
Social Interaction of Students with Intellectual Disabilities at SMP Negeri 5 Sangatta Utara

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ABSTRACT

Social interaction plays a fundamental role in the holistic development of students, particularly in inclusive educational settings where students with intellectual disabilities learn alongside their peers. This interaction not only facilitates academic progress but also shapes emotional well-being and social competence. This study aims to describe the challenges faced by students with intellectual disabilities in developing social interactions, as well as the roles and strategies of teachers in supporting these interactions within inclusive education settings. The research was conducted at *SMP Negeri 5 Sangatta Utara* using a qualitative descriptive method, which emphasizes an in-depth understanding of phenomena through observation, interviews, and documentation. The research subjects consisted of a student with intellectual disabilities, peers, and classroom teachers. The findings reveal that students with intellectual disabilities experience difficulties in initiating and maintaining interactions, expressing opinions during group activities, and understanding social norms such as turn-taking and emotional expression. These limitations often lead to withdrawal and dependency on close peers. However, teacher interventions through participatory learning, peer mentoring, the use of visual and play-based learning media, and cooperative learning methods have proven effective in enhancing student engagement and communication. The study highlights the vital role of teachers as facilitators in fostering inclusive learning environments that promote empathy, social acceptance, and meaningful participation. Strengthening teacher competence and the availability of Special Assistant Teachers (GPK) are recommended to optimize the social and emotional development of students with intellectual disabilities in inclusive schools.

Keywords: Intellectual disabilities, social interaction, inclusive education, teacher role, peer support, qualitative study

INTRODUCTION

Social interaction is an important part of a child's social-emotional development, especially in the educational environment. Through social interaction, children learn to understand the feelings of others, develop empathy, and build communication skills necessary for daily life (Susanti et al., 2022). This interaction occurs in various situations at school, both formally in the learning process and informally during breaks or play, which serve as means for children to hone their social skills. Diyakhere, in Tibo et al. (2022), explained that interaction occurs when two individuals or groups communicate, forming a relationship pattern that supports the child's cognitive and social development.

Global evidence from UNESCO (2023) and the World Health Organization (WHO) demonstrates that positive social interaction serves as a critical indicator of successful inclusive education worldwide. When students with disabilities engage meaningfully with peers, they experience better academic outcomes, improved emotional regulation, and enhanced social competence. Social interaction thus forms the foundation for healthy academic, emotional, and social development across diverse learners (Immordino-Yang et al., 2025; Tusha et al., 2024).

The role of social interaction is very important in character formation, the ability to work together, and students' adaptation to the school environment (Cholifah, 2024; Renaldo et al., 2025). Students who interact well will find it easier to form positive relationships with peers, have confidence, and be able to understand and comply with social rules (Santrock, 2021). Group

learning activities, playing together, and class discussions at school are important forums for practicing students' social skills, helping them understand how to participate in groups and develop a sense of social responsibility in daily school interactions (Yuliana & Setiawan, 2023).

Not all students have the same ability to establish social relationships; this is influenced by various internal and external factors. Intellectual, emotional, psychological, and environmental factors determine students' success in establishing social interaction at school (Putri & Hartatik, 2023). Children with good communication skills interact more easily, while students who have communication barriers tend to have difficulty starting conversations, understanding social rules, and maintaining ongoing interactions with peers (Susanti et al., 2022).

Students with intellectual barriers are a group at risk of experiencing difficulties in social interaction in inclusive schools (Elballah & Alsayed, 2025; Lid et al., 2025). They tend to have limitations in understanding social contexts, have difficulty starting and maintaining conversations, and take longer to understand social situations (Wulandari, 2023). This makes them more withdrawn, less confident, and limits their ability to build stable social relationships with their peers in the school environment (Mian et al., 2025; RSE, 2025).

Intellectual barriers or disabilities are conditions characterized by limited intellectual function, below-average intelligence, and an inability to adjust to social demands in society (Widiastuti & Winaya, 2019). According to the DSM-5, intellectual barriers appear before adulthood and affect an individual's ability to carry out daily activities. Children with intellectual barriers typically have an IQ below 70 and difficulties in basic academic, communication, and social skills (Santrock, 2021).

Characteristics of students with intellectual barriers include difficulty communicating effectively, difficulty understanding social rules, and a tendency to rely on assistance in social activities (Susanti et al., 2022). These students also experience barriers in social interaction skills such as understanding turns, reading friends' facial expressions, and starting conversations (Putri & Hartatik, 2023). This condition requires special support from teachers and peers so that children can learn to adjust and interact optimally in the school environment (Gladh et al., 2025; Salsabila et al., 2025).

Inclusive schools aim to provide equal access to education for all children, including those with intellectual disabilities, in the same learning environment as their peers (Susanti et al., 2022). Through this inclusive approach, children with intellectual barriers have the opportunity to engage in academic and social activities with peers, developing social and academic skills simultaneously. It also supports the creation of a friendly, tolerant, and inclusive social environment in schools (Yuliana & Setiawan, 2023).

However, in reality, inclusive schools still face various challenges in implementation, especially in the social aspect. Children with intellectual barriers often have difficulty adapting to the school's social environment due to limitations in their social skills, while the school environment has not fully supported positive interactions (Wulandari, 2023). Crowded and unstructured classroom conditions frequently hinder children from interacting comfortably with peers, so the role of inclusive schools in facilitating social interaction needs to be improved (Kasari et al., 2011). Data from the Data and Information Technology Center (Pusdatin) of the Ministry of Education and Culture shows that in 2024, around 528,000 children with special needs (ABK) in Indonesia require inclusive education services, but only about 18% have been served in inclusive schools (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2024). UNESCO data (2023) also confirms that developing countries still face challenges in providing access to quality education for children with disabilities, including intellectual barriers, increasing their risk of social isolation.

In East Kutai Regency, especially North Sangatta District, six junior high state schools have been designated as inclusive schools, including SMP Negeri 5 Sangatta Utara, which is the research location. Field observations reveal challenges such as the lack of permanent special assistant teachers, limited ABK-friendly learning facilities, and teachers focusing more on academic achievement than on social interaction assistance for ABK students. This condition may hinder the development of social interaction skills in students with intellectual barriers who urgently need continuous support in an inclusive environment.

Moreover, students with intellectual barriers in inclusive schools, including North Sangatta, still face difficulties in initiating and maintaining interaction with peers, understanding social rules, and actively participating in group activities. This is a tangible problem requiring attention in the implementation of inclusive education to realize children's rights to develop optimally in a supportive social environment. This research aims to contribute to formulating appropriate social interaction assistance strategies for intellectually challenged students in inclusive schools, so schools become not only places for academic learning but also safe spaces to build social skills.

SMP Negeri 5 Sangatta Utara has been an inclusive school since 2020, accepting students with special needs to learn together in one environment. One student falls under the intellectual impairment category based on psychologist diagnosis. Observations on May 19, 2025, showed the student still had communication difficulties with peers, such as not knowing how to start or maintain a conversation. He seemed confused about social rules, for example, waiting his turn to speak or adjusting facial expressions to the situation. Additionally, this student often withdrew from group interactions and preferred to be alone during joint activities.

This limitation in social interaction skills impacts students' ability to adapt to the school environment and build peer relationships. Lack of courage to start conversations and difficulty understanding social contexts means children with intellectual barriers need more support in their social interaction process (Wulandari, 2023). Therefore, special strategies and approaches are necessary to create positive social interaction experiences at SMP Negeri 5 Sangatta Utara.

Teachers play a vital role in facilitating social interaction for students with intellectual barriers in inclusive schools. However, a teacher focus still heavily weighted toward academics often limits social mentoring (Wahyuni, 2022). Field observations on May 19, 2025, confirm teachers have not fully focused on individualized support, reflecting weak implementation of learner-centered principles, especially for students needing special approaches. This is compounded by the absence of Special Assistant Teachers (GPK), who should provide tailored learning services based on special needs. The absence of GPK results from limited human resource allocation by the education office and suboptimal inclusive education policy implementation at the basic education level. As a result, classroom teachers bear full responsibility despite not all having specialized inclusive education competencies.

Students with intellectual barriers require help understanding social situations and interaction rules and encouragement to engage in conversations with peers, making teacher support essential (Putri & Hartatik, 2023). Peers also have a facilitative role, but this remains minimal due to a lack of peer understanding about interacting with intellectually challenged classmates (Carter et al., 2025). These students often do not participate in group activities or play and thus feel isolated. The lack of specific programs to develop social skills limits opportunities for continuous social interaction practice in school (Kasari et al., 2011).

Teachers can foster social interaction through seating arrangements, social skills training, and cooperative learning methods to help children engage with peers (Wahyuni, 2022). Using

engaging media like pictures or simulations can also help children understand social norms and gain confidence (Putri & Hartatik, 2023).

Implementing social skills training programs, inclusive group work, and collaborative approaches offer promising solutions to support social skill development for students with intellectual barriers in inclusive schools (Santrock, 2021). These strategies must be structured and sustainable to ensure consistent learning across school contexts. This builds positive social interaction, supports social skill development, and strengthens inclusive education success (Kasari et al., 2011).

Research on social interaction among students with intellectual barriers in inclusive schools is needed to understand their real challenges in daily interaction. This study identifies specific difficulties in initiating and maintaining interactions and obstacles to building positive peer relationships (Nugroho & Trihastuti, 2024). It will explore factors affecting social interaction from internal aspects (communication skills) and external factors (teacher and school environment roles) (Santrock, 2021).

This research is important for formulating strategies to enhance social skills development in students with intellectual barriers within inclusive schools. The results aim to enrich inclusive education practices by recommending policies that foster a supportive, friendly learning environment (Wulandari, 2023).

In summary, social interaction plays a crucial role in the social-emotional development of children, particularly those with intellectual barriers in inclusive school environments. Challenges such as difficulties in initiating and maintaining conversations, understanding social rules, and forming relationships impact confidence, adaptation, and social participation. Support from teachers, peers, and inclusive environments is essential to foster positive social experiences.

Such support requires structured, sustainable strategies including social skills training, cooperative learning, and individualized assistance. Although teachers are key facilitators, the lack of special competencies and Special Assistant Teachers (GPK) limits effectiveness. Hence, this research is timely and relevant to identify gaps, find solutions, and propose practical recommendations enabling more effective inclusive education that supports social skill development for students with intellectual barriers, thus fostering a safe, equitable, and empowering school environment.

Most previous research on inclusive education focused broadly on teacher strategies and policy frameworks without examining context-specific participatory interventions. While theoretical foundations by Kasari et al. (2011) and Santrock (2021) exist, gaps remain around the implementation of specific strategies like play-based learning, peer mentoring, and visual media in rural inclusive settings such as Sangatta. Additionally, little is known about how teacher facilitation, peer support, and absence of GPK interact to shape social outcomes for students with intellectual disabilities in resource-limited schools. This study fills these gaps through in-depth, context-sensitive evidence from North Sangatta, highlighting unique infrastructural and human resource challenges.

In inclusive education, children with intellectual barriers often face challenges in social interaction, particularly at SMP Negeri 5 Sangatta Utara. Initial observations and school communications identified problems: difficulty in conversation initiation and maintenance, struggles with social rules like turn-taking and reading facial expressions, preference for solitude, and limited support due to teachers' focus on content delivery and the lack of GPK. Not all teachers possess competencies in inclusive education.

This research is urgent because it aligns with Indonesia's commitment to disability rights under Law No. 8 of 2016 and national policies promoting equitable education. Failure to address social barriers in formative years risks long-term social isolation, mental health issues, reduced peer relations, low self-efficacy, and future employability challenges (Kasari et al., 2011; Santrock, 2021). Sangatta's challenges reflect broader rural Indonesia issues, so solutions here have national relevance.

The research novelty lies in its focus on Sangatta's under-researched rural context, use of participant observation plus multi-stakeholder interviews, and examination of combined teacher and peer support absent GPK. These elements provide unique, actionable insights for policy and practice.

The study aims to describe teacher roles and strategies supporting social interaction of students with intellectual barriers at SMP Negeri 5 Sangatta Utara, and to describe challenges these students face. It offers theoretical insights into how inclusive environments support social and learning abilities of intellectually challenged students.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study used a qualitative descriptive method to explore in depth students' social interactions with intellectual barriers in inclusive schools, focusing on their experiences interacting with peers and teachers during daily school activities. This method allowed a detailed understanding of the challenges students faced, teachers' strategies for supporting social interaction, and the dynamics within the inclusive school environment that influenced children's social skills. Creswell (2018) explains that qualitative research not only addresses "what" happens, but also "how" and "why" phenomena occur, providing a comprehensive picture of the subject's social experience.

The research subjects were students with intellectual barriers, their peers, and teachers at *SMP Negeri 5 Sangatta Utara*. The researcher met directly with the informants to obtain accurate information based on observable facts. The research object was the social interaction of students with intellectual barriers at this inclusive school.

The research was conducted at *SMP Negeri 5 Sangatta Utara* over one month in May 2025, covering preparation, data collection, and analysis. Data sources included grade VII students with intellectual barriers as the main subjects, their peers in the same class who provided insights on social interaction and peer support, and classroom teachers who informed about teacher roles and strategies in facilitating social interaction for these students.

Data collection employed techniques aligned with the study's objectives to gather relevant and accurate information:

- 1) **Participatory Observation:** The researcher actively observed social interactions of students with intellectual barriers in classrooms and other school settings. Observations focused on verbal and nonverbal communication, group behavior, and students' responses to support from peers and teachers. Important events, such as difficulties faced by students or support strategies, were noted. This technique provided direct data on natural social interactions without influencing participants' behavior, allowing exploration of dynamics that interviews alone could not capture.
- 2) **In-Depth Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers (particularly BK teachers), peers, and students with intellectual barriers. Questions centered on participants' experiences, challenges in social interaction, and perceived support within the inclusive environment. With consent, interviews were recorded and

transcribed to identify themes relevant to social dynamics. These interviews provided deeper personal perspectives and richer context complementing observational data.

Research instruments included a participatory observation grid designed to capture social interaction behaviors in various school contexts (class, extracurricular, informal settings). This tool measured abilities such as understanding and responding in conversations, participation in group discussions, use of nonverbal cues, emotional responses, cooperative attitudes, initiative in interaction, and perceived school support. The grid was based on established theories of social interaction and characteristics of children with intellectual barriers, ensuring alignment with social development and inclusive education principles.

Table 1: Observation Instrument Grids

Indicators	Sub Indicators	Aspects Observed	Number of Items	Item No
The ability of blind students to understand and respond to conversations with peers	Listen and respond	Students listen to the interlocutor Students give answers according to the topic Students ask for repetition if they don't understand	3	1,2,3
Students' ability to take part in group discussions	Giving opinion	an Students try to speak in a group discussion	1	4
(Use of non-verbal communication (e.g., facial expressions, eye contact)	Eye expression and contact	Students show expressions according to the situation (smile, laugh) Students make or avoid eye contact during interactions	2	5,6
Emotional responses of students with disabilities to interact with peers	Interaction response	Students seem happy, hesitant, or uncomfortable when invited to play Students cry, get angry, or be silent when conflict occurs	2	7,8
Students' attitudes towards cooperation and sharing in groups	Help and share	Students help friends in activities and lend items to friends	1	9
Confidence level in interacting with others	Interaction initiatives	Students approach friends/teachers to talk Students sometimes wait to be greeted or take the initiative to say hello	2	10,11
Peer support in social interactions (e.g., acceptance, cooperation)	Reception and assistance	Friends invite students with disabilities to play or join a group Friends help students during play or group activities	2	12,13

<p>The role of teachers in encouraging or facilitating Social Interaction of Students with Disabilities</p>	<p>Facilitate interaction</p>	<p>. Teacher accompanies students during play/group work . Teachers help students when they have difficulty talking to friends</p>	<p>2 14,15</p>
<p>Inclusive policies and practices implemented in the classroom and school environment (Putri & Hartatik, 2020)</p>	<p>Activity Involvement</p>	<p>. Intellectually challenged students are involved in all classroom activities . No discriminatory treatment from teachers or friends</p>	<p>2 16,17</p>

The purpose of the In-Depth Interview Instrument is to obtain in-depth perspectives from teachers, peers, and students with disabilities regarding their social interactions. This guideline for interviews with teachers is prepared based on a theoretical study related to the role of teachers, challenges, strategies, and school policies in supporting the social interaction of students with intellectual barriers in inclusive schools. According to Santrock (2017), teachers have an important role in developing social skills of children with intellectual barriers through guidance, mentoring, and providing opportunities to interact in learning activities and playing with peers. Putri and Hartatik (2020) emphasized that teachers play a role in designing activities that can train children's social skills, provide emotional support, and guide children's interactions with the surrounding environment.

In addition, teachers also face various challenges in facilitating social interaction of students with intellectual barriers, such as communication barriers, difficulties in arranging interactions between students, and limited time and the number of students who must be guided (Wahyuni, 2021). To overcome these challenges, teachers can use cooperative learning strategies, seating arrangements, heterogeneous group formation, as well as creating an inclusive classroom environment and minimizing discrimination in social interactions (Putri & Hartatik, 2020; Susanti, Lestari, & Pratama, 2022).

School policies that support the admission of students with intellectual barriers, their involvement in school activities, and adjustments to activities so that all students are involved are also an important part of supporting children's social interaction with intellectual barriers in inclusive schools (Wahyuni, 2021; Susanti et al., 2022). Therefore, this interview grid is compiled in order to explore in depth the roles, challenges, strategies of teachers, and school policies in supporting the social interaction skills of students with intellectual barriers in accordance with the theory of inclusive education and children's social development.

Table 2. A Teacher's Guide to Interviewing

No	Indicators	Sub Indicators	Number of Items	Item Number
1	<p>Aspects of the Role of the Teacher: Teacher support in the development of students' social skills is an intellectual barrier.</p>	<p>How to guide interactions with friends, social skills training activities, group mentoring</p>	3	1,2,3

2	Teachers' challenges in facilitating social interaction of students with intellectual barriers	Communication barriers, difficulty managing interactions, limited time and number of students	3	4,5,6
3.	Teachers' strategies in encouraging social inclusion of students intellectual barriers)	Cooperative learning strategies, seating arrangements, heterogeneous groups, minimizing discrimination	4	7,8,9,10
4	Inclusive policy and practice aspects: School policies in supporting social inclusion of students with intellectual barriers	Intellectual Barrier Student Admission Policy, Involvement in Activities, Mentoring Programs	3	11,12,13
	Addressing social skills differences in the context of inclusion	Adjustment of individual approaches, adjustments of activities so that all students are involved	2	14,15

Table 3. Peer interview guidelines grid

No	Indicators	Sub Indicators	Number of Items	Item Number
1.	Experience of interaction with friends with the blind (Santrock, 2017)	How to interact daily, forms of interaction when playing/group work, communication with friends with the blind	2	1,2
2.	Differences in interaction with friends with people with disabilities compared to other friends (Putri & Hartatik, 2020)	Differences in how to speak, how to play, how to help a friend with autism	2	3,4
3.	Peer support in social interaction (Susanti et al., 2022)	How to help a disabled friend when communicating, help in games, help in group learning	2	5,6

Table 4. Interview Guidelines with Students with Intellectual Barriers

No	Indicators	Sub Indicators	Number of Items	Item Number
1	Experience interaction with friends (Santrock, 2017)	How to interact with friends every day, while playing, learning together	3	1,2,3
2.	Feelings when interacting with friends or teachers (Susanti et al., 2022)	Feelings of pleasure, fear, anxiety, comfort when interacting	3	4,5,6

3. Challenges in talking and working with friends (Putri& Hartatik, 2020)	Difficulty expressing opinions, difficulties during group work, difficulties when playing together	3	7,8,9
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Data analysis in qualitative research is carried out before entering the field, while in the field, and after completion in the field, as explained by Sugiyono (2015: 337). The data analysis process is carried out interactively and continues continuously until it reaches the point of data saturation. Activities in data analysis include three main stages, namely data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion or verification.

The data collected in the field is quite numerous, complicated, and complex, so it is necessary to analyze the data by means of data reduction. The process of data reduction involves summarizing and selecting important information, focusing on key points, looking for themes and patterns in the data, and eliminating irrelevant parts (Sugiyono, 2015). The researcher extracts important information, summarizes the data, and creates categories from the data that has been collected. Next is the presentation of data (*data display*).

The presentation of data in qualitative research can be done in the form of brief descriptions, charts, relationships between categories, flowcharts, and other forms. According to Miles and Huberman (Sugiyono, 2015), the most often used form of data presentation in qualitative research is in the form of narrative texts. In this study, the presentation of data was carried out by descriptively describing the social interaction of students with intellectual disabilities, which includes cooperation, assimilation, opposition, competition, and accommodation with normal students, fellow students with intellectual disabilities, students with disabilities, and with teachers.

The final step in qualitative data analysis is the drawing of conclusions and the verification process. The initial conclusions made are still provisional and may change if strong and supporting evidence is not found at the next stage of data collection. Therefore, the data that has been re-presented is selected based on its importance and its need to be used in drawing the final conclusion.

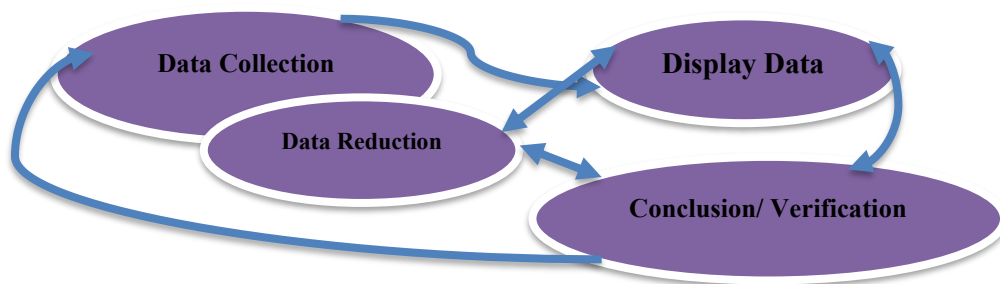


Figure 1. Qualitative Data Analysis Model Miles and Huberm Model

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This research addresses a critical gap in Indonesia's inclusive education landscape, particularly in rural contexts where implementation challenges are most acute. The urgency of this study is threefold: it responds to Indonesia's legal commitments under Law No. 8 of 2016 on disability rights and national inclusive education mandates; it addresses the documented risks of long-term social isolation, mental health deterioration, and diminished life prospects when social

interaction barriers remain unaddressed during formative school years (Kasari et al., 2011; Santrock, 2021); and it provides evidence from Sangatta, a representative rural setting, offering scalable insights for similar resource-constrained contexts nationwide. The novelty of this research lies in its contextual specificity (rural Sangatta versus predominantly urban-focused previous studies), its methodological depth (combining intensive participant observation with multi-stakeholder interviews), and its unique focus on the simultaneous interplay of teacher strategies and peer support in the absence of specialized GPK personnel—a common yet under-researched reality in Indonesian inclusive schools. North Sangatta State Junior High School is located at the Gg. Majai Student Complex, North Sangatta District, East Kutai Regency. The full identity is in the following table:

Table 5. School Profile

1 SCHOOL IDENTITY	
School Name	SMP Negeri 5 Sangatta Utara
NSS/NPSN	201161004078 / 69864255
Address	Student Complex, Jl Majai
Village	North Sangatta
District	North Sangatta
Regency	East Kutai
Date/ Year of establishment	14 July 2014
Year of Operation	14 July 2014
TMT	14 July 2014
SK Number	421/K.729/2014
Decree Date	06 October 2014
Principal's Name	Syahrani, SP
2 Building Condition	
Building Construction	Concrete
Land Area	3400m ²
Building Area	672m ²

The State of North Sangatta State Junior High School Students In 2024/2025 there are 478 students with 245 male students and 233 female students. SMP Negeri 5 Sangatta Utara has been an inclusion school since 2023. In 2024, there will be 1 ABK student who has intellectual barriers to successfully report from the results of the examination by a psychologist. Meanwhile, the number of teachers with the status of Civil Servants (PNS) is 16 people and those with the status of Government Employees with Employment Agreements are 19 people and several honorary personnel.

Social Behavior and class state. The acceptance of grade VII students and teachers towards people with intellectual disabilities can be well judged, as can be seen from the behavior of grade VII students who continue to interact with TPV, it can be seen that there is cooperation in the learning process and mutual help attitudes among peers, both male and female students.

1. Description of the research subject

TPV is a girl who sits in grade VII at SMP Negeri 5 Sangatta Utara. TPV was born in Barito, February 5, 2011, and will be 14 years old in 2025. Physically, TPV has complete limbs and is not deformed. However, TPV needs more time to be able to understand something and is less able to control his emotions, and likes to interrupt or invite his friends to play during learning hours in

class. Based on the results of the assessment, an IQ score of 68 was obtained so that TPV includes children with disabilities.

2. Description of Research Results

The research was conducted from May 2025 to June 2025 at North Sangatta State Junior High School. This study aims to describe the challenges faced by students with intellectual barriers in building social interaction as well as the role of teachers and strategies to support social interaction in inclusive schools. Data was obtained through interviews with teachers, peers, students with intellectual barriers, and the results of observations in the classroom.

From the results of the interview analysis with the challenges faced by students' intellectual barriers in Building Social Interaction. From the results of the interview, TPV said that he felt happy when playing with his friends and wanted to learn together. However, he admitted that during group work he found it difficult to understand the material.

TPV Interview (Intellectual Barrier Student) "Yes it's hard to understand". In addition, TPV also can't express his opinion, sometimes it can be asked by a friend".

And based on interviews with peers, they explained that they often invite TPV to talk and play during breaks and study together, but must be patient because TPV's focus is often distracted. and need to repeat explanations and accompany so that TPV wants to play/learn together". (Peer Interview)

In line with that, the results of TPV observations when asked or talked to were not always according to the topic, not active in group discussions. The results of the above study show that the main challenge faced by students with intellectual barriers is difficulty focusing when communicating so that conversations are often distracted and tend to wait to be interacted with.

The Role of Teachers and Strategies in Supporting Social Interaction. From the results of the interview with the teacher, it was stated that in the learning process in the classroom, TPV was directly involved in activities in the class group work and presentations.

(Interview with Teacher Hs) "By directly involving in the activities in the classroom and also using audio-visual media and attractive images to practice social skills through the method of play while learning and during group work, teachers accompany and direct other friends to involve students with intellectual barriers, and teachers adjust activities and approaches so that TPV remains actively involved in activities and project activities are adjusted to their abilities from the process to the results".

In line with this, the results of observation of the role of teachers in accompanying during group work and giving briefings are very influential in TPV's social interaction and show that there is no difference between TPV and other friends in the class.

The results of the study show that the role of teachers and strategies to support social interaction is to be a facilitator of TPV involvement in activities, both in classroom and outside classroom activities such as project activities and creating an inclusive and open learning environment.

The results of this study show that. The challenges faced by students are intellectual barriers in building social interaction in inclusive schools. Based on the results of interviews and observations, students with intellectual barriers face challenges in social interaction, including: Difficulty initiating and maintaining interactions. Students are more likely to wait to be talked to or play and do not always respond with topical answers. Observations show that students seem happy when they are invited to play, but sometimes avoid eye contact and easily lose focus. Difficulty expressing opinions in group discussions. Students are not observed actively giving opinions during group discussions. Students also admit that it is difficult to understand the teacher's

instructions during group activities, such as. Dependence on close friends. Students only help friends who are close to them and have not been able to build extensive interactions. Difficulty dealing with conflict. Students cry when their wishes are not fulfilled while playing.

Based on the results of interviews, observations, and strengthened by the opinions of experts, it can be concluded that students with intellectual barriers at SMP Negeri 5 Sangatta Utara face various challenges in building social interactions, such as difficulties in initiating and maintaining communication, limitations in expressing opinions, and the tendency to depend on close friends. According to Mumpuniarti and Rachmawati (2022), children with intellectual barriers tend to experience delays in understanding social cues, have difficulty focusing in conversations, and need intensive assistance in group activities in order to participate actively.

This is reinforced by the findings of Nurhasanah et al. (2023) who stated that children with intellectual barriers in inclusive schools generally have limited social relationships and require the support of teachers and peers to build a wider social network. Therefore, the role of teachers as facilitators in creating an inclusive learning environment and learning strategies that actively involve students, such as mentoring in group work and the use of engaging media, are very important in supporting the sustainable development of social skills of students with intellectual barriers.

The study found that intellectually challenged students in inclusive schools faced various challenges in building social interactions, which was in line with previous research. Difficulty initiating and maintaining interactions can be seen from the tendency of students to wait to be talked to or played, and not always respond with topical answers. This is in accordance with the findings of Santrock (2021) who stated that children with intellectual disabilities are often passive in interactions, take longer to respond, and have limitations in maintaining conversations.

And these findings are in line with Vygotsky's theory (in Yafie, 2024) about the concept of scaffolding, that the development of social skills requires interaction with the environment through guidance from adults and peers (scaffolding). Due to cognitive limitations, students with intellectual barriers need help initiating, maintaining interactions, and understanding social rules during interactions. The Role of Teachers and Strategies in Supporting Social Interaction of Students with intellectual barriers.

The results of teacher interviews and observations show that the role of teachers is very significant in supporting the social interaction of students with intellectual barriers in inclusive schools, including Active Involvement in Classroom and School Activities. Teachers involve students with intellectual barriers in all school activities such as group projects by adjusting roles according to their abilities. This is observed when students are given project assignments until they are finished with their groups. Assistance When Playing and Learning in a Group. The teacher accompanies the students during group activities and directs peers to actively involve intellectually challenged students in the group. Interesting Use of Learning Media. Teachers use audio-visual media and attractive images to practice social skills through play-while learning activities. Seating Arrangements to Facilitate Interaction. Teachers place students with intellectual barriers at the front to make it easy to monitor and accompany them during interactions. Providing Education to Peers. The teacher gives direction to peers to accept and help friends with intellectual barriers so that they can participate in activities. Time utilization when other students are independent. Teachers use time while other students are doing independent assignments to assist students with intellectual disabilities specifically.

From the perspective of peers, they also help students with intellectual disabilities by inviting them to play, accompanying them during group study, waiting when students with intellectual

disabilities have difficulty speaking, and helping to explain instructions repeatedly. The active involvement of teachers in supporting the social interaction of students with intellectual barriers at SMP Negeri 5 Sangatta Utara can be seen through various strategies that are integrated in classroom and school activities. Teachers involve students in group projects by adjusting roles according to their abilities, so that students still feel part of the team despite their limitations. In addition, teachers consistently accompany students while playing and learning in groups, while also directing peers to actively engage intellectually challenged students.

This strategy is reinforced using engaging learning media such as audio-visual and images, which are designed to train students' social skills through a play-while learning approach. This approach is in line with the findings of Roberts & Simpson (2022) in *the International Journal of Inclusive Education*, which states that active involvement in collaborative activities can increase a sense of belonging and social acceptance in students with special needs. This is also supported by research by Chen et al. (2023) in *the Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, which showed that the use of visual media and structured games is effective in improving the social communication of students with intellectual barriers.

In addition to involvement in learning activities, teachers also make strategic seating arrangements by placing students with intellectual barriers at the front of the classroom to make it easier to monitor and accompany during interactions. Teachers also actively educate their peers on the importance of inclusivity, encouraging them to accept and help students with intellectual barriers in various activities. This effort shows that teachers not only play the role of teachers, but also as facilitators of social interaction in the school environment. The effective use of time when other students are doing independent assignments is also used by teachers to pay special attention to students with intellectual barriers, so that they are not left behind socially and academically. This holistic approach reflects the important role teachers play in creating learning environments that are inclusive, responsive, and support the social development of students with intellectual barriers.

These findings corroborate Vygotsky's theory (in Yafie, 2024) that social interaction supports the development of children's abilities with the active role of teachers and peers as scaffolding. In addition, it is in line with the one that states that social skills can be trained with repeated interactions in real-life situations with environmental mentoring. theory (Gresham & Elliot, 2008)

With this strategy, intellectually challenged students gain social learning opportunities in real conditions and feel accepted by their school environment, supporting the development of social interaction skills and self-confidence in an inclusive environment.

This research was conducted in the context of a specific educational unit, namely SMP Negeri 5 Sangatta Utara, with the subject of students with intellectual barriers who have unique individual characteristics. Therefore, the results of this study cannot necessarily be generalized broadly to all inclusive schools or to students with intellectual barriers at different levels and backgrounds.

The data obtained mainly came from interviews with teachers, peers, and observations of one or two students Intellectual barriers. This approach does not include the perspective of parents or other support workers such as therapists or school counselors, who can actually provide complementary information related to children's social interactions outside the school environment. This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach that aims to describe the phenomenon, but is not designed to quantitatively measure the effectiveness of interventions or strategies used by teachers.

CONCLUSION

Teachers and inclusive learning strategies play a crucial role in supporting the social skill development of students with disabilities. Participatory approaches such as visual media, educational games, and peer involvement in study groups effectively boost students' social engagement. The synergy of teacher support, peer collaboration, and inclusive school policies creates a foundation for students with intellectual barriers to interact confidently within the school community. This study revealed that social interaction is shaped by internal challenges—like limited communication and low initiation—and external factors related to the school environment. Despite these challenges, students who experience a socially safe environment with ongoing support show potential for more meaningful interactions. These findings align with Santrock's (2021) view that children with intellectual disabilities often exhibit passive social behavior and delayed responses, while Vygotsky's theory (in Yafie, 2024) highlights the importance of adult and peer scaffolding in developing social skills. Future research could explore specific scaffolding techniques and the long-term impact of combined teacher and peer interventions on social interaction outcomes in inclusive settings.

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