



Social Belonging and Peer Acceptance in Children with Autism in Elementary School Inclusion Classes

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Abstract: Despite the growing implementation of inclusive education, many autistic students continue to experience difficulties in achieving meaningful social participation within mainstream classrooms. While schools increasingly provide physical access to inclusive settings, challenges related to peer acceptance, social belonging, and participation in everyday social interactions remain prevalent. Limited social inclusion may hinder autistic students' opportunities to develop friendships, engage in collaborative activities, and establish a sense of belonging within the school community. Therefore, understanding their lived social experiences is essential for strengthening inclusive educational practices. This study aimed to examine the social experiences of an autistic student in an inclusive elementary school, focusing on peer acceptance, social belonging, and the role of teachers in fostering an inclusive social environment. The research employed a qualitative approach using a single case study design. The participant was one autistic student enrolled in an inclusive elementary school and selected through purposive sampling based on active involvement in classroom social interactions. Data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis supported by NVivo 14 software. The findings revealed that peer acceptance was often conditional and situational. Although classmates generally accepted the student during structured classroom activities, social interaction outside academic contexts remained limited. The participant experienced difficulties in developing reciprocal friendships and participating in spontaneous peer activities. Nevertheless, teacher interventions, peer empathy, and collaborative learning activities contributed positively to social engagement and participation. Teachers served as key social mediators by facilitating interaction opportunities, encouraging collaboration, and promoting an inclusive classroom climate. The findings suggest that successful inclusion extends beyond physical placement and academic participation. Meaningful inclusion requires supportive social environments that foster peer acceptance, social belonging, and active participation. The study highlights the importance of teacher-mediated strategies in promoting positive social experiences for autistic students in inclusive elementary schools.

Keywords: Autism; Social Belonging; Inclusive Education; Peer Acceptance; Elementary School

Article info: Submitted : 2026-05-19 | Accepted : 2026-06-11 | Published : 2026-08-01

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How to Cite :

Introduction

Inclusive education is an educational approach that provides opportunities for all students, including children with special needs, to learn together in a regular school environment without discrimination (Pradhan & Naik, 2024). In Indonesia, the implementation of inclusive education continues to grow as awareness of the

importance of equal access to education for all children increases. Inclusion elementary schools today are not only required to be able to provide adequate academic services, but also create a social environment that supports the emotional development and social interaction of students. In this case, children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are one of the groups that need special attention because they have unique characteristics in social communication, interpersonal interaction, and adjustment to the social environment at school (Mamas et al., 2021).

The phenomenon that is developing today shows that the success of inclusive education is still often understood only as limited to the physical presence of children with autism in regular classes (Cahyo Adi Kistoro et al., 2021; Siller et al., 2021). Many schools consider inclusion to be successful when students with autism are able to participate in learning with their peers (Chen et al., 2023; Dyer, 2022; Roberts & Webster, 2022). However, the reality on the ground shows different conditions. Children with autism are in the same classroom, but are not yet fully part of the social community of that class. In various learning activities and games, children with autism often have difficulty building social relationships, are less involved in group work, tend to be alone, and even experience subtle rejection from peers (Dahary et al., 2023; Schwartz et al., 2021).

This condition is an important issue because the elementary school age is a crucial phase in children's social development. At this stage, children begin to build self-identity, confidence, and the ability to establish social relationships through interaction with peers. Social acceptance of the classroom environment has a great influence on children's psychological development, including the emergence of a sense of security, comfort, and belonging to the school environment (El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022; García-Peinado, 2023; Vaccaro & Newman, 2023). On the other hand, when a child feels unaccepted or socially isolated, this condition can affect their learning motivation, emotional well-being, and social development in the long run (García-Peinado, 2023).

Children with autism often face more complex social challenges because they generally experience difficulties in understanding social expressions, engaging in two-way communication, maintaining eye contact, and interpreting social rules that develop within peer interactions (Hus & Segal, 2021). In inclusive classroom settings, these conditions frequently make it difficult for autistic children to establish equal friendships with their peers. Many autistic children participate only passively in classroom activities, become "social observers," or are not fully recognized as part of peer play groups (Strom & Strom, 2025). This phenomenon indicates that the success of inclusive education should not only be measured through academic achievement, but also through the extent to which autistic children experience social belonging within the school environment. Various challenges in the implementation of inclusive education are still commonly found in elementary schools. Teachers generally place

greater emphasis on adapting academic instruction rather than fostering inclusive social interactions within the classroom (Jabeen et al., 2026). In addition, regular students often have limited understanding of the characteristics of children with autism, which can lead to stereotypes, miscommunication, and a lack of empathy in daily social interactions. In some cases, autistic children even experience subtle forms of social exclusion, such as not being chosen for group work, being ignored during playtime, or being accepted only because of teacher instructions rather than through genuine social acceptance from their peers (Pritchard-Rowe et al., 2024).

Research on inclusive education for children with autism has been widely conducted. Previous studies have primarily focused on the effectiveness of inclusive learning models (Krämer et al., 2021), differentiated instructional strategies (Gheysens et al., 2023), social behavior interventions (Saran et al., 2023), and teachers' competencies in supporting autistic students in regular classrooms (Devi et al., 2024). Other studies have also highlighted the importance of peer-mediated interventions in improving the social interaction skills of autistic children (Zhang et al., 2022). In addition, several studies have examined the relationship between school belonging and the psychological well-being of students with special needs in inclusive school settings (Boyle et al., 2023).

Nevertheless, several research gaps remain insufficiently explored in depth. First, most previous studies have focused more on academic aspects and inclusive learning strategies, while the social experiences of autistic children within regular classroom environments have received relatively limited attention. Second, research on social belonging among autistic children has generally been conducted within the contexts of psychology or mental health, and has rarely been specifically linked to the dynamics of peer acceptance in inclusive elementary schools. Third, many prior studies have emphasized teachers' perspectives or the effectiveness of school programs, whereas the subjective experiences of autistic children in feeling socially accepted have seldom been deeply examined. Fourth, studies related to peer acceptance of autistic children in Indonesia remain very limited, particularly within the context of inclusive elementary schools that are influenced by collectivist cultural backgrounds and social characteristics different from those of Western countries.

Based on these research gaps, the novelty of this study lies in integrating the concepts of social belonging and peer acceptance simultaneously to better understand the social experiences of autistic children in inclusive elementary school classrooms. This study not only examines the presence of autistic children within the inclusive education system, but also explores how they are accepted, involved, and positioned within daily social interactions with their peers. Furthermore, this research presents the context of inclusive elementary education in Indonesia, which has rarely been investigated, and is therefore expected to provide new perspectives on the social dynamics of autistic children within a collectivist school culture.

Methodology

Research Model

This study employed a qualitative approach using a case study method. This approach was chosen because the study aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of the social experiences of autistic children related to social belonging and peer acceptance in inclusive elementary school classrooms (Viera, 2023). Through the case study method, researchers were able to explore social phenomena naturally based on the interactions that occurred within the inclusive school environment.

Participant

The study was conducted in an inclusive elementary school that had implemented an inclusive education program. The research population consisted of autistic students who studied in regular classrooms within the inclusive elementary school setting. Participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique by considering their direct involvement in social interaction processes within the inclusive classroom environment. A single autistic student was selected as the participant in this study because the research employed an in-depth case study approach focusing on individual social interaction experiences within the inclusive classroom setting.

Data Collection Tools

The data collection techniques used in this study included participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation.

1. Data Collection Process

The data collection process was conducted through several stages, namely the preparation stage, the implementation of data collection, and data analysis. The research procedure can be seen in the following figure.

2. Data Trustworthiness

To ensure the academic rigor, integrity, and validity of this qualitative case study, the researcher established trustworthiness based on the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba, which include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

- a. **Credibility (Internal Validity):** To guarantee that the findings accurately represent the social experiences of autistic children, the researcher primarily utilized source and method triangulation. This was achieved by cross-checking the data obtained from participant observations against the insights gathered from in-depth interviews and supporting school documentation. Additionally, prolonged engagement was maintained within the inclusive elementary school environment

to build trust with participants and observe their natural social interactions over an extended period.

- b. **Transferability (External Validity):** Since this study employs a case study method focused on a specific inclusive elementary school setting, the findings are not statistically generalizable. However, to enable other researchers to judge the applicability of the insights to other inclusive contexts, the researcher provides a thick description. This includes detailed explanations of the research model, selection criteria for the purposive sampling of participants, and the specific classroom dynamics.
- c. **Dependability (Reliability):** To ensure that the research process is consistent and could be replicated by future investigators, the researcher maintains a clear and transparent audit trail. Every step of the data collection process – from the initial preparation stage to the implementation of interviews and observations – was documented systematically. The coding process using NVivo software further enhances dependability by providing a traceable path from raw data to final thematic analysis.
- d. **Confirmability (Objectivity):** To ensure that the interpretations and final themes emerge purely from the data and the participants' experiences rather than the researcher's biases, a peer debriefing process was conducted. Drafts of the analyzed data, NVivo coding structures, and conceptual findings were regularly reviewed and discussed with academic peers and advisors to maintain a high level of objectivity throughout the study.

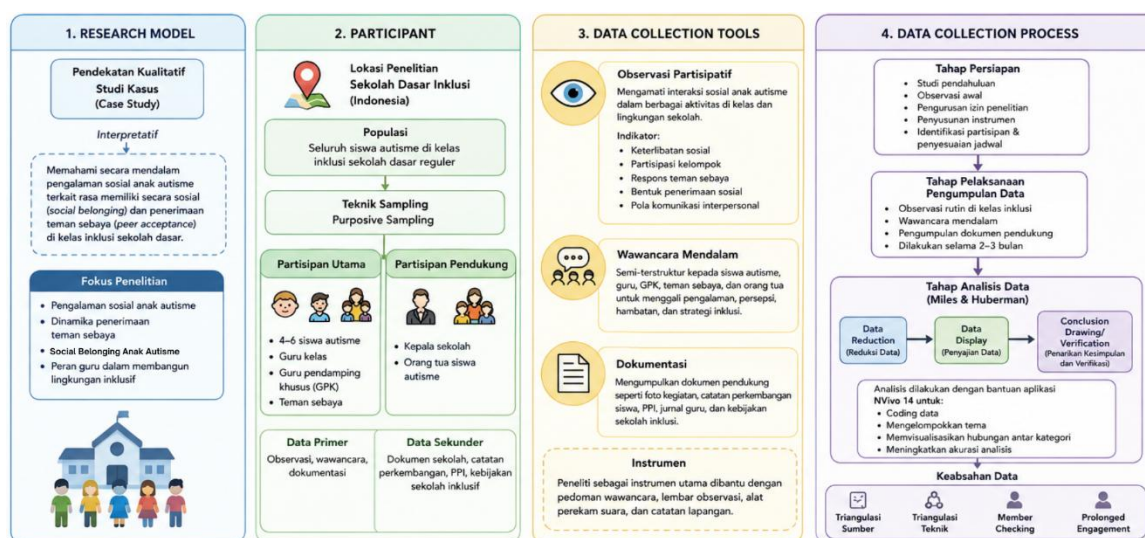


Figure 1. Research Procedure

To support the credibility of the field research process, documentation of research activities conducted in the inclusive elementary school is presented in Figure 2.



Figure 2. Learning activities

Result and Discussion

Finding

1. Social Experience of Children with Autism in Elementary School Inclusion Classrooms

Based on observations, in-depth interviews, and documentation, the study found that the social experiences of children with autism in elementary school inclusion classes exhibit complex dynamics. Children with autism do not experience complete social isolation, but their involvement in social interactions is still limited and situational. The findings of the study show that there are four main themes that emerged from the data coding process using the NVivo version 14 application, namely 1) limited social involvement, 2) interpersonal communication difficulties, 3) dependence on teacher support, 4) positive social experiences in a supportive environment.

a. Limited Social Engagement

The results of observations show that most children with autism tend to be passive in social activities in the classroom. Children are more likely to follow directions than to start spontaneous interactions with peers. In group discussion activities, children with autism generally only get involved when asked by the teacher or invited directly by certain friends. The results of interviews with classroom teachers show that children with autism often take longer to adjust to group interactions. One of the teachers said:

"If it's group work, he usually waits first. Sometimes I just want to talk if I ask my friend or teacher directly." (Teacher interview 01)

This finding is strengthened by the results of NVivo coding which shows that the theme of limited social participation has the highest frequency of occurrence in interview and observation data.

Table 1. NVivo Thematic Analysis Results: Limited Social Participation

Node	Frequency	Data Source
Limited Social Participation	28	Observations, teacher interviews
Passive Classroom Interaction	21	Observasi kelas
Group Activity Withdrawal	17	Observations and interviews

b. Interpersonal Communication Difficulties

The study found that the main obstacle in the social experiences of autistic children lies in their interpersonal communication abilities. The children experienced difficulties in understanding social expressions, maintaining two-way conversations, and interpreting responses from their peers. In several situations, autistic children appeared to have limited understanding of social rules in games and group conversations, causing social interactions to often stop in the middle of activities. Interviews with peers revealed that some regular students felt confused about how to initiate communication with autistic children.

"Sometimes when we try to talk to him, his answers are very short. So, the other students also become confused about how to continue the conversation." (Teacher Interview 02)

NVivo analysis showed that the theme of communication barriers emerged as one of the dominant categories during the data coding process.

Table 2. NVivo Thematic Analysis Results: Interpersonal Communication Difficulties

Tema (Node)	Frequency	Data Source
Communication Barriers	31	Observations and interviews
Difficulty Understanding Social Cues	24	Observations
Limited Verbal Response	19	Peer interview

c. Dependence on Teacher Support

The findings revealed that the social involvement of autistic children was strongly influenced by the role of classroom teachers and special assistant teachers. Autistic children were more likely to engage in social activities when teachers actively facilitated group interactions and provided emotional support. Teachers often acted as mediators in the communication process between autistic children and their peers. In several group activities, teachers helped explain social instructions and guided peers to involve autistic children in shared activities. Interview results indicated that without teacher support, autistic children tended to withdraw from social interactions again.

Table 3. NVivo Thematic Analysis Results: Dependence on Teacher Support

Tema (Node)	Frequency	Data Source
Teacher Support Dependency	26	Teacher interviews
Teacher-Mediated Interaction	22	Classroom observation
Emotional Guidance	15	Student and teacher interviews

d. Positive Social Experiences in a Supportive Environment

Despite facing various social barriers, research found that children with autism have positive social experiences in a supportive classroom environment. Children with autism show better social engagement when they are with friends who understand their characteristics and teachers who build an inclusive atmosphere. In some observations, children with autism appeared to be more active when participating in simple games, structured collaborative activities, and classroom activities involving peer mentoring.

The teacher also explained that social acceptance increases when regular students are given an understanding of diversity and the importance of empathy towards friends with special needs.

Table 3. NVivo Thematic Analysis Results: Positive Social Experiences in a Supportive Environment

Tema (Node)	Frequency	Data Source
Positive Peer Support	20	Observations and interviews
Inclusive Classroom Climate	18	Teacher interviews
Increased Social Confidence	14	Student observation

The results of the analysis using NVivo show that the theme of communication barriers and limited social participation is the most dominant theme that appears in the research data. This shows that the social experiences of children with autism in the inclusion class are still greatly influenced by interpersonal communication barriers and limited social involvement in classroom activities. The theme of positive peer support and inclusive classroom climate shows that a supportive social environment has a significant influence on increasing the comfort and social participation of children with autism in inclusive schools.

3. Peer Acceptance Dynamics

Based on observations, in-depth interviews, and document analysis, the study found that peer acceptance of children with autism in elementary school inclusion classes was dynamic and influenced by various social, emotional, and environmental factors. The results of the study show that social acceptance does not arise automatically just because an autistic child is in the same class as a regular student. In

daily practice, there are forms of acceptance, covert rejection, limited social relationships, and social interactions that develop gradually through the process of social adaptation in the classroom environment. The results of data analysis using the NVivo version 14 application produced five main themes related to the dynamics of peer acceptance, namely 1) conditional social acceptance, 2) limited friendship relationships, 3) the emergence of veiled exclusion, 4) the influence of peer empathy, and 5) the development of acceptance through repeated interactions.

a. Conditional Social Acceptance

The research findings suggest that most regular students accept the existence of an autistic child in an academic context, but not yet fully in closer social relationships. Children with autism are generally accepted when learning activities are structured and teacher-directed, but these acceptances tend to decline in more spontaneous social situations, such as playing during breaks or choosing group members independently. The results of observations showed that some regular students were willing to help children with autism when asked by the teacher, but did not always involve them voluntarily in daily social activities.

"Children don't actually refuse, but if they want to play alone or choose a group of friends, they usually still choose friends who are closer to them." (Teacher interview 02)

The results of NVivo coding show that the theme of conditional peer acceptance is one of the dominant themes in this study.

Table 4. NVivo Thematic Analysis Results: Conditional Social Acceptance

Tema (Node)	Frequency	Data Source
Conditional Peer Acceptance	29	Observations and interviews
Teacher-Directed Inclusion	23	Classroom observation
Situational Social Acceptance	18	Student interviews

b. Limited Friendship Relationships

Research has found that children with autism generally have few close friends in the classroom. Social interaction tends to occur with certain students who already understand the characteristics and habits of children with autism. The results of observations show that the social relationships of children with autism are more formed in the pattern of "safe friendship", which is a relationship with friends who are considered safe, patient, and used to interacting with them. Outside of these small circles, children with autism still have difficulty building broader social relationships.

"He usually plays with just that. If it's the same with others, sometimes it's still silent."
(Student interview 01)

These findings show that the social acceptance of children with autism is still limited and has not been fully integrated into the social community of the classroom as a whole.

Table 5. NVivo Thematic Analysis Results: Limited Friendship Relationships

Tema (Node)	Frequency	Data Source
Limited Friendship Circle	26	Observations
Selective Peer Interaction	20	Student interviews
Safe Friendship Pattern	16	Observations and interviews

c. The Emergence of Covert Exclusion

The study also found that there is a form of covert social exclusion of children with autism in inclusion classes. This exclusion does not always appear in the form of open bullying, but more often occurs through social abandonment, not being involved in the game, or not being selected in a study group. In some observations, children with autism appear to be near peer groups, but are not really involved in the interactions that occur. This condition shows the existence of "physical inclusion without social inclusion".

"Sometimes his son is in the middle of friends, but he doesn't really participate in the conversation." (Teacher Interview 01)

The results of NVivo coding show that the theme of subtle social exclusion appears quite often in the results of field observations.

Table 6. NVivo Thematic Analysis Results: The Emergence of Covert Exclusion

Tema (Node)	Frequency	Data Source
Subtle Social Exclusion	24	Observations
Ignored in Group Activities	19	Observations and interviews
Physical but Not Social Inclusion	17	Teacher interviews

d. The Influence of Peer Empathy

The findings of the study show that peer empathy is an important factor in building social acceptance of children with autism. Regular students who have a better understanding of autism conditions tend to show a more open, helpful, and engaging attitude toward children with autism in social activities. Teachers actively explain to regular students the importance of respecting differences and helping friends with special needs. This approach has been shown to help increase positive social interaction in the classroom.

"If he has difficulty speaking, we usually help him slowly so that he wants to come."
(Student interview 02)

The results of NVivo's analysis show that the theme of peer empathy has a strong relationship with increasing social participation of children with autism.

Table 7. NVivo Thematic Analysis Results: The Influence of Peer Empathy

Tema (Node)	Frequency	Data Source
Peer Empathy	22	Student interviews
Supportive Peer Behaviour	18	Observations
Understanding Individual Differences	15	Teacher interviews

e. Progression of Acceptance through Repetitive Interactions

Research has found that social acceptance of children with autism develops gradually through repetitive and consistent interactions. The more often regular students interact with children with autism, the greater the chance of forming more positive social relationships. In classes that have implemented collaborative activities regularly, regular students appear to be more accustomed to interacting and show better social acceptance of children with autism.

The results of observations show that social relationships that were initially awkward can develop more naturally after students have experienced interaction together for a certain period of time.

Table 8. NVivo Thematic Analysis Results: Progression of Acceptance through Repetitive Interactions

Tema (Node)	Frequency	Data Source
Repeated Social Interaction	21	Observations
Gradual Peer Acceptance	18	Teacher interviews
Social Adaptation Process	14	Observations and interviews

The analysis of the above data shows that the dynamics of peer acceptance of children with autism in elementary school inclusion classes are still situational and have not been fully formed naturally. The theme of Conditional Peer Acceptance is the category with the highest frequency, which shows that social acceptance of children with autism is more common when classroom activities are directed by teachers or in structured situations. The coding results also show a strong relationship between the themes of Teacher-Directed Inclusion and Conditional Peer Acceptance, which indicates that the social involvement of children with autism is still strongly influenced by teachers' interventions in building interactions in the classroom. In addition, the emergence of the theme of Limited Friendship Circle and Selective Peer Interaction

shows that the social relationships of children with autism are still limited to a few specific friends who have understood their characteristics.

It was also found that there is a subtle social exclusion theme which shows that children with autism often experience indirect social exclusion, such as not being involved in games or only physically present without really engaging in group interactions. However, the themes of Peer Empathy and Supportive Peer Behavior show that peer empathy has a great influence on the development of social acceptance of children with autism. The more often regular students interact with children with autism, the more positive and inclusive social relationships develop. These findings show that social acceptance in inclusive classrooms develops through a process of social adaptation influenced by teacher support, repetitive interaction experiences, and a classroom culture that is supportive of student diversity.

4. Sense of Social Belonging for Children with Autism in Inclusion Classes

The results of the study show that the sense of social belonging in children with autism in elementary school inclusion classes has not developed optimally. Although children with autism have become part of the regular school environment, not all children feel emotional comfort and strong social connection to the classroom community. Based on the results of observations and interviews, the sense of having an autistic child is influenced by the experience of social interaction, peer acceptance, teacher support, and the emotional atmosphere of the classroom environment. Data analysis using the NVivo version 14 application produced five main themes related to social belonging, namely 1) feeling of belonging to a group, 2) emotional comfort in the classroom, 3) involvement in social activities, 4) social support from teachers and peers, 5) and the emergence of feelings of social isolation.

a. Feeling of Being Part of a Group

The findings of the study show that some children with autism do not fully feel part of a social group in the classroom. Children are more often around peer groups without really being actively involved in the interactions that take place. In some observations, children with autism appeared to passively participate in group activities and only spoke when asked. This condition causes social connection with peers to not have developed deeply.

"I sit down with my friends, but sometimes I don't know what to say." (Student Interview 03)

Table 9. NVivo Thematic Analysis Results: *Feeling of Being Part of a Group*

Tema (Node)	Frequency	Data Source
Sense of Group Membership	27	Observations and interviews
Passive Social Presence	21	Classroom observation
Limited Social Connection	18	Student interviews

b. Emotional Comfort in the Classroom Environment

Research has found that emotional comfort is an important factor in building social belonging for children with autism. Children with autism show better social engagement when they are in a calm, supportive classroom environment, and do not exert excessive social pressure. The results of the interviews showed that children with autism were more confident when teachers and peers responded positively to their communication.

“If the classroom atmosphere is comfortable and the friends are receptive, the child will be more courageous to participate in activities.” (Classroom Teacher Interview).

Table 10. NVivo Thematic Analysis Results: Emotional Comfort in the Classroom Environment

Tema (Node)	Frequency	Data Source
Emotional Comfort	25	Student and teacher interviews
Safe Classroom Environment	19	Observations
Positive Emotional Response	16	interviews

c. Involvement in Social Activities

The findings of the study show that active involvement in social activities helps increase the sense of belonging of children with autism towards the classroom environment. Children with autism appear to feel more part of the class when engaged in group play, group discussions, and structured collaborative activities. However, this involvement is still highly dependent on the support of teachers and peers. In unstructured social situations, children with autism tend to withdraw from social interactions.

Table 11. NVivo Thematic Analysis Results: Involvement in Social Activities

Tema (Node)	Frequency	Data Source
Social Participation	24	Observations
Collaborative Activity Engagement	18	Observations and interviews
Structured Social Interaction	15	Teacher interviews

d. Social Support from Teachers and Peers

Research has found that social support is the dominant factor in building social belonging for children with autism. Teachers who actively build inclusive classroom cultures and peers who show empathy help children with autism feel more accepted and valued. Some regular students seem to help children with autism understand instructions, invite play, and provide support when children have difficulty interacting.

"If his friends want to invite and not mock, his child will be more comfortable in class."
(Interview with the teacher).

Table 12. NVivo Thematic Analysis Results: Social Support from Teachers and Peers

Tema (Node)	Frequency	Data Source
Teacher Social Support	28	Teacher interviews
Peer Emotional Support	22	Observations
Inclusive Classroom Relationship	17	Interviews and observations

e. The Emergence of Feelings of Social Isolation

Despite positive social experiences, research has also found that some children with autism still experience feelings of social isolation in the classroom. Children feel different from their peers and have difficulty understanding the patterns of social interaction that develop. As a result of observations, children with autism seem to prefer to be quiet, avoid crowds, or sit alone when social activities take place freely.

Table 13. NVivo Thematic Analysis Results: The Emergence of Feelings of Social Isolation

Tema (Node)	Frequency	Data Source
Social Isolation Feeling	23	Student interviews
Feeling Different from Peers	19	Observations
Withdrawal from Social Activity	16	Observations and interviews

The results of the analysis show that the themes of Teacher Social Support and Sense of Group Membership are the most dominant categories in building a sense of social belonging in children with autism. These findings show that the social belonging of children with autism is greatly influenced by the quality of interpersonal relationships in the classroom environment. Teacher support and peer acceptance help children feel more safe, valued, and part of the classroom community. In addition, the theme of Emotional Comfort also shows a strong relationship with the increasing social involvement of children with autism in learning activities and group games.

On the other hand, the emergence of the themes of Social Isolation Feeling and Limited Social Connection shows that some children with autism still experience social isolation even though they are in an inclusive school environment. NVivo's analysis shows that social communication barriers and limited spontaneous interaction are the main factors that affect the low sense of belonging to children in the classroom environment. These findings suggest that the success of inclusive education depends not only on access to shared learning, but also on the ability of schools to create a social environment that provides a sense of acceptance, safety, and emotional connection for children with autism.

5. The Role of Teachers in Building an Inclusive Social Environment

The results of the study show that teachers have a very important role in building an inclusive social environment for children with autism in elementary school classrooms. Teachers not only function as facilitators of academic learning, but also as social mediators who help shape positive interactions between children with autism and peers. Based on the results of observations and interviews, teachers' active involvement affects the level of social acceptance, sense of belonging, and social participation of children with autism in the inclusion classroom environment. Data analysis using the NVivo version 14 application produced four main themes related to the role of teachers in building an inclusive social environment, namely 1) teachers as mediators of social interaction, 2) development of inclusive classroom culture, 3) providing emotional support, and 4) collaborative learning strategies.

a. Teachers as Mediators of Social Interaction

The findings of the study show that teachers play an active role in helping children with autism interact with peers. Teachers often become a liaison when there are social communication barriers in the classroom. In various group activities, teachers help direct regular students to involve children with autism in discussions and games together. The results of the observations showed that the social engagement of children with autism increased when teachers provided direct social instruction and created structured interaction opportunities.

"If he is not directed, sometimes his friends are confused about how to invite him to interact." (Classroom teacher interview).

Table 14. NVivo Thematic Analysis Results: Teachers as Mediators of Social Interaction

Tema (Node)	Frequency	Data Source
Teacher as Social Mediator	30	Observations and interviews
Facilitating Peer Interaction	24	Classroom observation
Guided Social Communication	19	Teacher interviews

b. Inclusive Class Cultural Development

Research has found that teachers have an important role in building a classroom culture that respects diversity and encourages mutual acceptance among students. Teachers actively provide regular students with an understanding of the importance of respecting differences and helping friends with special needs. In some observations, teachers seem to provide positive reinforcement when students show empathetic and cooperative behavior towards children with autism.

"We get used to children not to tease and always invite their friends to join us."
(Classroom teacher and accompanying teacher interview).

Table 15. NVivo Thematic Analysis Results: Inclusive Class Cultural Development

Tema (Node)	Frequency	Data Source
Inclusive Classroom Culture	28	Teacher interviews
Promoting Respect and Empathy	22	Observations
Positive Social Reinforcement	17	Observations and interviews

c. Providing Emotional Support

Research findings show that emotional support from teachers helps children with autism feel safer and more comfortable in the classroom environment. Teachers pay special attention when children have difficulty interacting, feeling anxious, or withdrawing from social activities. The results of the interviews showed that children with autism were more confident to engage in classroom activities when teachers provided positive responses and supportive approaches.

Table 15. NVivo Thematic Analysis Results: Providing Emotional Support

Tema (Node)	Frequency	Data Source
Emotional Support from Teacher	26	tudent and teacher interviews
Building Student Confidence	20	Observations
Supportive Teacher Relationship	18	Interview

d. Collaborative Learning Strategies

Research has found that collaborative learning strategies help improve the social interaction of children with autism with peers. Teachers use group activities, educational games, and collaborative assignments to create broader opportunities for social interaction. In some observations, children with autism appear to be more active when learning activities are carried out in groups with the assistance of teachers.

"If it is done with directed group work, it is easier for the child to interact." (Interview with the teacher).

Table 16. NVivo Thematic Analysis Results: Collaborative Learning Strategies

Tema (Node)	Frequency	Data Source
Collaborative Learning Strategy	25	Classroom observation
Structured Group Activities	21	Observations and interviews
Increased Social Participation	18	Teacher interviews

Data analysis shows that the themes of Teacher as Social Mediator and Inclusive Classroom Culture are the most dominant categories in building an inclusive social environment for children with autism. These findings show that teachers have a central role in creating positive social interactions through communication direction, strengthening empathic behavior, and building a diverse classroom culture. In addition, the theme of Collaborative Learning Strategy shows that collaborative learning activities are able to increase the social involvement of children with autism when designed in a structured and supportive manner.

The theme Emotional Support from Teacher shows that emotional support from teachers has a great effect on the sense of security and confidence of children with autism in interacting with their social environment. The results of this analysis show that positive interpersonal relationships between teachers and students help reduce social anxiety and increase children's participation in classroom activities. These findings confirm that the success of inclusive education does not only depend on academic strategies, but also on the ability of teachers to build a supportive, empathetic, and inclusive social environment for all students.

Discussion

1. Social Experience of Children with Autism in Elementary School Inclusion Classrooms

The results of the study show that the social experiences of children with autism in elementary school inclusion classes still face various challenges in building natural interpersonal relationships with peers. Even though children with autism have been in the same learning environment as regular students, their social involvement tends to be limited and passive. Children are more likely to follow interactions than to initiate spontaneous communication. In group activities, they are generally only involved when directed by a teacher or invited by a certain friend. This condition shows that physical presence in the inclusion class has not fully provided a meaningful social experience for children with autism. These findings are in line with the research of Chen et al., (2022) who explained that autism students in inclusive schools often experience barriers to social engagement due to limited interpersonal communication and a lack of a supportive social environment.

The study also found that children with autism are often in situations of "being present together but not yet fully socially connected". In various classroom activities,

children appear to be around peer groups, but are not fully active part of the interactions that occur. This phenomenon shows the existence of a form of passive inclusion, which is a condition when schools have succeeded in presenting inclusion administratively, but have not been able to build deep social connections for children with autism. The results of (Mamas et al., (2021) show that children with autism in inclusion environments generally have a limited circle of friends and experience social isolation more often than other regular students. These conditions can affect children's emotional development, confidence, and comfort in the school environment.

This research also shows that the social experiences of children with autism can develop positively when the classroom environment has a supportive, empathetic, and collaborative culture. Children with autism appear to be more comfortable interacting when teachers and peers provide positive social acceptance. In some situations, children become more active when they participate in structured group activities that involve simple cooperation with their peers. These findings show that social barriers in children with autism do not entirely stem from individual characteristics, but are also influenced by how the social environment responds to their existence. This perspective is in line with the double empathy problem approach developed by Xu et al., (2023), who explains that social difficulties in autistic individuals arise due to the incompatibility of two-way communication between children with autism and their social environment.

The results of the study show that social activities based on shared interests and collaborative learning can help increase the social involvement of children with autism in inclusion classes. Children look more confident when they are in social situations that are safe, non-judgmental, and provide natural interaction opportunities. Jiang et al., (2026) explained that interest-based social activities can help increase social participation and comfort for children with autism in an inclusive environment. These findings suggest that inclusive education should not only focus on academic adaptation, but also on creating social experiences that make children with autism feel accepted, valued, and an important part of their classroom community.

2. Peer Acceptance Dynamics

Social interactions between children with autism and peers in inclusion classes showed that social acceptance was not formed automatically just because they were in the same learning space. Peer acceptance tends to be situational and is easier to emerge when class activities take place in a structured and directed manner by the teacher. In more spontaneous social situations, such as when playing freely or choosing groups independently, children with autism still often experience limited social engagement. Peers generally accept the existence of children with autism in an academic context, but have not fully established close and equal social relationships. This condition shows that social inclusion requires a deeper social adaptation process than just

physical integration in the school environment. These findings are in line with the research of Schwab et al.,(2022) who explained that children with autism in inclusive schools often experience limitations in friendship relationships and tend to be in peripheral positions in the social network of the classroom.

The dynamics of peer acceptance also show a form of subtle social exclusion. Children with autism do not always experience rejection directly, but are often not involved in conversations, group games, or social activities that take place naturally among their peers. This situation causes the child to be physically present in the social environment of the classroom, but not yet to be really part of meaningful social relationships. This phenomenon illustrates that social acceptance in inclusive education is still at the level of existential tolerance, has not fully reached emotional and relational acceptance. Omorogiuwa & Aladeselu, (2025) explain that forms of social neglect that are not explicitly visible are actually one of the biggest challenges for children with autism in an inclusive environment because it affects their confidence and social comfort in the long run,

Peer empathy has been proven to have a great influence on the development of social acceptance of children with autism. When regular students begin to understand the characteristics of autism and have positive interaction experiences, social relationships become more open and supportive. Children with autism seem more comfortable interacting with friends who show patience, help with communication, and do not give a negative stigma to their behavioral differences. This condition shows that social acceptance develops through the process of social learning in the classroom environment. According to Chen et al., (2022), peer understanding of diversity is an important factor in creating inclusive social relationships for children with autism, as empathetic attitudes can reduce social distance and increase interpersonal engagement.

The more often children are involved in collaborative activities with their friends, the more mutual understanding develops in these social relationships. Classroom environments that provide regular interaction opportunities allow regular students to become more familiar with the communication patterns of children with autism, so that social awkwardness is slowly reduced. In this context, social acceptance is not a condition that arises instantly, but rather a process that develops through shared social experience. Aisy & Aprilia, (2025) explain that consistent experiences of social interaction can help improve the quality of friendship relationships and strengthen the social engagement of children with autism in an inclusive educational environment.

3. Peer Acceptance of Autistic Children within Indonesia's Collectivist Cultural Context

The findings of this study should be interpreted within the sociocultural context of Indonesia, which is widely characterized as a collectivist society. In collectivist cultures, social harmony, group cohesion, interdependence, and collective responsibility are highly valued. These cultural characteristics appear to influence how autistic children are accepted and positioned within inclusive elementary school classrooms. The findings revealed that peer acceptance was often facilitated through collaborative activities, teacher guidance, and repeated social interactions. These patterns were consistently reflected in the present study through teacher-directed inclusion, peer empathy, supportive peer behaviour, and collaborative classroom activities identified during observations and interviews. Unlike individualistic cultures where social relationships are more strongly based on personal preferences and individual autonomy, social interactions in Indonesian classrooms are frequently shaped by collective norms that encourage students to maintain harmonious relationships and support one another. Consequently, autistic children may receive social support not only because of individual friendships but also because classroom members feel a shared responsibility to include peers who require assistance.

One important cultural value reflected in the findings is *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation), which remains deeply embedded in Indonesian social life and educational practices. The emergence of peer empathy, supportive peer behavior, and collaborative participation observed in this study can be interpreted as manifestations of **gotong royong** within the school environment. Students often helped autistic classmates understand classroom tasks, invited them to participate in group activities, and provided social assistance during interactions. Although social acceptance was not always fully developed, the tendency of peers to offer support demonstrates how collective cultural values can promote inclusive social behavior. This finding suggests that the social acceptance of autistic children in Indonesian inclusive schools is influenced not only by individual attitudes but also by cultural expectations that encourage cooperation, empathy, and communal responsibility.

Another important finding relates to the influential role of teachers in shaping peer acceptance. In Indonesian educational culture, teachers are generally regarded as respected authority figures whose attitudes and behaviors strongly influence students' social actions. The findings showed that peer acceptance often emerged in situations where teachers actively mediated interactions, encouraged inclusion, and reinforced empathetic behavior among students. This pattern reflects the hierarchical yet relational nature of Indonesian classrooms, where teacher guidance frequently serves as a reference for acceptable social behavior. Students were more likely to involve autistic peers in classroom activities when teachers explicitly encouraged inclusive participation. Therefore, the authoritative role of teachers functions not only as an

instructional mechanism but also as a cultural mechanism that shapes social norms and peer relationships within inclusive classrooms.

These findings contribute to the literature by demonstrating that peer acceptance and social belonging among autistic children cannot be fully understood without considering the cultural context in which inclusion occurs. While previous studies conducted in Western contexts often emphasize individual attitudes and personal social competencies, the present study highlights the significance of collectivist cultural values, mutual cooperation, and teacher authority in influencing social inclusion processes. This suggests that successful inclusive education in Indonesia is closely connected to the ability of schools to mobilize local cultural resources, including **gotong royong**, collective empathy, and teacher-led social guidance, to foster meaningful social participation for autistic children.

4. A Sense of Social Belonging for Children

Social belonging among autistic children in inclusive classrooms indicates that the success of inclusive education cannot be measured solely by academic participation or the physical presence of children in regular schools. Autistic children need social experiences that make them feel accepted, valued, and part of the classroom community. The condition in which children are physically present around peer groups but not fully involved in social interactions demonstrates that social connectedness remains a major challenge in the implementation of inclusive education. This situation reflects the concept of social presence without emotional belonging, where children are physically present in the social environment but have not fully developed emotional attachment to their group. These findings are consistent with the study by (El-Salahi et al., (2025), which explained that autistic children often experience difficulties in developing a sense of belonging at school due to limited social interaction and low-quality interpersonal relationships with peers.

Emotional comfort also emerged as an important factor in shaping the social belonging of autistic children in inclusive classrooms. A supportive classroom environment, free from excessive social pressure and characterized by acceptance of diversity, helps children feel safer in social interactions. When teachers and peers respond positively to the communication attempts of autistic children, their self-confidence and social participation tend to increase. Conversely, less empathetic social environments may trigger social anxiety and encourage children to withdraw from group interactions. Gilbert, (2024) and Surasni (2026) explained that emotional safety serves as the primary foundation for developing social engagement and psychological well-being among autistic students in inclusive schools. Therefore, creating a warm and supportive classroom climate becomes an essential part of fostering meaningful inclusive experiences.

The involvement of autistic children in structured social activities was also found to strengthen their sense of belonging within the classroom environment. Collaborative activities, group games, and classroom discussions provide opportunities for children to develop more natural social relationships with their peers. However, such involvement remains highly dependent on the support of teachers and regular students. In unstructured social situations, autistic children tend to experience difficulties again in maintaining social interactions. This condition suggests that social belonging among autistic children develops through repeated, safe, and supportive social experiences. Aisy & Aprilia,(2025) explained that consistently implemented collaborative social activities can improve social participation and strengthen interpersonal relationships among autistic children in inclusive educational settings.

The emergence of feelings of social isolation indicates that some autistic children still experience emotional alienation despite being part of an inclusive education system. Children often feel different from their peers and struggle to understand the social communication patterns that develop within the classroom environment. These feelings may affect learning comfort, self-confidence, and even the long-term psychological well-being of the child. These findings demonstrate that inclusive education still faces challenges in creating truly equal social relationships for all students. Therefore, schools need to build social environments that not only accept the presence of autistic children, but also foster empathetic and supportive interpersonal relationships that allow children to feel like valued members of the classroom community.

5. The Role of Teachers in Building an Inclusive Environment

The role of teachers in building an inclusive environment is a crucial factor in determining the success of the social experiences of autistic children in elementary school classrooms. Teachers not only function as providers of academic instruction, but also as social facilitators who help create positive interpersonal relationships within the classroom. In learning practices, teachers actively connect autistic children with their peers through group activities, guidance in social communication, and the development of a classroom culture that values diversity. The presence of teachers as social mediators helps reduce the interaction barriers often experienced by autistic children, especially in situations where peers do not yet understand how to communicate or interact appropriately. These findings are consistent with the study by (Kunwar & Adhikari, (2023), which emphasized that teachers hold a central role in creating an inclusive culture that enables all students to feel accepted and socially involved within the school environment.

In addition to serving as mediators of social interaction, teachers also play an important role in creating a safe and supportive emotional classroom climate for

autistic children. Classroom environments filled with social pressure, ridicule, or excessive competitiveness may cause autistic children to experience anxiety and withdraw from social interactions. Conversely, when teachers demonstrate empathy, provide positive reinforcement, and establish warm communication, autistic children tend to become more confident in participating in classroom activities. Li & Li, (2024) explained that emotional support from teachers has a significant influence on the development of social security and school belonging among autistic students in inclusive educational settings. Therefore, positive interpersonal relationships between teachers and students become an essential foundation for building the social engagement of autistic children at school.

The role of teachers is also evident in their efforts to develop peers' understanding of the diverse characteristics of students in inclusive classrooms. Teachers indirectly shape the social attitudes of regular students through the way they treat autistic children in everyday learning activities. When teachers demonstrate respect for differences and model inclusive behavior, regular students are more likely to develop empathy and stronger social acceptance toward autistic children. On the other hand, a lack of social guidance from teachers may lead to social neglect or exclusive interactions among students. Bindhani & Gopinath, (2024), the success of inclusive education is strongly influenced by teachers' ability to cultivate inclusive values and classroom cultures that appreciate students' social and emotional diversity.

Collaborative learning strategies implemented by teachers have also been shown to improve the social interactions of autistic children in inclusive classrooms. Structured group activities provide opportunities for autistic children to engage in social communication in a more natural and secure way. Teachers who are able to design cooperation-based learning not only support students' academic development, but also expand their social experiences with peers. In this context, inclusive learning should not only focus on curriculum adaptation, but also on creating social experiences that allow all students to feel valued and become part of the classroom community. Aisy & Aprilia (2025) explained that collaborative learning strategies can strengthen social participation and improve the quality of interpersonal relationships among autistic children in inclusive school environments.

Conclusion

Based on these comprehensive insights into the social dynamics of autistic children, several concrete actions must be taken by key educational stakeholders. The transition from mere physical integration to genuine social belonging requires systematic changes at the classroom, institutional, and regulatory levels. Practical Implications, The findings of this study provide critical insights for transforming inclusive elementary education in Indonesia from mere physical integration into meaningful social inclusion, specifically for autistic children.

For Teachers, Educators must expand their role from academic facilitators to active social mediators within the classroom. They should design structured, collaborative group activities and games that intentionally bridge the interaction gap, preventing the subtle social exclusion of autistic children. Furthermore, teachers need to consistently model emotional support to foster peer empathy and create a safe classroom culture where student diversity is embraced.

For School Principals, School leaders need to establish a school-wide ecosystem that prioritizes the social and emotional well-being of autistic students, rather than focusing solely on equal learning access. Principals can implement regular awareness programs or empathy-building workshops for regular students to help them understand the unique characteristics of autism, thereby cultivating a gradual, sustainable process of peer acceptance.

For Policy Maker, Educational authorities in Indonesia should refine inclusive education standards by embedding social connectedness indicators into the school evaluation framework. Policies should incentivize lower teacher-to-student ratios to allow educators sufficient time for social mediation, and mandate continuous training that equips general education teachers with practical strategies for fostering positive interpersonal relationships in diverse classrooms.

Based on these comprehensive insights into the social dynamics of autistic children, several concrete actions must be taken by key educational stakeholders. The transition from mere physical integration to genuine social belonging requires systematic changes at the classroom, institutional, and regulatory levels.

The social experiences of autistic children in inclusive elementary school classrooms indicate that their presence in regular school environments has not been fully accompanied by optimal social involvement. Autistic children still experience barriers in developing interpersonal communication, actively participating in group activities, and forming natural social relationships with their peers. Social interactions generally remain limited and occur mostly in structured situations. Nevertheless, positive social experiences begin to develop when the classroom environment provides emotional support, safe opportunities for interaction, and a learning atmosphere that embraces student diversity.

Peer acceptance of autistic children also demonstrates complex dynamics that develop gradually over time. Social acceptance does not emerge automatically simply because autistic children are placed in inclusive classrooms; rather, it is influenced by processes of social adaptation, peer empathy, and repeated interaction experiences. In some situations, autistic children still experience subtle forms of social exclusion, such as not being naturally included in games or group activities. However, when regular students begin to understand the characteristics of autistic children and build more supportive relationships, the quality of social interactions becomes more positive and helps autistic children feel more accepted within the classroom environment.

Social belonging among autistic children in inclusive elementary school classrooms is still influenced by the quality of interpersonal relationships, social support, and the emotional environment established within the classroom. Autistic children tend to develop a stronger sense of acceptance and belonging to the classroom community when they receive support from teachers, acceptance from peers, and opportunities to participate in collaborative and structured social activities. On the other hand, limitations in social communication, low levels of spontaneous interaction, and feelings of social isolation remain barriers to developing emotional connectedness with the school environment. Therefore, inclusive education should not only focus on providing equal access to learning, but also on creating social environments that are safe, supportive, empathetic, and capable of providing meaningful social experiences for autistic children in inclusive elementary school classrooms.

Teachers play a central role in building inclusive social environments for autistic children in elementary schools. Teachers function not only as facilitators of academic learning, but also as social mediators who help create positive interpersonal relationships within the classroom. Through the development of empathetic classroom cultures, the provision of emotional support, and the implementation of collaborative learning strategies, teachers contribute to improving social acceptance and the sense of belonging of autistic children within the school environment. Therefore, the success of inclusive education should be understood not only from an academic perspective, but also from the school's ability to create a social environment that accepts, values, and meaningfully involves all students.

Furthermore, this study highlights the importance of considering Indonesia's collectivist cultural context in understanding the social inclusion of autistic children in inclusive elementary schools. The values of gotong royong (mutual cooperation), collective responsibility, and the influential role of teachers as respected authority figures contribute to fostering peer acceptance, social participation, and a stronger sense of belonging among autistic children. These findings suggest that inclusive education in Indonesia can be strengthened by utilizing local cultural values as social resources for promoting meaningful inclusion.

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