

Vol. 15, No. 2 (2024), pp. 215-240		 Doi: https://doi.org/10.32923/maw.v15i2.4968
Publisher: The Faculty of Da'wa and Islamic Communication at Syaikh Abdurrahman Siddik State Islamic Institute (IAIN) Bangka Belitung, Indonesia.		How To Cite : afifah, zahra, & Kusmiati, Y. (2024). SYMBOLIC COMMUNICATION OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN SOCIAL INTERACTION AT SAKA KARAWANG NATURAL SCHOOL. <i>Mawaizh : Jurnal Dakwah Dan Pengembangan Sosial Kemanusiaan</i> , 15(2), 215 - 240. https://doi.org/10.32923/maw.v15i2.4968
Received: 08-10-2024	Accepted: 14-12-2024	Published: 30-12-2024

SYMBOLIC COMMUNICATION OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN SOCIAL INTERACTION AT SAKA KARAWANG NATURAL SCHOOL

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Abstract

This study aims to understand the forms of symbolic communication used by ABK during social interactions in the inclusive classroom environment of Sekolah Alam Karawang and involves the perspectives of teachers, parents, and non-ABK students regarding their understanding of the meaning of ABK symbolic communication. This study uses a qualitative research method, a phenomenological approach, a constructivist paradigm, and data collection through observation, documentation, data triangulation, and literature studies. The subjects in this study were Students with Special Needs (PDBK) with ADHD, slow learner, and deaf classifications; accompanying teachers; Regular Students (non-PDBK); and parents of students with special needs at Sekolah Alam Karawang. The object of the study was the social interaction of ABK with the environment at Sekolah Alam Karawang. As an analysis, this study uses the Symbolic Interactionism theory developed by G. H Mead and published by Herbert Blumer. The study's findings indicate that PDBK uses three forms of symbolic communication. First, body/physical movements are carried out by PDBK ADHD and slow learners. Second, repetition of words is done by one of the slow learners, PDBK and the deaf PDBK. Third, excessive use of emotions, done by the ADHD PDBK and one of the slow learner PDBK. Teachers, parents, and regular students (non-ABK) understand ABK symbolic communication differently. First, symbolic communication of body/physical movements is interpreted as encouragement, feelings of discomfort/nervousness/happiness, and unclear/strange children. Second, symbolic communication of repetition of words is interpreted as a form of difficulty in regulating thought patterns, a symbol of difficulty hearing, and a symbol of misunderstanding by student V and Mrs T. Third, symbolic communication of excessive use of emotions is interpreted as a form



of channelling emotions/annoyance/wanting something and interpreting the form of communication using emotions as a form of anger and bad attitudes from ABK.

Keywords: *Symbolic Communication, Social Interaction, ABK, Inclusion, Nature School, symbolic interactionism, Inclusive Education*

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk memahami bentuk komunikasi simbolik yang digunakan oleh ABK selama interaksi sosial di lingkungan kelas inklusi Sekolah Alam Karawang, serta melibatkan perspektif guru, orang tua, dan siswa non-ABK terkait pemahaman mereka terhadap makna komunikasi simbolik ABK. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode penelitian kualitatif, pendekatan fenomenologi, paradigma konstruktivis, dan pengumpulan data melalui observasi, dokumentasi, triangulasi data, serta studi kepustakaan. Subjek dalam penelitian ini yaitu Peserta Didik Berkebutuhan Khusus (PDBK) dengan klasifikasi ADHD, *slowlearner*, dan tunarungu; guru pendamping; Peserta Didik Biasa (non-PDBK); dan orang tua siswa berkebutuhan khusus di Sekolah Alam Karawang. Objek penelitian yaitu interaksi sosial ABK dengan lingkungan di Sekolah Alam Karawang. Sebagai analisis, penelitian ini menggunakan teori Interaksionisme Simbolik yang dikembangkan oleh G. H Mead dan dibukukan oleh Herbert Blumer. Hasil temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa PDBK menggunakan tiga bentuk komunikasi simbolik. Pertama, gerakan tubuh/fisik, dilakukan oleh PDBK ADHD dan *slowlearner*. Kedua, pengulangan kata, dilakukan oleh salah satu PDBK *slowlearner* dan PDBK tunarungu. Ketiga, penggunaan emosi berlebihan, dilakukan oleh PDBK ADHD dan salah satu PDBK *slowlearner*. Pemahaman guru, orang tua, dan siswa biasa (non-ABK) terhadap komunikasi simbolik ABK bervariasi. Pertama, komunikasi simbolik gerakan tubuh/fisik dimaknai sebagai bentuk pesan semangat, perasaan tidak nyaman/gugup/Bahagia, anak yang tidak jelas/aneh. Kedua, komunikasi simbolik pengulangan kata dimaknai sebagai bentuk kesulitan mengatur pola pikir, simbol sulit mendengar, dan simbol ketidakpahaman oleh siswa V dan Ibu T. Ketiga, komunikasi simbolik penggunaan emosi berlebihan dimaknai sebagai bentuk penyaluran emosi/kesal/ingin sesuatu dan memaknai bentuk komunikasi menggunakan emosi sebagai bentuk sikap marah dan tidak baik dari ABK.

Kata Kunci: Komunikasi Simbolik, Interaksi Sosial, ABK, Inklusi, Sekolah Alam

A. Introduction

Every living thing needs to communicate to interact and socialise. Communication becomes an urgency that covers the needs of all aspects of life. The importance of communication in life can be seen from the research results, which states that the percentage of time used in the communication process is very large, ranging from 75% to 95%. The time used in the communication process is 5% for writing, 10% for reading, 35% for speaking, and 50% for



listening. In addition, 44% is used for routine communication, 26% for human resource development (HRD), 19% for traditional management, and 11% for networking. (Sitti Roskina Mas & Ikhfan Haris, 2020) This is evidence that communication is the heart of life, and no one can escape from communication activities without realising it. Communication expert Wilbur Schramm said that in the context of communication, a society can be seen as several relationships in which each person takes part (shares) of their information. (Sultra & Hakki, 2017).

Communication is also an absolute requirement for adapting. Without communication skills, people will find it difficult to survive and actualise themselves because they experience obstacles in human interaction (Barseli dkk., 2019). Good communication is answering the five basic questions from Harold Lasswell's communication model: Who Says What In Which Channel to Whom with What Effect. (Sapienza dkk., 2015). Based on the definition according to Lasswell, five elements of communication can be drawn that are interdependent on each other, namely the source, also known as the sender, encoder, communicator, or speaker; message; channel or media; receiver; and effect (Mulyana, 2000).

It is not uncommon to find children who experience communication barriers, so they have a different communication style, usually called children with special needs. Children with Special Needs can be said to be children with abnormal conditions (Hardyanti, 2019). Children with special needs (ABK) must not experience discrimination when obtaining quality education. This is guaranteed by several legal regulations in Indonesia, such as the 1945 Constitution Article 31 paragraph (1), Law No. 23 of 2001 concerning Child Protection Article 49, and Law No. 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System, which emphasizes that every citizen has the same right to obtain a quality education (Yulian & Redi, 2024).

Although the government has established Special Schools (SLB) with a segregation model, where children with special needs are separated from non-special needs children, Reynolds and Birch consider this model to be suboptimal



for developing the potential of children with special needs (Irdamurni, 2020) In addition, according to research conducted during the implementation of Special Schools in Indonesia, the Ministry of National Education (2019) said that the segregative model does not guarantee the opportunity for Children with Special Needs to develop their potential optimally because the curriculum is designed differently from regular schools. (*Kemendikbud Ajak Daerah Tingkatkan Pendidikan Inklusif*, 2019). This segregative model is also considered not to guarantee children's opportunities to develop because the curriculum is designed differently from regular schools, so children with special needs cannot integrate with ordinary society.

In essence, as human beings, Children with Special Needs (ABK) must also receive the same treatment and education as normal children in general. Allah SWT, in the Qur'an says:

لَيْسَ عَلَى الْأَعْمَى حَرْجٌ وَلَا عَلَى الْأَعْرَجِ حَرْجٌ وَلَا عَلَى الْمَرِيضِ حَرْجٌ وَلَا عَلَى أَنْفُسِكُمْ أَنْ تَأْكُلُوا مِنْ بُيُوتِكُمْ
أَوْ بُيُوتِ آبَائِكُمْ أَوْ بُيُوتِ أُمَّهَاتِكُمْ

Meaning: There is no obstacle for the blind, nor for the lame, nor the sick, nor yourselves, to eat (with them) in your homes or the homes of your fathers or in the homes of your mothers..... (QS. An-Nur: 61)(*Al-Qur'an dan Terjemah*, 2009).

The verse above emphasises social equality between people with disabilities and those without. Children with Special Needs must be treated equally and sincerely, without discrimination and negative stigma, as explained by Sheikh Ali As-Shabuni in the Tafsir Ayat al-Ahkam, as follows: "The substance of the word of Allah Ta'ala (Surat An-Nur verse 61) is that there is no sin for people who have excuses and limitations (blind, lame, sick) to eat with healthy people (normal) because Allah Ta'ala hates arrogance and arrogant people and loves humility from His servants (*Pandangan Islam tentang Hak-Hak Penyandang Disabilitas - PLD UB*, 2018). Even from this interpretation, it becomes clear that Islam condemns discriminatory attitudes and actions against people with disabilities (Naamy, 2023). Especially discrimination that is based on arrogance and far from good morals.



In addition to the prohibition of discrimination against children with special needs, the rights of children with special needs have also received recognition from the international community in the form of the 1989 Geneva Declaration with 193 countries, and Indonesia also signed the UN Convention on the Rights of Children (CRC) (*Konvensi Hak Anak: Versi anak anak | UNICEF Indonesia*, 2018.). In general, the main points of the KHA are (1) The principle of non-discrimination against children with certain races, ethnicities, and religions, this principle also applies to children with disabilities and special needs (2) The principle of what is best for children (3) The principle of the right to life, survival, and development (4) The principle of respect for children's opinions (Frances Nicholson, 2018). So, in the declaration, it is explained that ABK gets equal rights in society, as marked by several schools willing to accept them as students.

If Special Needs Children continue to attend Special Schools, their emotional and social development will be limited. This worsens their condition and limits their further development. (Kemdikbud.go.id, 2023). Some of the classifications of disabilities by The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (RPWD) 2016 are as follows (Disabilityaffairs, 2016):

1. Loco-motor Disability	12. Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD)
2. Leprosy Cured Persons	13. Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)
3. Cerebral Palsy (CP)	14. Mental Illness
4. Dwarfism	15. Chronic Neurological conditions
5. Muscular Dystrophy	16. Multiple Sclerosis
6. Acid Attack Victims	17. Parkinson's Disease
7. Blindness	18. Haemophilia
8. Low Vision	19. Thalassemia
9. Hearing Impairment (HI)	20. Sickle Cell Disease
10. Speech and Language Disability	21. Multiple Disabilities (MD) including Deaf-Blindness
11. Intellectual Disability (ID)	

Schools that accept children with special needs are usually called inclusive schools, where the school provides learning materials and accompanying teachers so that children get the same rights (Kemdikbud.go.id, 2023). Children with Special Needs (ABK) need more support in their development and learning processes. The role of teachers, parents, family, siblings, and their environment



is most important in understanding the needs of Children with Special Needs in interacting. Today's society must be educated on how to treat children with special needs in the surrounding environment.

It is not uncommon for many people to have difficulty understanding the communication language of Special Needs Children because they experience obstacles in communicating, interacting and controlling their emotions (Nida, 2013). Therefore, this study will observe the process and form of delivering messages or meanings through symbols from ABK, which are then interpreted through symbolic interaction so that communication carried out by ABK can produce meanings that are recognised by society. Understanding symbolic communication will also function so that Children with Special Needs can convey messages or desires of themselves (mind & self) to others so that the same understanding is created in interactions in society (society) (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). Therefore, based on the background above, it is necessary to study, observe, and research more deeply about the symbolic communication of Children with Special Needs in social interaction. The researcher chose Sekolah Alam Saka Karawang as an inclusive school with 30 students who are Children with Special Needs.

In this study, the researcher attempted to review several previous studies relevant to the communication of Children with Special Needs (ABK) and, of course, different from other studies. One of the reference studies is the work of Yopi Kusmiati. (Kusmiati & Nisa, 2020) This paper examines the perception and management of ABK communication in Madrasah Bogor, focusing on teacher interaction. Meanwhile, the researcher's research focuses on ABK symbolic communication in social interactions in inclusive schools. Other research from Fatma Laili Khoirun Nida (Nida, 2013) The At-Tabsyir journal discusses the Augmented and Alternative Communication (AAC) and Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) methods in helping ABK communication, which is different from the focus of the researcher's research, which highlights social interaction in inclusive schools. Ahfi Hikmawati et al.'s study (Hikmawati dkk., 2019) The expressive abilities of autistic children through a psycholinguistic



approach are also relevant, but the difference lies in the method used. In addition, research by Wendy Mitchell et al. (Wendy Mitchell et al., 2009) Emphasises the social experiences of ABK in the workplace, while this study focuses more on symbolic communication in the school environment. Marhamah Rusdy's research (Marhamah Rusdy, 2019) This research uses ethnographic methods to study the communication patterns of autistic children with teachers and parents. It is relevant but different in approach. Finally, the research of Refiana Ainnayah et al. (Ainnayah dkk., 2019) The social interaction of ABK in schools shows communication disorders. Still, it does not explore communication symbols, which is the main focus of this study. By reviewing these studies, researchers can identify gaps and contribute to new understandings of ABK symbolic communication in inclusive schools.

The existence of problem limitations in this study is to avoid research that is too broad. So, this study is limited to symbolic communication by Children with Special Needs (ABK) in social interactions at the SAKA Karawang Nature School in 2023.

B. Methods

This research uses a constructivist paradigm, which focuses on the subjective experiences of individuals in shaping social reality. (Adom, 2016). This paradigm is appropriate for understanding the symbolic communication of Children with Special Needs (ABK) in social interactions at the SAKA Karawang Nature School. Researchers use qualitative methods to describe and analyse the phenomenon of ABK social interactions based on individual experiences. According to Guba and Lincoln, qualitative research has criteria of trust, namely credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, which are closely related to validity and reliability. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017).

The phenomenological approach was chosen to examine the subject's conscious experience. (Kuswarno, 2009), including ABK, teachers, parents, and non-ABK students. This study explores the psychological meaning of everyday social interaction experiences at school. (Herdiansyah, 2010). A purposive sampling technique was used to select the most knowledgeable research subjects about social interaction, including five ABK students, two non-ABK students, and



several teachers and parents. The focus of phenomenological attention is not only the phenomenon (Sutiyono, 2022) However, conscious experience is from the first person's perspective or the person who experiences it directly (*first-hand experiences*).

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, documentation, and literature studies. Source triangulation techniques were applied to validate data from various sources. (Wijaya, 2018), including symbolic communication experts. Data analysis follows Moustakas's phenomenological method and the Miles and Huberman model. (John W. Creswell & J. David Creswell, 2018), involving textural and structural descriptions of participants' experiences and data reduction, presentation, and verification.

Table 1. The list of research subjects is included in the following table:

Research Subject	Position	Information
1. Student K	Students with Special Needs	ADHD
2. Student F	PDBK	Deaf
3. Student S	PDBK	<i>Slow learner</i>
4. Student A	PDBK	<i>Slow learner</i>
5. Student C	PDBK	<i>Slow learner</i>
6. Student V	Regular Students	Teman Sekelas
7. Student R	Regular Students	Teman Sekelas
8. Teacher L	<i>Shadow Teacher</i>	Interview informant
9. Teacher S	<i>Shadow Teacher</i>	Interview informant
10. Mrs Imas Hartati, S. Psi	Stimulus Unit Manager	Interview informant
11. Mrs T	Parents of students A	Interview informant
12. Mrs Y	Parents of students K	Interview informant
13. Prof. Dr. H. Kadri, M. Si	Communication Expert (ABK research)	Data triangulation informants



Tabel 1 show the research involves a diverse group of participants, including students with special needs (ADHD, slow learners, and deaf), regular students, teachers, parents, and experts. Key informants like teachers, parents, and communication experts provide valuable insights into the challenges faced by children with special needs in the educational system. The inclusion of both students with special needs and regular students allows for a comparative analysis, while triangulation through expert opinions strengthens the study's findings. This combination of perspectives ensures a comprehensive understanding of the educational and social experiences of these students.

This study aims to deeply understand ABK's symbolic communication in the context of social interactions in nature schools and its impact on their social relationships with non-ABK students and adults in the school environment.

C. Result and Discussion

C.1. Result

The data obtained in the study "Communication Patterns of Islamic Student Families in Karawang (KMIK) Jakarta in Forming Group Cohesion" are based on interviews, observations, documentation, and library literature; interviews were conducted. The Purposive Sampling technique allows researchers to determine who should be involved in the research based on certain assessments. Researchers can intentionally select subjects who are considered to represent the characteristics of the population being studied. In this study, researchers chose competent sources such as Mrs. Imas Hartati (Stimulus Unit Manager of Karawang Nature School), Mrs. Tri and Mrs. Yosi (parents of students with special needs), Mrs. Sri and Mrs. Aulia (teacher assistants), and students V and R (classmates). Observations were also conducted on five students with special needs, each with ADHD, hearing impairment, and slow learning, to observe their social interactions at school. The data found is relevant to the research problem.

Shadow teacher: In independent classes, one shadow teacher accompanies one student. This study focused on elementary school inclusion classes to observe interactions between ABK and non-ABK students. It was found that ABK's symbolic communication forms were diverse and influenced by their special needs



classification, including the use of words, visuals, clothing, and behaviour as symbols. (Yan, 2017). Children assigned to the trained symbol group were significantly more likely to add new symbol forms through follow-up (Braddock & Armbrecht, 2016). Although, in reality, the meaning of a symbol is influenced by agreements and social constructions of society, individual interpretations of the meaning of symbolic communication are based on their respective preferences. (Shea, 2016). Symbolic communication is the delivery of messages using certain symbols, either verbally or non-verbally. The symbol itself is a manifestation of the message to be conveyed. This was stated by the source, Kadri, in an interview as follows:

“We must understand that messages in the form of verbal and non-verbal symbols are choices of how to convey messages, each person is different. So symbolic messages are conveyed to others in different ways from each person.” (Prof. Dr. Kadri, M.Si, personal communication, 12 Januari 2024)

Menurut Prof. Kadri, ada tiga pertimbangan seseorang dalam menyampaikan symbol of a message. Researchers construct that the factor is based on:

1. Ability and capacity. This depends on physical, mental, and psychological conditions that influence how individuals convey a message.
2. A person's sense of desire. This happens to individuals with healthy and stable self-conditions, so they are able to determine and consider the form of delivering their message. Individuals with good performance will be able to use diverse diction and verbal abilities and emphasise non-verbal.
3. Situational factors. This occurs when the communicator considers how to convey a message, considering the conditions and situations of the communication partner, commonly called the communicant.

Children with special needs use communication as the first factor. Individuals who experience psychological, physical, or mental limitations will maximise their abilities and communication capacities. Symbolic play and language are known to be highly interrelated, but the developmental process involved in this relationship is not clear (Orr & Geva, 2015). For example, children with visual impairments will use communication symbols that utilise their senses of hearing, touch, and feeling more than their sense of sight. This happens because of limitations in vision, and the form of communication has been



adjusted based on their abilities and capacities. This is in accordance with the opinion of Prof. Kadri in an interview as follows:

“Their ways of communicating are the same because that is the extent of their capacity to convey messages or communicate symbolically. So related to that, the people who accompany children with special needs certainly also understand how to deal with them and communicate with them. So they already understand that if, for example, he wants something, he has to say this.”(Prof. Dr. Kadri, M.Si, personal communication, 12 Januari 2024)

During observation, researchers found special characteristics of Special Needs Students when interacting with teachers and friends in nature schools. These special characteristics are constructed in the following table:

Table 2. Observed Special Characteristics of PDBK

PD BK	Special Features							
	Hype ractiv e	Impul sive	able to interact	Able to Follow Instruc tions	listen	Hard to remem ber	Be alone	Not focus
K	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	✓
A	✓	x	✓	x	✓	✓	x	✓
S	x	✓	✓	x	x	✓	✓	✓
C	x	x	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	x
F	x	x	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	x

Source: processed from observation results

Researchers found characteristics of PDBK in nature schools. PDBK K with ADHD often isolates himself but can still be interacted with. He is able to complete tasks with guidance, although it takes longer and usually acts impulsively, especially when the atmosphere is crowded. PDBK A, S, and C with slow learners have different interaction and understanding abilities. PDBK C is more responsive to teacher instructions, while PDBK A and S prefer to study outside the classroom. Regarding counting and remembering abilities, PDBK C is superior to A and S. PDBK F, with hearing impairment, can follow lessons with a teacher's help. In verbalising words,

PDBK F still has difficulty, but he understands and comprehends when interacted with. Only a loud voice is needed when talking to him.

Figure 1. PDBK S was unable to follow the Tahsin and Mathematics classes and was then assisted by a shadow teacher.



Source: Researcher's Doc. during observation

From the two classes studied, Augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) refers to a wide range of techniques, strategies, and tools designed to support children with communication challenges, particularly those with little or no understandable speech (Griffiths dkk., 2022). the researcher found three forms of symbolic communication of ABK when carrying out social interactions, namely (1) using physical movements (pulling, holding, and playing with one's own or other people's body parts) which indicate feelings of happiness, sadness, and discomfort, (2) explaining a word or sentence repeatedly which has meaning as an affirmation of a message until the communicator feels satisfied, and (3) using excessive emotions such as crying or getting angry while talking which means feelings of discomfort and emotion. The researcher constructed three forms of symbolic communication of ABK into the following table:

Table 3. Forms of PDBK Symbolic Communication

No	Name	Physical Movement	Word Repetition	Excessive Emotions
1	PDBK K	✓		✓
2	PDBK A	✓		✓
3	PDBK S	✓	✓	
4	PDBK F		✓	



5	PDBK C	✓		
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Source: processed from research results

Based on the table 3, the research findings identified three classifications of PDBK symbolic communication:

1. Physical Movement: Most PDBKs use physical movements, such as pulling the teacher's shirt or headscarf, hugging, or running, when feeling upset or confused. For example, PDBK A often pulls the teacher's shirt or headscarf when feeling upset, while PDBK K with ADHD often moves actively and impulsively.
2. Word Repetition: PDBK S and F often repeat words or sentences when communicating. PDBK S repeats sentences up to 15 times, while PDBK F repeats words when articulation is unclear.
3. Excessive Emotion: PDBK K and A often show excessive emotions, such as anger or crying, especially when they have difficulty understanding lessons or social interactions. These findings confirm that, as Prof. Kadri stated, the form of PDBK symbolic communication is influenced by their physical and psychological capacities.

A. Understanding of Teachers, Parents, and Non-ABK Students at SAKA Karawang Nature School regarding Symbolic Communication of Children with Special Needs.

Everyone must understand symbolic communication in social interaction because it will eventually form individuals coordinated into a society. (Blumer, 1986). Therefore, understanding the people involved in the interaction is important to agree that the communication creates and conveys meaning. The understanding of symbolic communication conveyed by ABK to teachers, parents, and other non-ABK students is different. Some understand that ABK is indeed like that, so it is difficult to understand; there are also those who know that it is a learning process for ABK and will change later. The following are the results of the author's interviews with informants about their understanding of ABK's symbolic communication.



Students with special needs at Sekolah Alam are diverse, one of the most common classifications of ABK is autism. According to Mrs. Imas, the Manager of the Stimulus Unit at Sekolah Alam, symbolic communication carried out by ABK is divided into two groups, namely, ABK who can already verbalise words but still find it difficult to interact with others because they cannot respond well. There are also those who can read, write, and understand what other people say but cannot yet verbalize their words. This is in accordance with the following interview results:

“They are already verbal, but they can't interact yet. If their verbal has come out, their communication is sometimes unclear. There are some whose verbal hasn't come out, even though their communication is good. For example, if the one who just passed by, the big one earlier, is here but in an independent class, His verbal is still unclear. Sometimes, if he talks like he writes, he types what he means, which means he can do it. As for communication, he can do it. As for his verbal, that's still not the case. In verbal, that means he can't do it yet. As for writing what, he understands, understands instructions, that's possible.”
(Mrs. Imas Hartati, S.Psi, personal communication, August 2023)

Interviews with teachers, school managers, and students at Sekolah Alam showed that the communication skills of children with special needs, especially autism, ADHD, slow learners, and hearing impairments, vary. Some children with special needs are able to verbalise words, but have difficulty interacting; others use nonverbal communication that is easier to understand. For example, children with ADHD use physical movements, such as running, to express emotions. Slow learner students often repeat words or use abstract body movements that are difficult to understand, while deaf students communicate with words out loud but with unclear articulation.

Teachers and non-specialized students provided mixed views. They understood that interacting with special needs children requires patience, especially when dealing with difficult-to-understand nonverbal communication or physical movements such as unintentional attacks. Special needs parents also recognised that their children's communication was often nonverbal, such as through gestures or emotions that were easier to understand than verbal communication.

Based on the results of interviews with seven informants who were directly involved in social interactions with ABK, the researcher constructed a form of understanding of ABK's symbolic communication in the following table:



Table 4. Understanding of Symbolic Communication of Children with Special Needs by Teachers, Normal Friends, and Parents

No	Information	Understanding the Meaning of Symbolic Communication		
		Forms for ABK		
		Physical Movement	Word Repetition	Angry and Crying
1	Bu Imas	Happy, excited, and unfocused	Understanding of one's own thought patterns	Emotion
2	Guru L	Nervous and happy	There is hearing loss	Validating yourself
3	Guru S	Happy, sad, scared and uncomfortable	Explain again	Annoyed and want to play
4	Siswa V	Unclear	Don't Understand Yet	Angry
5	Siswa R	Strange	Explaining the same thing	Wicked
6	Ibu T	Uncomfortable	Not satisfied explaining	Emotion
7	Ibu Y	Excited and happy	Don't know	Uncomfortable

Source: processed from interview results

Symbolic communication focuses on the process of delivering, receiving, and interpreting messages from individuals to individuals or individuals to groups. This understanding is included in the symbolic communication section, in which messages are delivered by PDBK in the form of non-verbal symbols, which are then received by communication participants (teacher assistants, classmates, and parents) and give birth to a different meaning, depending on each individual involved.



C.2. Discussion

Perception and guesswork are part of the communication process. When we see someone, we often guess their character and how they communicate. Perception is subjective and depends on the observer's perspective. This is similar to symbolic communication, where the symbols used can have different meanings depending on the recipient of the message. In the social interactions of Children with Special Needs (ABK), symbolic communication becomes crucial, especially in inclusive educational environments such as nature schools. Nature schools act as a unique space to understand the use of symbols by ABK in communicating.

Symbolic Interactionism Theory is used to analyze how children with special needs interpret symbols in their social interactions. This theory focuses on three main principles: meaning, language, and thought. Meaning is defined as an action based on the interpretation of behaviour or symbols. Verbal and nonverbal communication are identified as the two main forms of communication for children with special needs in nature schools. Examples of nonverbal communication are pulling hands, pointing, or gesturing, while verbal communication involves the use of words, although sometimes not perfect. (Blumer, 1986).

1. Meaning, namely humans act according to the meaning interpreted from the behavior or actions of a person.

This study shows that ABK, such as slow learners, ADHD, and deaf, use symbols in their interactions. For example, deaf PDBK often use hand gestures to understand instructions, while PDBK ADHD tends to show their needs through physical actions. The role of the accompanying teacher is very important in helping ABK understand instructions and adjusting the curriculum to their abilities.

In this context, the symbols used by ABK in communication help them express their desires and feelings. For example, the results of observations in grades 3 and 4, from August 29 to September 19, 2023, in PDBK ADHD, closing the



lunch box when full or PDBK slow learners pulling the teacher's hand when feeling uncomfortable.

Table 5. Meaning (Actions according to ABK meaning)

ABK	Communication Actions	Meaning
PDBK S (<i>slowlearner</i>)	Standing out of class	Feel uncomfortable
PDBK F (Deaf)	Approaching friends	Want to play
PDBK A (<i>slowlearner</i>)	Pulling the teacher's hand	Feeling clueless
PDBK C (<i>slowlearner</i>)	Lend a hand	Calling someone to come closer
PDBK K (ADHD)	Closing the lunch box	Already full
PDBK K (ADHD)	Take the lunch box	Feeling hungry

Source: Processed from observation results

Language is a language or tool that is a social meaning resulting from social construction and interaction. In this analysis, researchers observed two main components in the symbolic communication of Children with Special Needs (ABK): verbal and nonverbal language.

a. Verbal Language

Includes communication through words, both in the form of speaking and writing. Students with special needs are able to use verbal language, but often have difficulty understanding the meaning of the words they use. Through continuous interaction, they gradually begin to understand the meaning of the words they say or write. Inclusive classes accelerate this process by facilitating communication between students with special needs and regular students. In



addition, listening and reading skills are also observed, but some special needs, such as slow learners and children with ADHD, face challenges in focusing and understanding meaning. However, all special needs use these skills in everyday social interactions.

b. Nonverbal Language

Analysis of nonverbal communication of students with special needs (PDBK) includes the following aspects:

1. **Touch:** PDBK often uses, such as pulling the headscarf or holding the hand of the assistant teacher, as a way to express feelings such as boredom or discomfort.
 2. **Body Movement:** Movements such as nodding or shaking the head are used to replace words, although they are not always meaningful in the context of their communication.
 3. **Chronemics:** PDBK often communicate outside of the time that corresponds to regular class activities, because they follow different modules.
 4. **Proxemics:** The distance used in communication indicates familiarity, with PDBK being closer to the assistant teacher because of difficulties in socializing with regular students.
 5. **Vocals:** PDBK's intonation and tone of speech vary, such as deaf people speaking louder, or slow learners speaking quickly and repeatedly.
1. Thought, namely the creation of meaning and social understanding that is refined as the interactive process continues. Continuous interaction deepens meaning and social understanding. This can be seen in communication between Children with Special Needs (ABK) and teachers, friends at school, and parents at home. Initially, ABK communication was difficult for people around them to understand. The process of labeling by non-ABK students towards ABK affects their interaction patterns. Non-ABK students often have difficulty understanding ABK communication symbols, because they are sometimes unclear. The role of teachers and nature school staff is very important in supporting effective



communication for ABK. With increasing intensity of interaction, understanding of the meaning conveyed by ABK will also develop.

Understanding of Teachers, Parents, and Non-ABK Students at SAKA Karawang Nature School towards Symbolic Communication of Children with Special Needs. In this section, the researcher will analyze the understanding of teachers, parents, and non-ABK or regular students towards symbolic communication of ABK. The symbolic interactionism theory used to analyze this section lies in the key concepts, namely mind, self, and society (Blumer, 1986). Researchers describe it as follows:

1. *Mind*

The difference between humans and animals is the mind, this refers to a person's reflective personality. In order to create self-reflection, humans need to think as others, this concept is known as the looking glass of self by Charles H. Cooley. Each person who interacts directly with PDBK has a different understanding depending on the reflection they create. Mrs. Imas as the Stimulus Unit Manager understands that PDBK ADHD self-reflection is often feeling unfocused, very active, but able to communicate. Self-reflection from slow learner students is described as students who have difficulty understanding the thought patterns of others and themselves and experience delays in remembering things.

Companion teachers S and L reflect on students with special needs as students who want to develop but often find it difficult to complete assignments. This is an important role for companion teachers to develop inclusive teaching skills as well, including strategies that support communication with ABK to be more responsive. Parents also have different understandings of ABK. Initially, there were parents who did not understand the delays in their children, but as the lessons from the Nature School developed, assisted by direction from the school, parents finally understood what was happening to their children and needed good support. So that now parents understand better that their child's self-reflection is different from other ordinary students (non-ABK).



2. *Self*

Self has two parts in a person, namely "I" an active, impulsive, and spontaneous self-description, while "me" is a part of the self that reflects the reactions given by others. An individual builds an identity through social interaction, ABK experiences a unique identity construction process in the school environment, especially in inclusive classes that contain not only students with special needs but also ordinary students (non-ABK). The existence of interaction with peers plays an important role in shaping the self-concept and social perception of ABK. Researchers analyze that the self-concept of ABK in the understanding of peers who are ordinary students (non-ABK) namely ABK have their own world, so ordinary students (non-ABK) find it difficult to interact with them.

The part of ABK that is in the form of "I" is often difficult to control because it is impulsive and spontaneous, they can sometimes suddenly scream, hit, or pull their peers and teachers. This is something that is not liked by ordinary students (non-ABK). On the other hand, the part of ABK that is in the form of "me" is often seen as alone and has a different intention from his actions. When he runs and bumps into someone else, it does not mean that he is a naughty child, but he has a greater spirit than other ordinary students (non-ABK). In order to avoid problems in social interactions, ABK prefer to be alone with their accompanying teacher.

3. *Society*

A togetherness formed through coordinated interaction between individuals. Students with special needs who are placed in inclusive classes have passed a series of tests so that they are considered capable of participating in normal learning with regular students (non-ABK). This is also done by Sekolah Alam to actively involve ABK in social interactions. The unification of regular students with special needs has succeeded in creating a different society for both. Students with special needs are actively involved in learning to develop their abilities, such as learning to count together. Although they often experience difficulties and obstacles, students with special needs who are accompanied by shadow teachers will be helped to complete assignments according to their abilities. Even if they are indeed considered



incapable, PDBK will be taught a special curriculum with a different method by their accompanying teacher.

Ordinary students (non-ABK) also begin to develop empathy and sympathy for PDBK, so that during group learning, they will pay more attention to students with special needs, and be helped as much as possible in completing their group assignments. Like during gardening class, ordinary students (non-ABK) do not hesitate to take fertilizer or plant seeds and give them to PDBK to plant. They help each other in social interactions even though sometimes it is difficult to understand each other. The creation of a good society like this is very dependent on the role of teachers, staff, parents, and ordinary students (non-ABK) in it. In order to develop the ABK self-concept, the actors must provide support and understand the unique needs of each ABK in implementing interactions in nature schools.

D. Conclusion

Based on research findings and data analysis regarding symbolic communication of ABK in social interactions at SAKA, it can be seen that symbolic communication born from the theory of symbolic interactionism has been successfully interpreted and constructed as follows:

1. Symbolic communication of ABK in social interaction at SAKA Karawang Nature School is constructed into three forms, namely body/physical movements, Vocals or repetition of words, and crying and angry emotions. These three forms of symbolic communication are often used by students with special needs in daily interactions. The use of symbolic interactionism theory then constructs the symbolic communication into its respective meanings. The meaning of ABK symbolic communication is as follows:
 - a. Body/physical movements, for PDBK ADHD, some physical movements such as running and bumping into people they pass are a form of happiness and enthusiasm. For PDBK slow learners, the movement of pulling the veil, pulling the arm of the teacher or friend, and hitting spontaneously means feelings of discomfort, sadness, and happiness. It is different with PDBK deaf, although they rarely use body movements, PDBK deaf also occasionally use them to emphasize what they say, because the articulation



- of their pronunciation is indeed not clear, so they are assisted by hand movements to emphasize.
- b. Vocals or repetition of words, this symbolic communication is often used by deaf PDBK, because of difficulty in hearing, so when he is able to verbalize words, it will be said repeatedly until the message conveyed is felt to be clear enough. The words spoken are also repeated slowly so that the communicant understands the intent and purpose of his words. This is different from PDBK slow learners who also often repeat words when speaking, this is done because he has great difficulty remembering and understanding his own thought patterns, so repetition of words is needed to validate his feelings until he feels sufficient.
 - c. Crying and anger, this symbolic communication is more often done by PDBK ADHD. Difficulty focusing and controlling their own emotions, makes them often angry and cry because of several things that are considered normal by ordinary students (non-ABK). PDBK slow learners also often do this kind of communication when they have difficulty understanding the lessons given by the teacher, or find it difficult to remember something. The presence of a companion teacher is very helpful in overcoming this form of communication which is considered less good because it makes ABK difficult to control.

Teachers, parents, and non-ABK students vary in their understanding of ABK's symbolic communication. Each ABK has unique needs, making their communication forms diverse. Teachers and staff in nature schools interpret behaviors like running as excitement, rolling as boredom, crying as confusion, and pulling as discomfort. Non-ABK students often struggle to understand ABK's physical movements, like hitting or pulling, which they perceive as negative actions. This leads to limited interaction, though they occasionally assist ABK during learning despite mixed feedback. Parents have a more positive understanding of ABK's communication, observing progress at home after school interactions. For instance, ADHD students become more



enthusiastic and slow learners show improvements in recalling numbers and colors.

Based on the study, the following recommendations are suggested to improve support for children with special needs:

1. **Academics**

Research should focus on evaluating the effectiveness of communication in children with special needs both at school and home, exploring specific aspects of symbolic communication, and assessing the impact of interventions or strategies.

2. **Practitioners**

Practitioners should promote collaboration among teachers, special education specialists, and communication experts to address children's needs holistically. Schools should involve parents actively and evaluate inclusion policies to ensure effective communication and social interaction.

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