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The Role of Peer Support on Social Interaction of Hearing and Hearing Impairment Students in Buleleng Inclusive School

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A B S T R A C T

Inclusive education acknowledges students' diverse needs, including those with hearing impairments who often face communication barriers. This study aimed to examine the role of peer support in shaping the social interactions between hearing and hearing-impaired students in a sixth-grade inclusive classroom in Buleleng, Bali. A descriptive qualitative approach was used, with data collected through classroom observations and interviews, then analyzed using thematic analysis. The results showed that peer support facilitated emotional, social, and academic development through the use of Kata Kolok, a local sign language that helped bridge communication gaps. However, hearing students' limited proficiency in Indonesian Sign Language and the difficulty in translating academic material posed challenges. Because consistent interaction is key to building empathy and inclusion, the lack of frequent engagement hindered inclusivity. Therefore, the study recommends sign language training for hearing students and strategies to encourage regular interaction. These efforts are crucial in fostering a more inclusive, respectful, and empathetic learning environment for all students.

A R T I C L E   I N F O

1. INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education is a process aimed at identifying and eliminating barriers to accessing education for all learners (Charles *et al.*, 2024; Dimitrellou & Hurry, 2019; Wulan *et al.*, 2022). Recognizing its significance enables educational institutions to implement inclusive practices more consistently, ensuring equitable access to learning opportunities for every student (Spörer *et al.*, 2020; Yang *et al.*, 2024). Inclusive education also fosters a supportive environment that promotes the academic, social, and emotional development of students with hearing impairment (Akbarovna, 2022; Woodcock *et al.*, 2022). This requires that teaching methods, curricula, and school environments be adapted to meet diverse student needs (Sahara *et al.*, 2024). Teachers, therefore, must develop the necessary skills and knowledge to support diversity in classrooms that include both hearing and hearing-impaired students (Susilawati *et al.*, 2023). With appropriate adjustments, students with hearing impairments can effectively engage and succeed alongside their hearing peers.

Although hearing-impaired students do not typically have intellectual disabilities, they often encounter communication challenges that hinder interaction in inclusive classrooms (Horoz *et al.*, 2022; Morningstar, 2020). Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory explains that individual development is shaped by interactions within interconnected systems, beginning with the microsystem, where direct peer interactions occur. Within this system, peer support (through social engagement, shared activities, and emotional backing) plays a crucial role (Bell *et al.*, 2024; Hassani & Schwab, 2021).

Research indicates that students with hearing impairments are generally eager to participate, but communication barriers often hinder full inclusion (Charles *et al.*, 2024; Eilertsen *et al.*, 2024). Moreover, negative academic self-concept affects these students more significantly than it does their hearing peers (Llorent *et al.*, 2024; Spörer *et al.*, 2020). Thus, even when physically present in inclusive settings, hearing-impaired students may not experience genuine inclusion (Khongsankham *et al.*, 2024; Stark *et al.*, 2024). A supportive environment is essential to promote their social and emotional well-being (Ferreira *et al.*, 2020; Made *et al.*, 2024), and hearing students must foster positive relationships to build empathy and effective communication (Bierman & Sanders, 2021; Meyers *et al.*, 2019).

Interactions between hearing and hearing-impaired students have been shown to enhance empathy and thoughtfulness (Chetverikova *et al.*, 2020; Ubah *et al.*, 2022), leading to greater tolerance and more positive attitudes in inclusive classrooms (Morningstar, 2020). This aligns with Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which asserts that knowledge and emotional development are constructed through social interaction (Wijiastuti *et al.*, 2020). Effective communication is essential to understanding students' needs and helping them navigate challenges.

Peer support is vital in promoting both academic and social development in inclusive settings. It includes emotional, academic, and social dimensions (Agyapong, 2020; Nurmalita *et al.*, 2021). However, hearing-impaired students often struggle to engage due to fear of discrimination. Building trust through consistent peer support enables them to feel comfortable and accepted (Szumski *et al.*, 2020; Wang *et al.*, 2024), fostering positive social interactions (Kiblen *et al.*, 2024; Williams *et al.*, 2024). Nonetheless, challenges persist, particularly the requirement for hearing students to acquire sign language skills—an inherently complex process (Dede *et al.*, 2024; Horoz *et al.*, 2022; Sahara *et al.*, 2024). Additional barriers include emotional distress, peer rejection, bullying, and social exclusion (Daunic *et al.*, 2021; Kiblen *et al.*, 2024).

Not all students naturally thrive in inclusive environments, underscoring the need for hearing students to acquire sign language proficiency (Charles *et al.*, 2024). Sign language is essential for fostering communication, social engagement, and effective peer support for students with hearing impairments (Batten *et al.*, 2014; McDermid, 2020; Singleton & Crume, 2022). In Buleleng, the local sign language Kata Kolok (a culturally embedded means of communication) plays a significant role in bridging the communication gap (Putu *et al.*, 2024). While research has explored peer support and social interaction broadly (Bierman & Sanders, 2021; Duncan *et al.*, 2023; Ellis *et al.*, 2009; Khongsankham *et al.*, 2024; Meyers *et al.*, 2019), the specific role of peer support in interactions between hearing and hearing-impaired students remains underexamined.

Therefore, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

(i)   How does peer support affect the social interaction of hearing and hearing-impaired students in Buleleng Inclusive School?

(ii) How does the sign language ability of hearing students affect their social interaction with hearing-impaired students in Buleleng Inclusive School?.

2. METHODS

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design. In qualitative research, data are gathered directly within natural settings, with the researcher serving as the primary instrument for both data collection and analysis. This approach was chosen to explore and gain an in-depth understanding of the role of peer support in the social interactions between hearing and hearing-impaired students at Buleleng Inclusive School. The research was conducted in a sixth-grade inclusive classroom in Buleleng, Bali. This particular class was selected because students with hearing impairment were more frequently integrated into regular classroom activities alongside their hearing peers compared to other classes.

The study involved eight sixth-grade students (six hearing and two hearing-impaired) as well as the teacher responsible for the class. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. Observations took place from October to December 2024 and focused on interactions during classroom instruction. Interview guides were adapted from previous student evaluation research and modified to align with the study's context and objectives. The interviews were conducted with selected hearing students and the classroom teacher, using both audio and video recording tools.

Participants were chosen through purposive sampling, targeting individuals (particularly hearing students and the teacher) who frequently interacted with hearing-impaired students during lessons and break times. All observational and interview data were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis, a method that enables researchers to identify recurring patterns or themes within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Thematic analysis was conducted in six stages (see **Figure 1**):

(i)   Familiarizing with the data,

(ii) Generating initial codes,

(iii) Identifying potential themes,

(iv) Reviewing the themes,

(v)   Defining and naming the themes, and

(vi) Producing the report.

This analytical process facilitated a structured and systematic interpretation of the social interactions shaped by peer support within the inclusive classroom setting.
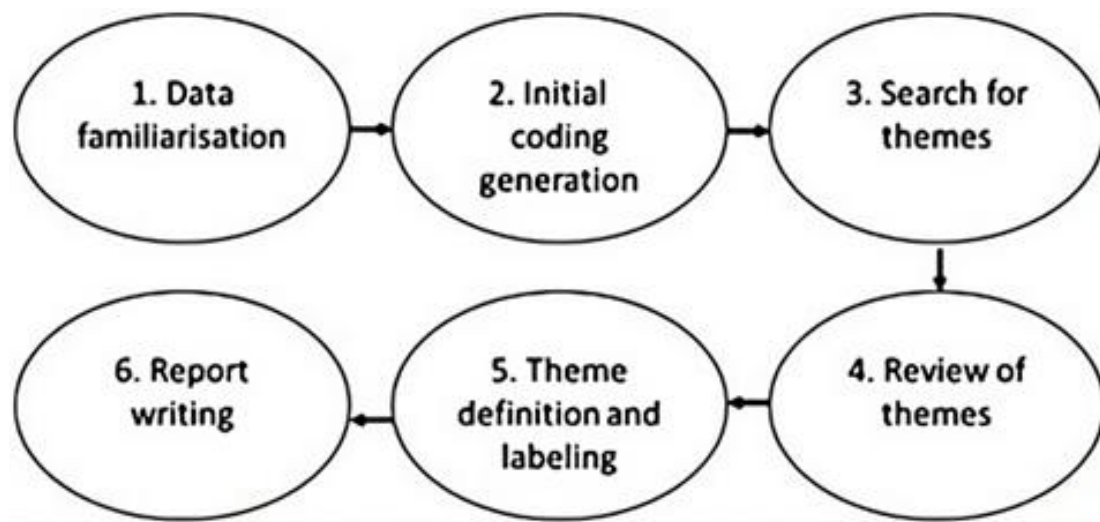
Figure 1. Model of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on data obtained from semi-structured interviews and classroom observations, the findings revealed that peer support plays a positive role in enhancing the social interactions of students with hearing impairment. Moreover, the sign language proficiency of hearing students was found to significantly influence the quality and frequency of these interactions. Through the thematic analysis, four main themes and several corresponding sub-themes were identified as central to understanding the dynamics of peer support in the inclusive classroom (see **Figure 2**).
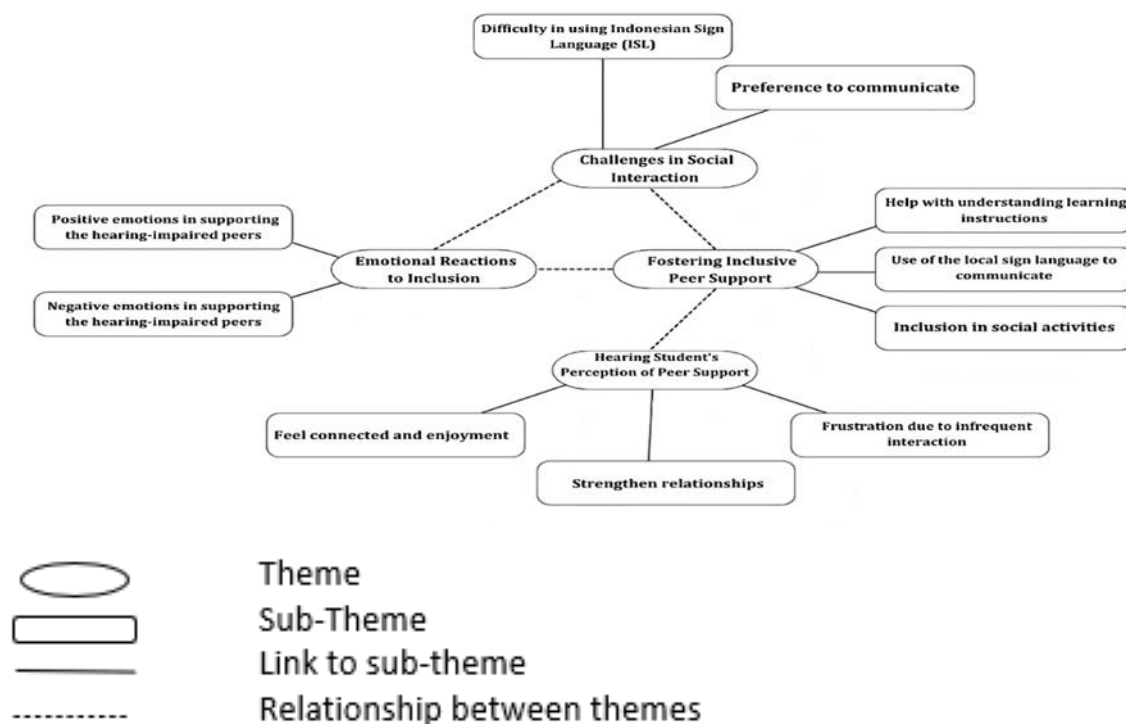

Figure 2. Thematic map demonstrating four themes.

Figure 2 illustrates that the theme of fostering inclusive peer support is represented by three sub-themes: understanding learning instructions, using local sign language for

communication, and inclusion in social activities. Hearing students acknowledged the importance of supporting their hearing-impaired peers, particularly in academic contexts. This supportive behavior was facilitated by the teacher, who actively promoted tolerance and inclusivity. The students demonstrated effective use of *Kata Kolok*, the local sign language, both during lessons and in informal interactions. Social inclusion was further reinforced when hearing-impaired students were actively involved in both academic and extracurricular activities.

The theme of hearing students' perceptions of peer support includes three sub-themes: feeling connected and experiencing enjoyment, strengthening relationships, and frustration caused by infrequent interactions. These sub-themes reflect the hearing students' views of their relationships with hearing-impaired peers during both classroom learning and playtime. Many hearing students reported feelings of happiness and emotional connection when offering assistance. Strong bonds were observed in their social interactions; however, limited opportunities for communication occasionally led to misunderstandings and challenges in navigating shared experiences.

The theme challenges in social interaction comprise two sub-themes: difficulty using Indonesian Sign Language and communication preferences. Hearing students often struggled to interpret complex instructions or academic terminology due to limited proficiency in Indonesian Sign Language, resulting in frustration and miscommunication. Hearing-impaired students tended to gravitate toward peers who were more fluent in *Kata Kolok*, seeking comfort and clarity in communication. This preference, while understandable, sometimes led to the unintentional exclusion of peers with lower sign language proficiency. Addressing these challenges is essential for improving inclusive practices and fostering stronger, more equitable peer relationships.

Lastly, the theme of emotional reactions to inclusion is divided into sub-themes of positive and negative emotional responses to supporting hearing-impaired peers. Positive emotions included feelings of joy, satisfaction, and pride when their efforts were appreciated or when hearing-impaired classmates responded with gratitude, laughter, or engagement. Conversely, negative emotions emerged in situations involving miscommunication, insufficient sign language skills, and difficulties interpreting complex academic content. These emotional reactions reveal the complex internal experiences of hearing students as they strive to contribute to an inclusive learning environment.

3.1. Fostering Inclusive Peer Support

This study found that peer support not only contributes to the academic achievement of students with hearing impairment but also promotes empathy and social development among hearing students. These findings align with previous studies (Ubah *et al.*, 2022; Eilertsen *et al.*, 2024), which demonstrate that peer support can enhance social interaction and accommodate the needs of hearing-impaired students. As one teacher noted: Mr. M: *"The hearing students are eager to communicate with their hearing-impaired classmates, as they have been together since fourth grade. They are already familiar with the hearing-impaired students, especially those who often meet after school."*

However, these results contrast with findings (Charles *et al.*, 2024; Khongsankham *et al.*, 2024; Stark *et al.*, 2024), who reported that peer support may be ineffective when hearing-impaired students face significant communication challenges and a diminished sense of belonging.

In the present study, hearing students provided support by helping their hearing-impaired peers understand learning instructions, demonstrating the principles of Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, which emphasizes the role of social interaction in constructing new knowledge.

S1: *"When they don't understand the instructions, sometimes they ask out of curiosity, then I'll tell them the instructions using Kata Kolok (local sign language)."*

S2: *"Invite one of them to sit together during lessons."*

The use of *Kata Kolok*, a local sign language, was a distinct advantage.

S3: *"I can do a little bit because it's common in our village to use local sign language (Kata Kolok)."*

This familiarity allowed hearing students to communicate effectively with their hearing-impaired peers, strengthening social bonds and enabling deeper connections.

Peer support was also evident during informal settings, such as break times, where hearing-impaired students felt included and respected.

S3 & S4: *"It's fun because the more people we play with, the more excitement we have, and they laugh a lot."*

However, the study also uncovered a case of emotional hesitation caused by limited interaction.

S5: *"I think they don't like me because I don't talk much, and sometimes, they are angry with me because I rarely communicate with them."*

This underscores the importance of consistent and sustained interaction to prevent unintentional exclusion and to foster mutual understanding.

4.2. Hearing Students' Perception of Peer Support

Hearing students held varied perceptions regarding their roles in supporting hearing-impaired peers. Their views primarily centered on their sense of responsibility and their emotional and social engagement. These perceptions reflect the dynamic nature of inclusive education and align with Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, where hearing students act as scaffolds, assisting their peers in understanding instructions and participating actively in class.

Students often expressed joy and a sense of connection when helping their hearing-impaired classmates. Their hearing-impaired peers, in turn, felt more comfortable communicating, revealing the mutual benefits of inclusive peer relationships.

S1: *"It's fun because the more people we play with, the more excitement we have, and they laugh a lot."*

These findings are consistent with studies (Charles *et al.*, 2024; Yousif *et al.*, 2021; Silvestri & Hartman, 2022), which confirm that peer support fosters empathy, improves social skills, and reduces social exclusion.

The trust and appreciation shown by hearing-impaired students encouraged stronger interpersonal relationships:

S4: *"I'm happy to be able to help them during lessons."*

S3: *"I asked them to join me because it's also fun to play with them."*

These positive interactions help to mitigate discrimination and promote inclusion. However, the study also noted that infrequent communication may result in discomfort and uncertainty:

S5: *"I think they don't like to interact with me because I don't talk much either, sometimes they are angry with me because I rarely communicate with them."*

This highlights the issue identified by literature (Stark *et al.,* 2024), who reported that communication barriers and insufficient peer support often prevent full interaction in inclusive settings.

This limitation is further supported by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory, which emphasizes that direct interactions (the microsystem) are essential for developing trust and effective communication. When these interactions are limited, the potential for building inclusive relationships diminishes, leading to exclusion and frustration among hearing students, who may then feel less equipped to support their hearing-impaired peers.

4.3. Challenges in Social Interaction

This study identified several challenges in social interaction arising from varying levels of sign language proficiency among hearing students, which often created communication gaps. Most hearing students relied solely on *Kata Kolok*, the local sign language, as they are native to the village. In contrast, students with hearing impairments used both *Kata Kolok* and Indonesian Sign Language (ISL), leading to occasional misunderstandings and exclusion.

S2: *"If Mr. W (the sign language interpreter) is absent and they join the regular class, it is quite difficult because we aren't fluent in Indonesian sign language, only the Kata Kolok."*

Additionally, in content-heavy subjects like mathematics and science, hearing students faced difficulties conveying technical terms and academic instructions.

S4: *"During math lessons, I usually can't translate the instructions or what they ask into sign language because it is difficult for me to interpret them."*

To bridge this gap, schools must provide ISL training for hearing students while maintaining the cultural and communicative benefits of *Kata Kolok*.

However, the shared native background of both hearing and hearing-impaired students presented a potential advantage, provided that communication remains consistent and students avoid switching unpredictably between sign languages.

Mr. M: *"Some of the hearing students already understand Kata Kolok. Because they often interact with people with hearing impairment. They meet hearing-impaired students or their parents after school, so they can use sign language because they meet every day."*

This supports previous findings (Batten *et al.,* 2014), which emphasize the importance of sign language proficiency for effective communication. Still, hearing-impaired students often prefer peers who are more fluent in *Kata Kolok*, which can unintentionally exclude students with lower proficiency.

S5: *"They seem uncomfortable interacting with me because I'm not fluent in Kata Kolok; they prefer S4, so I ask her (one of the hearing-impaired peers) to sit with S4 because she likes S4 better than me."*

Such situations may hinder the inclusivity of the classroom environment. Therefore, encouraging all students to learn basic ISL is necessary for fostering equitable communication and stronger peer connections.

4.4. Emotional Reactions to Inclusion

The findings revealed a range of emotional reactions from hearing students when interacting with hearing-impaired peers. Positive emotions included happiness and a sense of fulfillment from providing support. These results are consistent with earlier studies (Yousif *et al.,* 2021), which found that inclusive education supports psychological adaptation and social integration for students with hearing impairments. Similarly, previous studies (Silvestri &

Hartman, 2022) demonstrated that culturally responsive practices, including the use of sign language, enhance social-emotional interaction.

These positive emotional responses also align with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory, particularly within the microsystem, where peer interaction fosters mutual understanding and emotional bonds.

S3: *"It's great to be able to communicate with hearing-impaired friends."*

S4: *"I'm happy to be able to help them."*

These experiences addressed a key communication barrier (Charles *et al*., 2024), who emphasized that despite eagerness to participate, hearing-impaired students often face interactional challenges. This suggests that peer collaboration can reduce such barriers, benefiting both groups and contributing to a more inclusive environment.

However, some students expressed negative emotional responses, including nervousness and hesitation, particularly when trying to communicate without sufficient sign language proficiency. These feelings were intensified in situations where hearing-impaired peers asked questions without teacher support.

S5: *"Sometimes I'm nervous, afraid they won't understand what I'm trying to say."*

This aligns with the literature (McDermid, 2020), which found that low sign language proficiency can hinder students' ability to meet curricular goals and participate in social learning activities. Such emotional responses illustrate the psychological complexity involved in peer support roles within inclusive classrooms.

4. CONCLUSION

This research underscores the vital role of peer support in fostering inclusive environments for students with hearing impairments, particularly in enhancing social interaction, emotional well-being, and communication skills. Guided by the teacher, hearing students supported their hearing-impaired peers with empathy and tolerance, using Kata Kolok to bridge communication gaps and promote a sense of belonging.

The use of sign language (both local and formal) was shown to be critical for successful inclusion. However, challenges persist, especially related to communication barriers, inconsistent sign language proficiency, and the absence of formal Indonesian Sign Language training for hearing students. These challenges affect not only the effectiveness of peer interaction but also the emotional experiences of hearing students, which range from joy and pride to anxiety and frustration.

Despite these obstacles, the overall findings suggest that hearing students generally perceive their hearing-impaired peers positively. With appropriate training and consistent interaction opportunities, hearing students can form meaningful connections, build empathy, and contribute to a more inclusive and respectful learning environment. Ultimately, continuous support and inclusive practices are essential to ensure that all students thrive emotionally, socially, and academically.

5. AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. Authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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