

THE APPLICATION OF STRENGTHS-BASED COUNSELING TO ENHANCE THE RESILIENCE OF PARENTS OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

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Abstract

Families with children with special needs (ABK) face complex relationships among family members. This often becomes a stressor that impacts parental resilience. Resilience is a form of ability of parents with special needs to overcome difficulties or problems caused by the presence and condition of children with special needs. Strength-Based Counseling is a counseling approach that uses a positive psychology approach and emphasizes the strengths of an individual or group of people. Strength-based counseling is considered more appropriate for today's era, due to its practicality and emphasis on positive aspects. This research is a case study, with research methods including observation, and interviews. Resilience is a crucial aspect of an individual's life, especially for parents of children with special needs. This study demonstrates that through the application of strengths-based counseling, parents of children with special needs gain reinforcement in their protective factors, thereby increasing their resilience. The results indicate that the use of strengths-based counseling can make parents of children with special needs feel better understood, more confident, and receive help and support, thereby increasing their resilience.

Keywords: children with special needs, strength based counseling, resilience

Abstrak

Keluarga dengan anak berkebutuhan khusus (ABK) memiliki kompleksitas relasi antar anggotakeluarganya. Hal ini seringkali menjadi stressor tersendiri yang memengaruhi resiliensi orang tua. Resiliensi merupakan suatu bentuk kemampuan orang tua ABK dalam mengatasi kesulitan atau masalah yang diakibatkan oleh keberadaan dan kondisi ABK. Strength Based Counseling merupakan konseling yang memakai pendekatan psikologi positif dan menekankan pada kekuatan dari seseorang/ sekelompok orang. Konseling dengan pendekatan strength based dinilai lebih sesuai untuk diterapkan pada era kini, dari sisi kepraktisan dan juga penekanannya terhadap hal yang positif. Penelitian ini merupakan penelitian studi kasus dengan metode penelitian meliputi observasi dan wawancara. Resiliensi merupakan aspek penting dalam kehidupan individu, khususnya bagi orang tua yang memiliki anak berkebutuhan khusus. Penelitian ini memberi gambaran bahwa melalui penerapan strength based counseling, orang tua ABK memperoleh penguatan dalam protective factornya, sehingga resiliensinya meningkat.. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan penggunaan strength based counseling dapat membuat orang tua ABK merasa lebih dipahami, merasa lebih

percaya diri, dan merasa memperoleh bantuan serta dukungan, sehingga hal ini meningkatkan resiliensinya.

Kata kunci: *anak berkebutuhan khusus, strength based counseling, resiliensi*

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education is one of the modern educational paradigms that places equality, equity, and respect for diversity as core principles in the delivery of educational services. This concept stems from the recognition that every individual, regardless of physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic, or cultural background, has an equal right to a quality education in a learning environment that is safe, comfortable, and supportive of the optimal development of their potential. Inclusive education does not merely focus on the presence of students with special needs in regular schools but also emphasizes transforming the education system so that it can accommodate the needs of all students through adjustments to the curriculum, teaching methods, assessments, support services, and collaboration among schools, families, and the community (UNESCO, 2020). Thus, the success of inclusive education is not measured solely by the admission of students with special needs into mainstream schools, but rather by the extent to which they receive equal learning opportunities, actively participate in all school activities, and develop academically, socially, and emotionally.

In Indonesia, the implementation of inclusive education continues to evolve as government and public awareness of the right to education for students with special needs increases. Policies regarding inclusive schools have provided broader opportunities for children with special needs (ABK) to access educational services in regular schools. However, the implementation of inclusive education still faces various challenges, including teacher readiness, facility availability, curriculum adaptation, and psychosocial support for students and their families. Many schools still view inclusive education merely as providing physical access for children with special needs without complementing it with a comprehensive support system that addresses the psychological needs of both students and their families (Rafikayati & Prawoto, 2022). In fact, the success of inclusive education is greatly influenced by family involvement as the primary environment shaping a child's development.

The family is the first and most influential support system in the life of a child with special needs. Parents serve not only as caregivers but also as the primary partners in their child's educational process, therapy, character development, and social skills development. The presence of a child with special needs in a family brings about different consequences compared to families with children without special needs. Parents often face various emotional changes when they first learn of their child's condition, ranging from feelings of shock, sadness, disappointment, anger, and guilt to difficulty accepting reality. These psychological reactions are part of an adaptation process that requires time and adequate social support so that families can fulfill their caregiving roles optimally (Walsh, 2016).

In addition to emotional challenges, parents of children with special needs also face various pressures in their daily lives. They must devote more time to accompanying their children to therapy sessions, helping them develop academic and daily living skills, meeting relatively greater financial needs, and confronting social stigma that still persists in society. Many parents experience physical and psychological exhaustion due to the long-term demands of caregiving. These conditions can lead to chronic stress, anxiety, depression, family conflict, and even a decline in the quality of the parent-child relationship if not balanced by strong adaptive abilities (Hayes & Watson, 2013).

The ability to endure, adapt, and bounce back from these pressures is known as resilience. Resilience is an individual's capacity to face difficulties, manage stress, and continue to function positively in life despite being in challenging situations (Masten, 2014). In the context of families with children with special needs, resilience serves as a crucial protective factor because it determines parents' ability to accept their child's condition, maintain mental health, foster harmonious family relationships, and provide optimal support for their child's development.

According to Walsh (2016), family resilience is not only understood as an individual's ability to cope with problems but also as a dynamic process involving the family's belief system, family organizational patterns, effective communication, problem-solving skills, and sustained social support. Parents with high levels of resilience tend to be better able to view challenges as opportunities for growth, hold hope for their child's future, and actively seek out various sources of assistance that can improve the family's quality of life.

Conversely, low resilience makes parents more prone to emotional exhaustion (*parental burnout*), loss of motivation in supporting their child, feelings of hopelessness about the future, and even withdrawal from their social environment. These conditions not only impact parents' psychological well-being but also affect the academic, social, and emotional development of children with special needs. Therefore, strengthening parental resilience is a crucial component of implementing inclusive education—an aspect that has historically received less attention compared to academic considerations.

Various studies indicate that psychological support for parents has a significant impact on the educational success of children with special needs. Such support can be provided through counseling services, parenting skills training, support groups, or community-based interventions. Among these various forms of intervention, counseling holds a strategic position because it helps individuals understand their own potential, develop adaptive coping strategies, and build realistic expectations regarding life's challenges (Corey, 2021).

Developments in the field of counseling over the past few decades have shown a paradigm shift from a problem-oriented approach toward a *strength-based approach*. This approach emerged alongside the rise of positive psychology, pioneered by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000). Positive psychology emphasizes the importance of identifying

an individual's strengths, potential, optimism, hope, and various positive character traits as key assets in achieving psychological well-being.

One application of positive psychology in the field of counseling is *Strength-Based Counseling*. According to Smith (2006), *Strength-Based Counseling* is a counseling approach that focuses on identifying, developing, and optimizing an individual's strengths rather than merely focusing on the client's weaknesses, disorders, or problems. The counselor's role is to help clients identify their internal and external resources so they can develop solutions based on their existing potential. This approach is considered more empowering because it views every individual as having the capacity to grow and develop despite facing various limitations.

In the context of parents of children with special needs, *Strength-Based Counseling* provides a space for parents to recognize the abilities they have long possessed in supporting their children. Counseling no longer focuses on the difficulties of raising a child with special needs, but rather emphasizes how that experience can serve as a source of learning, boost self-confidence, strengthen the meaning of life, and build hope for the family's future. This approach is highly relevant for application in inclusive schools because it aligns with the principles of valuing diversity, empowering individuals, and developing the potential of every member of the school community.

A number of previous studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of strength-based approaches in improving individuals' psychological well-being. Research by Rashid (2015) shows that positive psychology-based interventions can increase optimism, hope, and an individual's ability to cope with life's pressures. Similarly, research by Niemiec (2018) found that the consistent use of a strengths-based approach can enhance resilience, life satisfaction, and adaptive capacity across various population groups.

In the context of families with children with special needs, research by Bayat (2007) shows that families who are able to develop a positive perspective on their child's condition have higher levels of resilience compared to families who focus solely on the child's limitations. Meanwhile, research by Hayes and Watson (2013) found that psychological interventions oriented toward strengthening adaptive coping significantly reduced stress levels among parents of children with special needs.

In Indonesia, research on inclusive education still largely focuses on teacher readiness, learning strategies, curriculum adaptation, and educational services for students with special needs (Rafikayati & Prawoto, 2022). Research specifically examining the implementation of *Strength-Based Counseling* to enhance the resilience of parents of children with special needs in inclusive school settings remains very limited. In fact, the success of inclusive education is determined not only by the quality of classroom learning but also by the families' psychological readiness to support their children's educational process on an ongoing basis.

This situation was also observed at SD Muhammadiyah 24 Surabaya, one of the elementary schools implementing inclusive education. Based on initial observations and

communication with special education teachers and school officials, it was found that some parents still struggle to accept their child's condition, feel anxious about their child's academic and social development, and experience emotional stress due to the complex demands of parenting. On the other hand, while the school has made efforts to provide adequate academic services, systematic psychological support for parents has not yet been implemented through a sustained counseling program. This situation highlights a real need for a non-academic service model capable of strengthening parents' psychological resilience as the school's primary partners in supporting the development of children with special needs.

Based on this analysis, the implementation of *Strength-Based Counseling* is viewed as a relevant intervention alternative to enhance the resilience of parents of children with special needs in inclusive schools. This approach not only helps parents cope with psychological stress but also encourages them to recognize their personal strengths, build hope, strengthen family relationships, and improve their ability to adapt to various parenting challenges. Thus, Strength-Based Counseling can become an integral part of inclusive educational services oriented toward the well-being of the entire school community.

This study offers novelty (*novelty*) by integrating the concepts of inclusive education, family resilience, positive psychology, and *Strength-Based Counseling* within the context of non-academic services in inclusive elementary schools. Unlike previous studies, which have primarily focused on learning support services for students with special needs, this study centers on strengthening parents' psychological capacity as the primary foundation for the success of inclusive education. Therefore, this study is expected to contribute theoretically to the development of positive psychology-based guidance and counseling research and to provide practical recommendations for inclusive schools in designing family support services that are more comprehensive, sustainable, and centered on the strengths of each family.

METHOD

The research approach used in this study is a qualitative research approach, specifically a case study. In qualitative research, the "process" of research is more important than the "results" obtained. Therefore, the researcher as a data-collection instrument is a key principle. Only through the researcher's active involvement in the data collection process can the research findings be considered reliable (Sahir, 2021). The case study design was chosen to provide a comprehensive and in-depth description of a phenomenon over a specific period, such as an individual, a group, an organization, a program, and so on (Hidayati & Idhartono, 2025). This study was conducted at an inclusive school, namely SD Muhammadiyah 24 Surabaya. To illustrate the selection of subjects, SD Muhammadiyah 24 has students with various special needs, including: slow learners, students with autism, ADHD, and cerebral palsy. In this study, through the principal and homeroom teachers, an invitation was extended to all parents of students with special needs at SD Muhammadiyah 24 Surabaya to participate in this research; the total number

of students with special needs was 24. Subsequently, the research subjects were selected from among the parents of students with special needs who expressed their willingness to participate in the study. In this case study, one parent agreed to serve as a subject in this research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Through interviews conducted with the vice principal in charge of curriculum at Muhammadiyah 24 Elementary School and the GPK Coordinator at Muhammadiyah 24 Elementary School, the following picture emerged. Muhammadiyah 24 Elementary School in Surabaya is known as a Character School committed to providing progressive, inclusive educational services. The school welcomes all students without any specific criteria or physical condition restrictions in order to optimize each child's potential. Regarding inclusive services and programs, the school has the following inclusive vision: To create Progressive Inclusive Learning and Services to ensure every student feels accepted and supported according to their individual uniqueness.

The school also provides specialized services, often referred to as “Kelas Hebat,” to facilitate students' learning needs. In addition, there are regular training programs for Special Education Teachers and Shadow Teachers to improve the quality of student support in the classroom. Regular training sessions, such as *In-House Training* (IHT), on the identification and support of students with special needs are also conducted for educators to maintain inclusive service standards.

Furthermore, data collection was conducted through observations and interviews with parents of children with special needs. The parents involved in this study were mothers, and their children's specific disability was autism. Initially, the research subjects' resilience profiles were assessed using a questionnaire (pre-test). Subsequently, the subjects underwent four counseling sessions using a strength-based approach. After the four counseling sessions were completed, their resilience was reassessed (post-test). The subjects' initial resilience was compared with their resilience following the strength-based counseling.

The data were systematically and structurally organized for management and analysis to meet the research objectives. Observations were conducted by closely monitoring the subjects' responses as part of the indicators of resilience.

In-depth interviews were conducted with the parents of children with special needs as the primary research subjects, and additional data was obtained from the school. The interviews aimed to explore their experiences, perceptions, and perspectives regarding how they cope with difficulties and challenges in life. Through these interviews, the researcher obtained in-depth data on how parents of children with special needs navigate the ups and downs of life—from parenting and education to the overall dynamics of daily life—thereby providing a comprehensive picture of the process by which subjects become more resilient, utilizing both internal resources and external support systems, specifically strength-based counseling.

The conclusion-drawing and verification stages in this qualitative study were conducted after all data had been presented and comprehensively analyzed. At this stage, the researcher interpreted the main findings obtained from observations, interviews, and data presentation to formulate conclusions addressing the study's focus on how the application of strength-based counseling can enhance the resilience of parents of children with special needs.

The verification process was carried out by rechecking the consistency between field data, data reduction results, and data presentation, ensuring that the resulting conclusions possess a high level of validity and reliability.

The data from this study show an increase in the resilience questionnaire scores for parents of children with special needs from 82 (pre-test) to 90 (post-test).

This can be explained as follows. Regarding parental and family resilience, there are three main contexts in which the family is considered: (1) The family can act as a risk factor. This type of family increases an individual's vulnerability; (2) The family can act as a protective factor.

This type of family enhances an individual's resilience; (3) The family can function as a distinct entity with its own resilience factors. In this study, the family is assumed to function as a distinct entity possessing its own resilience factors.

Indeed, over time, increasing attention has been given to communities and other support systems as sources of protective factors: as support systems.

The four types of support systems according to Sydney Cobb:

1. Social support refers to a type of support involving attentive information exchange, and this social support has three components: (1) Emotional support, which makes the recipient feel cared for and loved; (2) Affirmative support, which makes the recipient feel valued and appreciated; and (3) Network support, which makes the recipient feel they have a clear place within a communication network and reciprocal obligations.
2. Instrumental support. This type of support, which includes counseling and psychotherapy, helps people cope or adapt better in ways that promote their independence.
3. Active support. This provides total support which, if given unnecessarily, can lead to dependence.
4. Material support. This involves the provision of goods and services that help individuals achieve their goals.

This study found that strength-based counseling serves as instrumental support, which strengthens the resilience of parents of children with special needs.

The conclusions and findings of this study indicate that strength-based counseling helps parents feel they are receiving additional support (social support), helps them cope with stress (emotional regulation), fosters a sense of being understood, and provides new perspectives, as well as assistance in facing various life challenges. These elements constitute part of the *protective factors* that support increased resilience among parents of children with special needs. Strength-based counseling contributes positively to enhancing the resilience of these parents.

However, upon closer examination of the research data—which shows an increase in the resilience questionnaire scores of parents of children with special needs from 82 (pre-test) to 90 (post-test), representing an 8-point increase—this suggests that for the parents of children with special needs who were the subjects of this study, their initial resilience score was already in the high resilience category; subsequently, through this strength-based counseling intervention, their already strong resilience further improved.

This increase in resilience scores was evident, among other things, in the parents' perception: those who previously felt they were not yet good at regulating emotions such as anger and despair became able to regulate these emotions effectively. An increase in resilience scores was also observed in the perception that parents had someone they could confide in, and in the perception that parents did not feel alone in facing the situations or problems they encountered.

Parents of children with special needs who received support for protective factors through strength-based counseling demonstrated more positive psychological well-being, felt supported, and exhibited greater self-confidence in fulfilling their parenting roles for children with special needs, as well as in facing life's difficulties and challenges in general. This aligns with the assertion that, regarding an individual's resilience, protective factors must be strengthened to counteract existing risk factors. Thus, it can be concluded that strength-based counseling functions as a protective factor that strengthens and enhances the resilience of parents of children with special needs.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings and discussion, it can be concluded that the application of strength-based counseling for parents of children with special needs has been proven to increase the resilience of these parents. Strength-based counseling serves as a protective factor that strengthens and enhances the resilience of parents of children with special needs at SD Muhammadiyah 24 in Surabaya. Parents who received additional support through strength-based counseling demonstrated better emotional regulation, a greater sense of social support, higher self-confidence, and a more positive/optimistic outlook, enabling them to cope better with difficulties. Time constraints posed a challenge in this study, preventing it from reaching a larger number of participants (parents of children with special needs). It is hoped that in future research, strength-based counseling can be applied more broadly, involving a greater number of parents of children with special needs.

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