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**BASELINE ASSESSMENT OF SOCIAL SKILLS AMONG STUDENTS WITH  
SPECIAL NEEDS**

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**ABSTRACT**

*School is not merely a place where students acquire academic abilities; it is also a social space in which they develop social skills, a sense of school belonging, and social adjustment. For students with special needs, social skills play an essential role in supporting learning comfort, social participation, psychological well-being, and academic success. This study aimed to describe the initial social skills profile of students with special needs at Anavah Homeschooling, Malang, as a basis for intervention planning. The study employed a descriptive quantitative approach using single-subject baseline observation. The participants were five students with special needs selected purposively, namely ME, JE, GA, TR, and JA. The observed aspects of social skills included communication, sharing, compliance with and following instructions, achieving targets, and making appropriate decisions. Data were collected through direct observation and analyzed descriptively through visual line-graph analysis focusing on level, trend, variability, and data stability. The findings showed that all participants demonstrated low initial social skills profiles. The highest mean scores were found in communication and sharing ( $M = 1.6$ ), followed by compliance with and following instructions ( $M = 1.4$ ), whereas the lowest mean scores were found in achieving targets and making appropriate decisions ( $M = 1.0$ ). These findings indicate that students with special needs at Anavah Homeschooling require explicit, structured, and sustained instruction in social skills. Theoretically, this study enriches the body of knowledge on social competence among children with special needs. Practically, the findings may serve as a basis for designing intervention programs, developing instructional modules, and evaluating social skills services.*

*Keywords: social skills, special needs students, single-subject design, baseline assessment, classroom participation*

### INTRODUCTION

School is not only a place where children learn to read, write, and count; it is also a social space in which they learn to interact and develop their social skills. Although students do not receive formal “grades” for social skills from their teachers, they are nevertheless evaluated socially every day by teachers and peers. School is the primary social environment in which children establish relationships with peers and teachers and develop a sense of school belonging, namely the feeling of being accepted, valued, included, and supported within the school environment. When students are able to navigate these social demands successfully, they are more likely to be liked by those around them and to experience positive emotions. As a result, they are more likely to enjoy the learning process at school. Peer social acceptance is associated with academic achievement, indicating that social experiences at school are closely related to academic performance (Wentzel et al., 2021). In contrast, when students fail to develop adequate social skills, they may feel isolated, uncomfortable in their learning environment, and vulnerable to broader school failure. The literature further indicates that school belonging is strongly associated with academic outcomes, behavior, and psychological well-being; therefore, social experiences at school cannot be separated from the learning process itself (Štremfel et al., 2024).

Experiencing failure in social skills may be even more painful for students than experiencing academic failure. Difficulties in enacting social skills are often associated with negative experiences such as loneliness, a diminished sense of connectedness with peers, and reduced psychological well-being. Research on school belonging shows that students’ sense of belonging at school is related to socio-emotional well-being and to experiences of loneliness during the school years (Palikara et al., 2021). Other findings confirm that loneliness in children and adolescents is associated with the risk of poor well-being and increased symptoms of depression and anxiety (Farrell et al., 2023). Social skills therefore play a very important role in students’ emotional health and well-being. Without friendships and adequate social skills, school may become an unpleasant place that students tend to avoid.

Social adjustment refers to an individual’s ability to adapt to the social environment in order to achieve harmony between the individual and that environment. Schneiders (1964) defines social adjustment as an individual’s ability to respond effectively and beneficially to social realities, situations, and relationships so that the demands and needs of social life are fulfilled in ways that are acceptable and satisfying. Social adjustment does not emerge automatically; rather, it develops through learning appropriate social behaviors, practicing adaptive responses, and receiving consistent environmental support. A growing body of literature indicates that social skills are not merely related to whether a child is “liked” or “disliked,” but are closely associated with learning success. A meta-analysis of peer social acceptance and academic achievement demonstrated a consistent relationship between the quality of social experiences at school and academic outcomes (Wentzel et al., 2021). Individuals who are able to adjust socially—for example, by establishing diplomatic and constructive relationships with peers and other people—are more likely to display behaviors that are perceived positively by others. Social adjustment can be achieved when individuals learn behavior patterns that are appropriate to their environment and modify their behavior to align with what is expected in that context.

However, other scholars argue that students' lack of social skills may interfere with their ability to attain strong academic competence. Problems that frequently emerge during the early years of schooling may be found in at least three areas: (1) academic competence, (2) behavioral competence, including behavior problems that require intervention beyond classroom activities, and (3) social competence, such as difficulty understanding the social system of the classroom and school and difficulty negotiating socially with teachers and peers. Although social skills are essential for students' success at school, they are rarely, if ever, taught explicitly. Parents often assume that social skills will be taught at school, while teachers may assume that students will acquire them naturally without direct teaching or training. Developing positive parent-child and teacher-student relationships can help create a healthy social environment, because establishing closeness and trust from the outset is crucial. A substantial body of research also indicates that academic behavior and learning achievement are influenced by students' beliefs about themselves (Schunk & Pajares, 2002).

Based on previous research and the phenomena observed in the field, it can be concluded that children with special needs require social skills in order to increase comfort, self-confidence, and academic development. Educators therefore need to facilitate opportunities, especially for students with special needs, to practice and improve their social skills. The urgency of social skills development becomes even greater for students with special needs. School-based interventions—such as teaching interaction strategies, cooperative learning, peer tutoring, support groups, and the facilitation of social interaction—can improve the social participation of students with special needs. These findings underline the need for social skills to be taught explicitly, systematically, and continuously (Garrote et al., 2017). Children's ability to interpret social situations is also important in the formation of social competence. Such competence is reflected in effective behavior, including responsible conduct, friendliness, teamwork, goal orientation, independence, self-control, and sensitivity to the surrounding environment.

Vaughn and Hogan, as cited in Wong (2004), explain that social competence consists of four interrelated domains: (1) social skills, namely the ability to initiate interactions with others and respond to them appropriately; (2) the ability to build relationships with others, including friendship and social acceptance; (3) social cognition, such as solving problems in social situations; and (4) the absence of behaviors associated with social maladjustment, such as aggression, concentration problems, withdrawal, and similar behaviors. In addition, teachers expect students to possess a range of social skills, including self-control, listening, problem solving, negotiation, cooperation, waiting for one's turn, conflict management, encouraging others to engage in positive behavior, and providing positive feedback (Lewis & Sugai, 1996; Quinn et al., 2000; Walker & Greene, 1991). Considering the importance of social skills for social adjustment, learning comfort, psychological well-being, and the participation of students with special needs in the school environment, an initial identification of students' social skills profiles is needed before intervention is provided. The social skills selected for instruction should be based on the strengths and weaknesses of the students who become research participants. Clearly, these skills influence success in the school environment, in relationships with the broader social environment, in the transition to adulthood, and later in work settings. In this study, the social skills observed were communication, sharing, compliance

with and following instructions, and the ability to achieve targets and make appropriate decisions among students at Anavah Homeschooling, Malang (Seven & Yoldaş, 2007).

### **METHOD**

This study employed a descriptive quantitative approach using single-subject baseline observation. This approach was chosen to obtain an initial picture of the social skills condition of students with special needs before any intervention was administered. In single-subject research, the baseline phase is used to establish the initial condition of the target behavior through repeated measurement, enabling the researcher to identify the behavioral level, directional tendency, and stability of the participant's performance over time. An adequate baseline provides a clear characterization of the initial behavior under investigation (Byiers et al., 2012).

Data were collected through direct observation of the target behaviors in each observation session. Observations were conducted repeatedly using an observation guide developed from the indicators of the social skills under study. In this research, the baseline phase was not intended to test treatment effectiveness, but rather to map the participants' initial behavioral profiles systematically. Therefore, the findings are directed more toward describing the initial condition of students' social skills as a basis for planning interventions in the next stage (Manolov et al., 2016). Data were analyzed using descriptive visual analysis by presenting the data in line graphs. The analysis focused on data level, trend, variability, and stability during the baseline phase. In single-subject research, graphical presentation is an important procedure because it allows researchers to examine behavioral patterns directly across time. However, because this study used only a baseline phase without intervention, the analysis does not support causal conclusions; instead, it provides an objective description of the participants' initial condition (Byiers et al., 2012).

### **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

The single-subject pattern in this study was adapted from the basic time-series design (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006). Line graphs were used to illustrate the pattern of target behaviors during the baseline phase. The research participants were students at Anavah Homeschooling who had been identified as experiencing difficulties in several aspects of social skills, namely communication, sharing, compliance with and following instructions, achieving targets, and making appropriate decisions. The participants were selected through purposive sampling based on observation of the target behaviors. The five students included in the study were ME, JE, GA, TR, and JA.

ME was a 22-year-old student with cerebral palsy. ME experienced difficulties in communicating and expressing opinions both inside and outside the classroom. In terms of sharing, ME still needed prompting and had not yet shown initiative to engage in sharing behaviors independently. With regard to compliance and following instructions, ME still required reminders, although not very frequently. Meanwhile, the social skills related to achieving targets and making decisions needed to be taught and guided continuously because these abilities had not yet developed adequately.

JE was a 19-year-old student with an intellectual disability. JE had difficulty expressing ideas and communicating intended meanings, and therefore often needed detailed prompting and questioning. At

times, when other people did not understand what JE wanted to convey, JE would cry and withdraw. The remaining four social skills were also highly limited and required continuous teaching and training.

GA was a 26-year-old student with an intellectual disability accompanied by weak fine-motor functioning. GA experienced difficulties in carrying out social skills across the observed domains; based on these conditions, the researcher considered systematic social skills training necessary. TR was a 27-year-old student with an intellectual disability. TR was able to communicate in simple ways, to share, and to help peers who were experiencing difficulty. TR was also able to comply with and follow simple instructions that had been practiced frequently. However, social skills related to achieving targets and making appropriate decisions still required support and guidance. JA was a 21-year-old student with an intellectual disability. JA was able to share with school friends, but communication still needed to be taught because JA often spoke too loudly and too rapidly to be understood by peers. JA also frequently struggled to comply with and follow instructions because of a preference for doing things according to personal wishes. The ability to achieve targets and make appropriate decisions had not yet developed.

The baseline findings describe the initial social skills profile of the five students at Anavah Homeschooling, namely ME, JE, GA, TR, and JA. The observed aspects included communication, sharing, compliance with and following instructions, achieving targets, and making appropriate decisions. Because the study focused solely on baseline observation, the line graphs in this study should be interpreted as depicting the students' initial social skills profiles rather than the effect of an intervention.

As shown in Table 1.1, all participants demonstrated low initial performance in the observed social skills. At the individual level, ME and TR obtained the highest mean scores ( $M = 1.6$ ), followed by JE and JA ( $M = 1.2$ ), while GA showed the lowest overall score ( $M = 1.0$ ). At the level of specific skill domains, the highest mean scores were found in communication ( $M = 1.6$ ) and sharing ( $M = 1.6$ ), followed by compliance with and following instructions ( $M = 1.4$ ). The lowest mean scores appeared consistently in achieving targets ( $M = 1.0$ ) and making appropriate decisions ( $M = 1.0$ ). Overall, the baseline data indicate that the students' social skills remained limited across all observed domains.

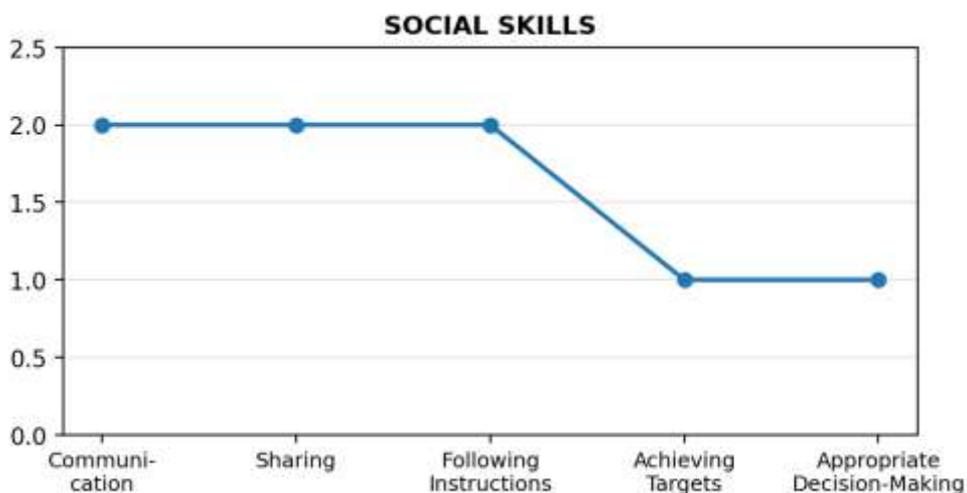


Figure 1.1. Baseline social skills profile of ME

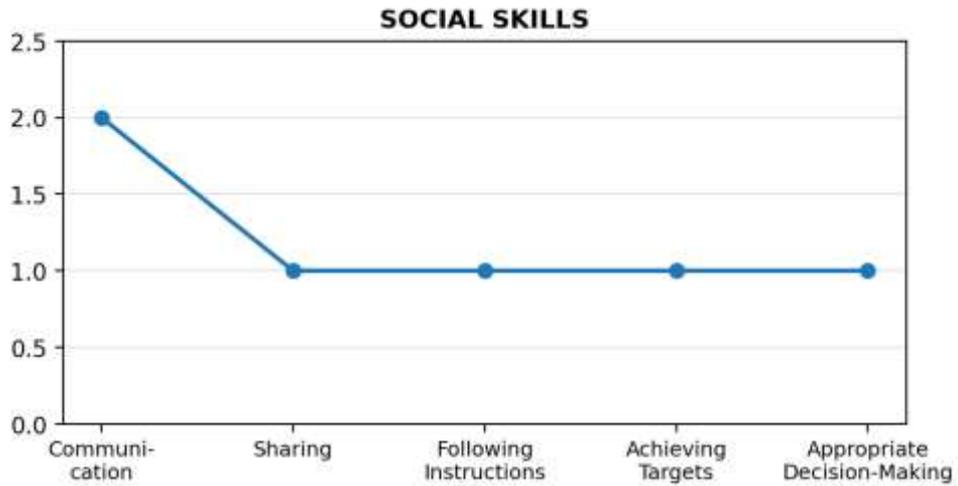


Figure 1.2. Baseline social skills profile of JE

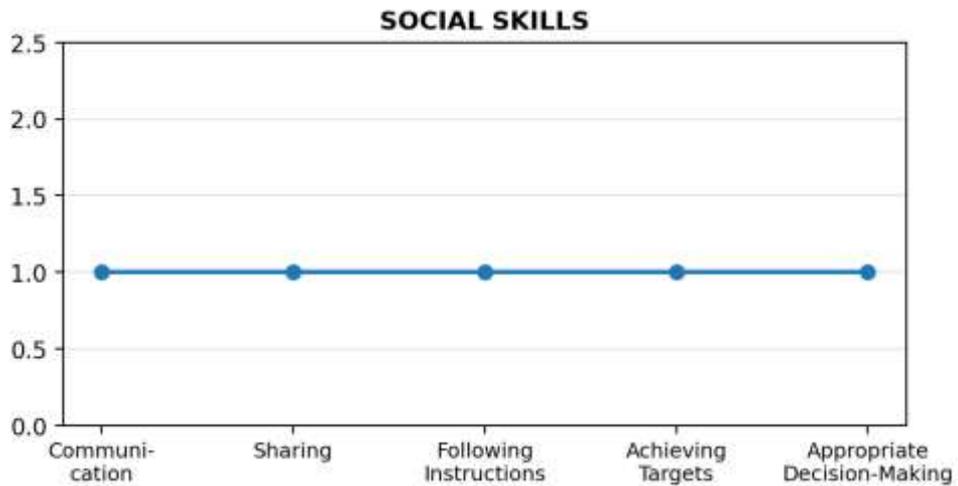


Figure 1.3. Baseline social skills profile of GA

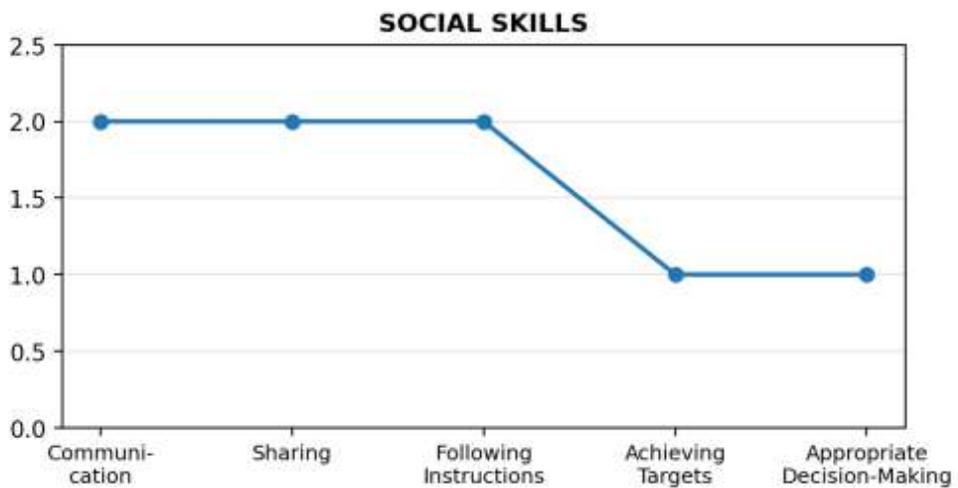


Figure 1.4. Baseline social skills profile of TR

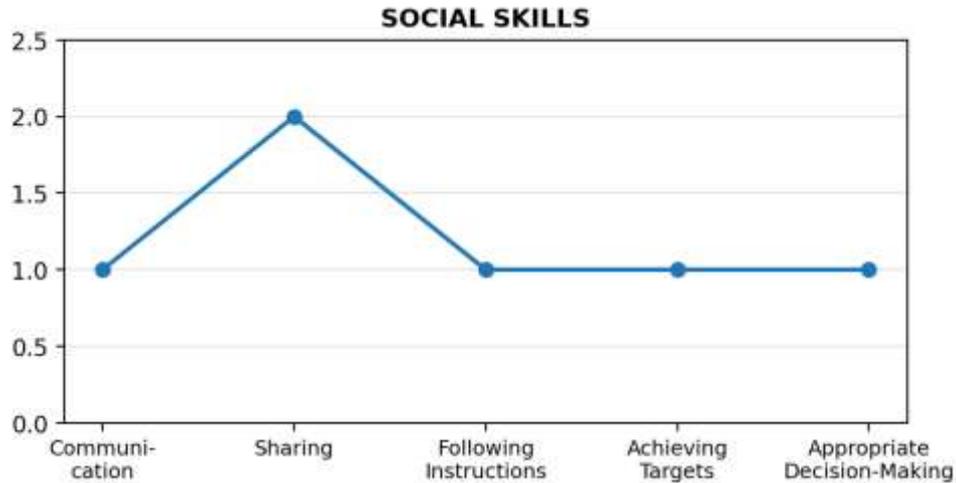


Figure 1.5. Baseline social skills profile of JA

The graphs show low social skills scores across all participants—ME, JE, GA, TR, and JA—during the baseline phase. The mean scores for the social skills domains were as follows: communication = 1.6, sharing = 1.6, compliance with and following instructions = 1.4, achieving targets = 1.0, and making appropriate decisions = 1.0.

Table 1.1. Baseline Social Skills

Social Skills	ME	JE	GA	TR	JA	Mean
Communication	2	2	1	2	1	1.6
Sharing	2	1	1	2	2	1.6
Compliance with and Following Instructions	2	1	1	2	1	1.4
Achieving Targets	1	1	1	1	1	1.0
Making Appropriate Decisions	1	1	1	1	1	1.0

The low baseline profile found in this study indicates that the students were potentially experiencing barriers to optimal participation in learning activities as well as in building positive everyday social interactions. This finding is consistent with literature showing that the way social skills function in school is closely related to academic achievement and students’ social adjustment. In other words, weaknesses in social skills at the beginning stage of schooling may affect not only peer relationships but also learning engagement and academic success (Wentzel et al., 2021).

In this study, the low scores in the domains of following instructions, achieving targets, and making appropriate decisions suggest that the students required more explicit direction, more predictable routines, and more structured interactional support in order to participate more effectively in classroom life (Sayers et al., 2025). Conceptually, the baseline pattern indicates that low performance across the five domains—communication, sharing, compliance with and following instructions, achieving targets, and making appropriate decisions—may hinder learning participation and the quality of daily social interaction, because social skills are linked to school adjustment and socio-academic success. Meta-analytic evidence shows

that peer social acceptance correlates with academic achievement, meaning that gaps in social skills may have broad implications for students' learning experiences (Wentzel et al., 2021). In addition, a systematic review concerning individuals with intellectual disability emphasizes that deficits in social skills can be improved through planned and consistent intervention (Goodman-Scott et al., 2023).

### CONCLUSION

Based on the baseline data, the social skills of students with special needs at Anavah Homeschooling were categorized as low across five major areas: communication, sharing, compliance with and following instructions, achieving targets, and making appropriate decisions. These findings indicate that students at Anavah Homeschooling need more targeted support in order to interact effectively, share and help peers, participate in learning activities, and regulate themselves to achieve goals. This is important because a range of studies has shown that social skills in students with special needs can be improved through carefully planned and consistently implemented practice, for example through classroom activities, peer support, and emotion-regulation exercises (Jacob et al., 2022). In addition, meta-analytic evidence on school-based SEL programs shows that systematically delivered social-emotional learning can improve social-emotional skills and school functioning (Cipriano et al., 2024). Thus, the low baseline profile identified in this study reinforces the urgency of teaching social skills directly during classroom learning. Theoretically, this study contributes to the literature on social competence among children with special needs by positioning such competence as contextual, developmental, and amenable to intervention. The findings show that discussion of students with special needs should not focus solely on academic issues and diagnostic limitations, but also on how these students participate socially within their environments. Previous studies indicate that students with special needs often experience obstacles in social participation and that social-emotional and social skills interventions have positive effects. As an initial baseline needs assessment, this study provides an early picture of the social needs of students with special needs. Practically, the social skills profile generated by this study can serve as a basis for designing targeted intervention programs. In addition, the findings may become a starting point for future research, the development of intervention modules, and the evaluation of social skills programs.

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