboration: Students enjoyed group work and cooperative activities.
6. Anti-Bullying: Increased awareness of mutual respect and reduced bullying behaviors.

Through semi-structured interviews with participants, six major themes emerged regarding students' program experiences:

#### 1. Peer Support

Students emphasized the importance of emotional and social peer support in facing school challenges.

*"When I felt sad or confused, my friends would talk to me and help me calm down. I didn't feel alone anymore."* (Student A, Grade 5)

#### 2. School Environment Comfort

Students reported feeling more comfortable and secure in school after program implementation.

*"School feels much better now. Friends don't tease anymore - they actually help each other."* (Student B, Grade 4)

#### 3. Communication and Empathy

The program enhanced students' communication skills and emotional understanding.

*"Now when I see a sad classmate, I ask what's wrong. Before, I would just ignore them."* (Student C, Grade 5)

#### 4. Acceptance and Self-Confidence

Inclusive students reported feeling more accepted and confident in group activities.

*"I used to be afraid to join games, worried about rejection. Now my friends always include me."* (Student D, inclusive student, Grade 4)

#### 5. Social Collaboration

The program fostered cooperative learning habits among students.

*"We often do group work together. If someone struggles, we help together - we've become more united."* (Student E, Grade 6)

#### 6. Anti-Bullying Culture

Students noted decreased bullying behaviors, particularly toward peers with differences or special needs.

*"Before, some kids got teased for walking differently. Now others protect them instead."* (Student F, Grade 5)

These qualitative findings reinforce the quantitative data, demonstrating the program's success in creating an environment that supports social and mental development, consistent with Bandura's (1986) social learning theory framework.

### 3.2 Discussion

This study aimed to analyze the effectiveness of a peer-support program in improving social skills and mental health among inclusive elementary school students. The quantitative findings revealed significant differences between pre-test and post-test scores for both variables, indicating that participation in the program contributed to measurable improvements in students' socio-emotional development. These results were further supported by qualitative findings, which highlighted students' positive experiences with peer assistance, greater comfort within the school environment, and increased self-confidence when interacting with classmates. Together, these findings suggest that structured peer-support activities can create meaningful opportunities for social engagement and emotional development among students in inclusive classrooms.

The findings indicate that intensive peer interaction can foster improvements in psychological well-being, resilience, empathy, and collaborative behavior. Within inclusive education contexts, peer-support programs are particularly valuable because children with special needs often experience limited opportunities for meaningful social interaction. Socially mediated learning environments allow students to practice communication, emotional regulation, and cooperative problem-solving in authentic contexts. These outcomes are consistent with sociocultural theories of development, which emphasize the importance of social interaction in cognitive and emotional growth. According to Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development, learning occurs most effectively when children engage with more capable peers who provide guidance and support (Vygotsky, 1978). Similarly, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory highlights how children's development is influenced by interactions within their immediate social environments, including the school context (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

In inclusive school settings, students with special needs frequently encounter social-emotional challenges such as communication difficulties, social isolation, and lower levels of self-esteem. These barriers can limit their participation in classroom activities and peer relationships. The peer-support program addressed these challenges by training classmates to provide emotional, social, and academic assistance. Through structured activities and guided interactions, students learned to demonstrate empathy, patience, and cooperation. As a result, the classroom environment became more inclusive and supportive, enabling students with diverse learning needs to participate more actively in social and academic activities.

Participants in this study reported improvements in psychological well-being, including reduced feelings of loneliness and increased self-esteem. These outcomes align with Social Support Theory, which suggests that supportive interpersonal relationships can buffer individuals from stress and

contribute to improved mental health (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Peer-support interactions provided students with opportunities to share experiences, express emotions, and receive encouragement from classmates. In addition, students who initially experienced emotional difficulties demonstrated progress in managing anxiety during structured peer-sharing sessions. Such findings are consistent with previous research indicating that peer-based support can help young people develop coping strategies and emotional resilience (Lyons, Cooper, & Lloyd-Evans, 2021).

The program also contributed to the development of communication skills, empathy, and teamwork among participants. According to Social Learning Theory, individuals acquire new behaviors by observing and imitating others within their social environment (Bandura, 1986). In the context of peer-support programs, students observe positive social behaviors demonstrated by their peers and gradually internalize these behaviors through repeated interaction. In inclusive school settings, these interactions can increase students' understanding and acceptance of individual differences. As a result, peer-support programs may help reduce stigma, discrimination, and bullying directed toward students with special educational needs while strengthening positive peer relationships (Carter, 2020).

Beyond cognitive and emotional benefits, the peer-support program also contributed to the development of a more inclusive school culture. Students reported feeling more valued, heard, and respected within the classroom community. Such outcomes highlight the broader institutional benefits of peer-support initiatives, suggesting that they can support the development of empathy, cooperation, and respect as core values within school environments. These findings support the integration of peer-support strategies into character education and inclusive education programs, as they promote both individual well-being and positive social dynamics within schools.

Despite these promising findings, several limitations should be considered when interpreting the results. The absence of a control group limits the ability to determine whether the observed improvements were solely attributable to the peer-support intervention or influenced by external factors such as natural developmental changes or teacher support. Additionally, the relatively small and culturally homogeneous sample limits the generalizability of the findings to broader populations (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The study also relied primarily on post-test measurements without long-term follow-up, making it difficult to determine whether the observed improvements in social skills and mental health are sustained over time (Kazdin, 2021). Furthermore, the use of self-reported data introduces the possibility of social desirability bias, in which participants may provide responses they believe are expected or socially acceptable rather than reflecting their authentic experiences (Caputo, 2017).

Nevertheless, the findings of this study are consistent with research conducted in other Southeast Asian contexts. Studies in Vietnam and Malaysia have similarly reported that peer-support initiatives can improve social inclusion, empathy, and collaborative learning among students in inclusive educational settings (Nguyen, 2020; Munawar, 2022). Research conducted in Indonesia has also highlighted the potential benefits of peer-support strategies, particularly for students with autism and other developmental differences (Ayuningtyas, 2018). Although methodological limitations remain across many of these studies, the overall evidence suggests that peer-support programs represent a promising approach for strengthening inclusive education practices in the region.

The effectiveness of peer-support programs may be explained through several key mechanisms. First, social modeling enables students to observe and imitate adaptive behaviors demonstrated by peers (Bandura, 1986). Second, the experience of acceptance and belonging within peer groups can reduce social anxiety and encourage participation in classroom activities (Wentzel et al., 2014). Third, structured peer interactions provide opportunities for students to practice communication, empathy, and conflict-resolution skills in real-life situations (Barsky, 2017). Finally, the involvement of peers in supporting inclusive education can contribute to broader cultural changes within schools by promoting empathy, cooperation, and mutual respect among students (Fullchange, Denis, & Smith, 2021).

Future research should employ more rigorous research designs to strengthen the evidence base for peer-support interventions in inclusive education. Randomized controlled trials could provide stronger causal evidence regarding program effectiveness (Leroy et al., 2022). Longitudinal studies are also needed to examine whether improvements in social skills and mental health are sustained over longer periods, such as three to six months following program implementation. Additionally, future studies should include more diverse samples across different regions and socio-cultural contexts to enhance generalizability. The use of multiple data sources, including teacher evaluations and behavioral observations, would also strengthen the reliability of research findings.

Overall, this study highlights the potential of peer-support programs as an effective strategy for enhancing social skills and psychological well-being among students in inclusive elementary schools. By fostering empathy, cooperation, and emotional support among peers, such programs can contribute to the development of more inclusive and supportive learning environments. With further research and improved methodological rigor, peer-support initiatives may become an increasingly valuable component of inclusive education practices across Indonesia and other Southeast Asian educational contexts.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that peer-support programs can significantly enhance social skills and mental health among inclusive elementary school students. The findings indicate that collaborative peer interactions help create a more supportive, communicative, and emotionally secure learning environment, particularly for students with special needs. Quantitative results showed statistically significant improvements in both social skills and mental health scores between the pre-test and post-test, suggesting that participation in the program contributed positively to students' socio-emotional development. These results were reinforced by qualitative findings, in which students reported feeling more accepted by their peers, experiencing increased self-confidence, and developing stronger social competencies after participating in the peer-support activities. Despite these promising outcomes, several limitations should be considered when interpreting the results. The absence of a control group limits the ability to determine whether the observed improvements were solely caused by the intervention, and the lack of long-term follow-up prevents the assessment of whether these positive effects are sustained over time. Additionally, the relatively limited sample may restrict the generalizability of the findings to broader educational contexts. Future research should therefore employ more rigorous research designs, such as randomized controlled trials and longitudinal studies, to examine the long-term effectiveness of peer-support programs in inclusive schools. Expanding the study across diverse regions and educational settings, as well as incorporating multiple data sources such as teacher evaluations and behavioral observations, would further strengthen the evidence base. Overall, peer-support programs represent a promising strategy for promoting inclusive education by fostering empathy, social belonging, and positive peer relationships, ultimately contributing to healthier and more supportive school communities.

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