Dynamics of Male and Female Social Interactions in Students with Intellectual Disabilities during Puberty

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Abstract. This research aimed to determine the understanding and experiences of students with intellectual disabilities regarding social interactions of the opposite gender during puberty. The focus was on comprehending these interactions and identifying associated risk and protective factors. A qualitative method was used, incorporating the Miles and Huberman analysis model as well as triangulating data through interviews and observations. The results showed that students with intellectual disabilities tended to imitate social interaction behaviors of the opposite gender observed in the surroundings including media such as TV and YouTube. Schools also played an important role in managing the protective factors within these interactions for students with intellectual disabilities. Measures implemented included reproductive health training, assigning proactive teachers to students, providing education on the boundaries of social interactions of the opposite gender, and installing CCTV to monitor and prevent negative behaviors. The actions were intended to mitigate the adverse effects of social interactions, particularly those including opposite-gender relationships.

Keywords: Intellectual Disabilities, Social Interactions, Puberty

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Introduction

During puberty, students typically develop a deep understanding of identity and emotions, including how to build relationships with the opposite gender. These relationships which can be romantic or non-romantic evolve throughout the life of students (Dewi & Minza, 2018). For adolescents, relationships with the opposite gender often become more common during this developmental stage.

Problems related to relationships with the opposite gender occur in all adolescents entering puberty, including students with intellectual disabilities (Damastuti, 2020). Despite a desire to form relationships with the opposite gender, students often struggle to express interest appropriately (Yusri & Fauziah, 2017). This difficulty arises from barriers that affect the pattern of social interactions (Arifah, 2016).

Relationships with the opposite gender sometimes become a problem perceived as complicated when the association becomes unhealthy leading to negative issues, such as premarital intercourse (Distianty, 2015)

and general violence (Zahirah et al., 2019). Negative relationships during puberty including students with intellectual disabilities can lead to gender-based violence (GBV) due to the limited ability to adapt to changes and the vulnerability possessed (Puspitasari et al., 2020). Additionally, the lack of support from teachers, parents, and community, who often perceive these students as easily persuaded and unable to act assertively further intensifies the issue (Royanto & Rosada, 2020).

Data from the National Commission on Women's Annual Report 2022 shows that the number of cases of GBV in 2021 increased by 50% compared to the previous year, totaling 338,496 cases. Sexual violence against female with disabilities was also recorded in the report showing varying numbers over the years which were 57, 57, 69, 87, 77, and 44 in 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, and 2022 respectively (Azhar et al., 2023). This includes instances engaging students with intellectual disabilities, such as an 18-year-old teenager in Pangandaran (Fadillah, 2022).

Research by Retznik et al. (2022) explored social

interactions between male and female students with intellectual disabilities, focusing on the experiences and challenges in forming relationships during puberty. This publication examined how the understanding of social cues, peer dynamics, and support from educators as well as caregivers influenced interactions. The importance of creating inclusive environments to facilitate positive social development and understanding among students with intellectual disabilities was emphasized.

Similarly, Heifetz et al. (2020) found that social ability and comorbidity significantly impact students with intellectual disabilities' understanding of romantic relationships. These students often desire romantic relationships and have varied experiences as well as understandings, viewing romantic relationships as serious, stable, and lifelong commitments.

Research by Charpentier and Carter (2023) further emphasized the challenges students with intellectual disabilities face in finding and maintaining relationships, as well as overcoming problems related to social interactions and sexual education. Comprehensive sexual education is also considered crucial to help these students understand and manage the relationships. More effective sexual education programs are considered essential for addressing these challenges.

Based on several international publications, this research compares the conditions of social interactions for students with intellectual disabilities in developed countries and Indonesia. In Europe and North America, awareness and social integration for these students are higher. General social inclusion programs and activities also help reduce stigma and foster better social integration (Scior et al., 2012). However, Sharma as cited in Schwarz (2016) explained that students with intellectual disabilities in Indonesia face greater vulnerability to social isolation due to a lack of public awareness and understanding. This limits opportunities for social interactions and participation in activities. The publication also emphasizes challenges such as stigma, discrimination, and limited access to appropriate interventions and support, significantly impacting the ability to participate fully in society.

Students with intellectual disabilities encounter unique challenges in social interactions, particularly in romantic relationships. Male with these disabilities struggle to distinguish between romantic attraction and friendship, understand appropriate behavior boundaries, and are more susceptible to manipulation due to a desire for friendship and a lack of understanding of healthy relationship dynamics. However, female with same challenges often experience overprotection from families. This leads to limited opportunities for independent social interactions and romantic relationships. Female are at

higher risk of sexual abuse and exploitation due to a combination of perceived vulnerability, social stereotypes, and difficulties in understanding consent. Both male and female find it difficult to communicate and express needs, desires, and consent in relationships (Johnson et al., 2012).

Given the problems and barriers experienced by students with intellectual disabilities in social interactions with the opposite gender, this research explores the perspectives of students on opposite-sex relationships during puberty. The research emphasizes how these students mimic relationship behaviors observed in the media and the environment, emphasizing the important role of schools in providing protective measures. Strategies include reproductive health training, proactive teacher engagement, and use of CCTV to monitor and guide student interactions. These aim to protect children from the negative impact of relationships and promote a healthy understanding of opposite-sex relationships.

Students with intellectual disabilities were selected as the main participants because this category faces distinct developmental barriers, specifically during puberty. This phase brings profound physical and emotional transformations, affecting the ability to understand and manage social interactions including with the opposite gender. The research also recognizes the need for customized support and interventions to assist students with intellectual disabilities in effectively navigating social interactions during puberty (Kerr et al., 2022).

Societal assumptions suggest that students with intellectual disabilities are easily exploited and have difficulty reporting adverse events due to communication limitations (Smith et al., 2020) making social interactions a matter of urgency. Barriers experienced by these students affect the pattern of social interactions with the environment, making relationships between sexes challenging (Lafferty et al., 2012).

Therefore, this research aims to examine how students with intellectual disabilities perceive and engage in social interactions with the opposite gender during puberty. It further emphasizes the influence of the environment and media on the behaviors of social interactions, such as holding hands and hugging, as well as discussing protective measures implemented by schools to reduce negative impact. Interviews with fifteen students with intellectual disabilities and two teachers provided insights into the risks and protective factors associated with these interactions from an educational perspective.

The relationship maintenance theory proposed by Stafford and Canary in 1991 was adopted (Ogolsky & Stafford, 2023), which identifies five types of relationship maintenance successfully in opposite-

gender relationships. This theory is used to explore the perspectives of students with intellectual disabilities engaged in social interactions with the opposite gender during puberty in school settings. The types include (1) Positivity, an attitude that creates a sense of pleasure in a relationship, including how to communicate and give praise. (2) Openness, an attitude of opening up, exchanging ideas, and listening to each other (Briñol & Petty, 2023). (3) Assurances, defined as commitments made in a relationship (Chandler et al., 2024). (4) Social Networks, an attitude of spending time with a partner and getting to know the partner's social environment (Hatamleh et al., 2023), and (5) Sharing tasks, an attitude of wanting to do tasks and activities together in a relationship (Canary & Yum, 2016). Furthermore, the purpose of this research is to understand social interactions in students with intellectual disabilities regarding opposite-sex relationships during puberty and to identify risk and protective factors influencing relationship development during the critical phase.

Methods

The research used a qualitative method, aiming to collect in-depth data from a specific case to understand particular phenomena or problems and show the unique characteristics (Assyakurrohim et al., 2022). The focus was on students with intellectual disabilities who had entered puberty. The identification of suitable participants included several steps such as (a) reviewing the list of students classified under intellectual disabilities at the school, (b) grouping students based on the age of puberty, (c) consulting with teachers about students' participation in social interactions, specifically romantic relationships with the opposite gender, (d) conducting direct interviews with students regarding social interactions, and (e) selecting students whose answers met the research criteria. From the predetermined criteria, the inclusion and exclusion criteria in the research were detailed in table 1.

The primary data source included 15 students with intellectual disabilities and two teachers from a Special School in Yogyakarta. Data collection included direct observation and interviews over three weeks during learning hours and breaks. The process was divided into two stages namely one week of observations and two weeks of interviews. The observation stage was carried out by directly observing interactions between participants and the opposite-sex peers, focusing on location, time, activities engaged, context of interaction, emotional responses, and communication dynamics. Furthermore, the interview stage was conducted with 2-3 participants per day and a duration of 15-20 minutes using a semi-structured interview instrument including a more flexible list of questions. This instrument allowed for adjustment and the addition of new questions based

on the response and direction of the conversation. It also allowed the research to explore specific topics and variations between respondents as well as respond to the unique context of each interview (Magaldi & Berler, 2020).

The research planned observation aspects, including environmental settings, subject characteristics, and specific behaviors to be focused on. This also included setting specific subject criteria such as age, gender, or other characteristics relevant to the objectives. Direct observation was used where the research recorded events or interactions that occurred using tools such as field notes and audio recordings. The research also acted as a non-participating observer, ensuring that observations were made without interrupting the natural flow of interaction. This information from observations was recorded accurately and systematically. Consequently, a coding system was developed for categorization and data analysis to identify patterns or themes in interactions.

Interviews included preparing a comprehensive and flexible list of questions to motivate personal narratives and broader information. Conducted in a comfortable setting for participants, the interviews maintained privacy and comfort to enhance response quality. Effective communication methods such as active listening, open-ended questions, and empathy were used to build trust with the participants. The interview guidelines used in the research were detailed in table 2.

Data from the interviews was transcribed and analyzed using the Miles and Huberman model, including coding the data, identifying themes, and developing theories evolving from the information. This analysis allowed the understanding of students' perspectives, interpretations of experiences, and unique context of observed social interactions between schoolmates. The data analysis included reduction, display, and conclusion drawing/verification (Abdussamad, 2021). Data reduction was accomplished by selecting and focusing on important aspects related to the perspectives of students with intellectual disabilities on opposite-gender relationships at puberty derived from interviews and observations of 15 students.

The criteria for selecting sources were based on the age of students with intellectual disabilities who had entered puberty. Furthermore, data was presented in the form of a brief description of the relationship between aspects of the opposite-gender relationships occurring in these students at puberty. Students with intellectual disabilities who participated in this research were selected accordingly as shown in table 3.

In-depth interviews were also conducted with two teachers at Special School X to identify the risk and protective factors for opposite-gender relationships formed by students with intellectual disabilities. The

teachers who served as participants in this research were selected as shown in table 4.

Obtaining informed consent was a crucial and ethical stage in the research. Informed consent ensured that all participants received a thorough explanation including the purpose, methods, possible risks, and benefits, as well as the right to withdraw at any time without facing negative repercussions (Xu et al., 2020). Before conducting the research, all elements were explained to students using clear and understandable language as well as responded to any questions. The participants were also informed that the confidentiality and anonymity of the data collected would be maintained and protected.

Table 1
Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria of the Research

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Students with intellectual disabilities.	Students with intellectual disabilities entered puberty but were still in elementary school.
Students who entered puberty.	Students with intellectual disabilities who entered puberty were at the high school level but had not established interactions with the opposite sex leading to romantic relationships.
Students with intellectual disabilities who established interactions with the opposite gender that led to romantic relationships.	
Students with intellectual disabilities were male and female.	
Students with intellectual disabilities who entered puberty at junior and senior high school levels.	

Table 2
Interview Guidelines

No.	Interview Item
Positivity Aspect	
1	What did you know about social interactions with friends of the opposite gender?
2	Since what grade did you understand social interactions with friends of the opposite gender?
3	Did you ever love a friend of the opposite gender at school?
4	Did you have interactions with friends of the opposite gender that led to romantic relationships?
Openness Aspect	
5	What forms of communication occurred in your interactions?
Assurance Aspect	
6	What was an excellent manner to build social interactions leading to romantic relationships with the opposite gender?
Sharing Tasks Aspect	
7	How did you experience relationships with the opposite gender?
Social Network	
8	What was the experience of social interactions with friends of the opposite gender while at school?

Table 3
Research Participants (Students with Intellectual Disabilities)

No	Initial	Gender	Age
1	E	Male	13
2	H1	Male	14
3	R	Female	15
4	T	Female	15
5	N	Female	15
6	R	Male	15
7	F	Male	15
8	O	Female	16
9	F	Female	18
10	Z	Female	18
11	N	Female	18
12	A	Male	18
13	D	Female	19
14	H2	Male	19
15	A	Female	20

Source: Special School Data, Academic Year 2023/2024

Table 4.
Research Participants (Teacher of Special School X)

No	Initial	Gender	Position
1	A	F	Islamic Education Subject Teacher
2	I	F	Class Teacher

Since the participants were students with intellectual disabilities, each homeroom teacher was given responsibility during school hours. The homeroom teacher was selected as the individual to consent to student's participation in the research. However, this process had to be customized to suit the homeroom teacher's understanding of the procedures and risks included.

The research used three main methods, namely in-depth interviews, direct observation, and verification with teachers. In-depth interviews aimed to understand the views and experiences of students with intellectual disabilities regarding social interactions with the opposite gender during puberty. Furthermore, direct observations were conducted at school to observe the behavior and social interactions of students with friends of the opposite gender providing more objective and in-depth data. To ensure the accuracy of the results from interviews and direct observations, the data were confirmed by two teachers who were familiar with the activities of students. Consequently, the teachers further provided additional views or verification related to students' statements and behavior in the school environment. This combination of methods allowed the research to produce more accurate and in-depth results, reduce bias, and provide a comprehensive as well as valid picture of social interactions of students with intellectual disabilities during puberty (Haryoko et al., 2020).

Results and Discussion
Result
The thematic analysis provided insight into students with intellectual disabilities' understanding of social interactions with the opposite sex that lead to romantic relationships. It also identified risk and protective factors for the school in managing the negative impacts of these interactions. The data collection process spanned two weeks, with 2-3 participants interviewed per day for 15-20 minutes each. The following themes evolved from the analysis of the interview results.

Theme 1: Understanding of Social Interactions with the Opposite Gender
All participants agreed that social interactions with friends of the opposite gender included close relationships, love, and affection. Certain students perceived the relationships as similar to those of other friends who engage in activities together, such as playing, chatting, and confiding in each other as explained by the following participant.

> *Interaksi dengan lawan jenis adalah hubungan yang dekat, penuh kasih sayang dengan teman lawan jenis, seperti berpacaran. (Subjek E)*
> Interaction with the opposite gender was a close relationship, affectionate with friends of the opposite gender such as dating. (Student E)

Social interactions with the opposite gender included attention, communication, support, and joint activities between students in the school environment. This was also evidenced by an in-depth interview conducted with a class teacher at School X, who stated that:

> *Saya juga memperhatikan bahwa beberapa siswa mulai menunjukkan ketertarikan pada lawan jenis. Kami harus sangat berhati-hati dan proaktif dalam membimbing mereka (Ibu I)*
> Certain students were starting to show interest in the opposite gender, thereby teachers were expected to carefully and proactively give guidance. (Mrs. I)

Theme 2: Boundaries in Social Interaction with the Opposite Gender
The participants set various boundaries in social interactions with the opposite gender, which included physical (appropriate physical contact), emotional (expressions of love and loyalty), social (disclosure of the relationship to others and third-party approval), and communication (use of chat and phone, and the content of the communication). These boundaries showed variations in how participants responded to social interactions with the opposite gender based on personal preferences, social norms, and ethical considerations as detailed by the following student.

> *Menunjukkan cinta dengan berpegangan tangan untuk mengungkapkan rasa sayang I ke aku, kadang juga ngirim emoticon cium kalau chat via whats app. Aku juga tahu batasan yang tidak boleh dilakukan dalam berpacaran itu tidak boleh menyentuh bagian ini (sambil menunjuk area dada dan area sensitif bagian bawah).(Subjek T)*
> Showing love by holding hands was to express I's affection, sometimes sending kisses emojis via WhatsApp chats. Knowing what not to do when it comes to touching the chest and other sensitive area. (Student T).

A participant decided to keep a clandestine relationship with parents and teachers, imposed restrictions on relationships with opposite-gender friends, and used digital communication as the primary medium of interaction. For this theme, in-depth interviews were conducted with School X teachers to identify restrictions that the school emphasized on students with intellectual disabilities in interacting with the opposite gender during puberty. The outcomes of the interviews were as follows.

> *Kami fokus pada pengembangan diri mereka sih mbak, itu mereka setelah dikasih sosialisasi pembelajarannya itu mereka paham mengenai itu atau tidak. Soalnya kan tak suruh karakterin juga, misalnya bagian tubuh yang tidak boleh disentuh, yang bagian mana aja. Nanti kan dia meraktekin di tubuhnya, meraktekin nunjuk dimanekin. Kan ta siapin manekin itu, terus ta siapin media yang gambar wanita, terus ada tombol silang sama centangnya. Cek list itu ditempel-tempelin yang boleh disentuh dan tidak boleh disentuh. Terus nanti ekspresinya ketika ada yang menyentuh gimana, Itu nanti diperaktekin juga Itu prakteknya cewek-cewek aja, belum ada praktek yang lawan jenis sih mbak. (Ibu I).*
> The school focused on student's self-development, assessing the understanding after being socialized about appropriate behavior. The teachers also instructed students to identify which body parts should not be touched. Students practiced on the bodies and used mannequins for demonstration. The school prepared mannequins and media with pictures, marking the parts that could and could not be touched. Students practiced appropriate responses to being touched. This practice was currently only conducted with girls with no sessions for the opposite sex. (Mrs. I).

> *Betul sekali. Di sisi lain, kami juga melibatkan psikolog dan guru kelas, serta saya sendiri sebagai guru agama Islam di sekolah ini untuk memberikan pengetahuan yang lebih mendalam mengenai perilaku yang pantas dan tidak pantas dalam berinteraksi dengan lawan jenis. Sangat*

penting bagi mereka untuk memahami batasan-batasan ini (Ibu A)

That's correct, as the school also engaged psychologists, class teachers, and the Islamic religion teacher to provide more in-depth knowledge about appropriate and inappropriate behavior in interacting with the opposite gender. It was considered very important for students to understand these boundaries. (Mrs. A)

Ya, kami harus melakukannya. Saya memanfaatkan CCTV untuk memantau mereka di area sekolah, ini membantu mengidentifikasi perilaku yang perlu kami bimbing. Tidak hanya tentang interaksi dengan lawan jenis, tapi juga tentang keamanan mereka secara keseluruhan (Ibu A).

Yes, it was necessary as CCTV was used to monitor students in the school area helping to identify behaviors that required guidance. This monitoring covered not only interactions with the opposite gender but also overall safety. (Mrs. A).

Theme 3: Forms of Interaction at School

Based on the interviews conducted for this theme, physical forms of interaction such as holding hands and hugs in certain participants' statements showed the need for appropriate physical closeness. Consequently, digital communication reflected the role of technology in the current relationships allowing students to stay connected beyond the physical boundaries of the school. Shared activities such as games or joint projects, strengthened social bonds and cooperation while exchanges of attention including inquiring about well-being showed interpersonal care and empathy as detailed by the following student.

Setiap hari jumat setelah senam bersama, kadang jalan-jalan berdua keliling sekolah dan foto-foto berdua. Suara dia bagus, dia suka nyanyi tenda biru, itu lagu favorit dia. (subjek H2)

Every Friday after gymnastics, students sometimes walked around the school together and took pictures. A student mentioned another had a good voice and liked to sing Tenda Biru, which was a favorite song. (Student H2)

The form of interaction carried out by the participants showed that despite implemented restrictions and norms, students still found a medium to interact with the opposite gender within the school environment either through physical interactions done secretly or through verbal and digital communication. School X which was a Special School in Yogyakarta City had 111 students (46 females and 65 males) and 91 students with intellectual disabilities. The research included 15 students with intellectual disabilities who

had entered puberty consisting of nine females and six males.

The core stage of the interview included introductions and clarification as well as an explanation of data usage and privacy. A warm-up session with general questions followed this to make students more open to answers. Pre-prepared main questions were asked emphasizing probing responses to understand participants' experiences in detail. The interview ended with appreciation and information about using the results and the next steps.

In the data collection and analysis stage, student's responses were recorded accurately by writing down the key points communicated and the audio recordings with prior permission from the participants. The data was systematically organized to facilitate the analysis process including transcription of the audio recordings and classification of opinions by topic. Analysis was further conducted to identify patterns and insights related to the objectives. At the reporting stage, the results were synthesized into a narrative explaining the research objectives, emphasizing important insights and patterns from the participants' answers. Conclusions were further stated based on the analysis including suggestions for practical application or future publications.

Interviews with 15 students with intellectual disabilities at Special School X showed that these students viewed opposite-gender relationships as close relationships with love and affection. Some perceived these relationships as ordinary friendships including shared activities such as playing, chatting, and confiding in each other. Most had engaged in opposite-gender relationships since elementary school (grade 5 or 6) while others began in junior high school and some only in senior high school. At the end of the interviews, statements were verified through follow-up questions and triangulation with teachers to ensure accuracy. When student's answer differed from a previous response, triangulation was conducted with a familiar teacher to verify the accuracy of the statement. For more details, the results of the interview were showed in table 5.

Based on the interview results with students with intellectual disabilities, distinctions arise between opposite-gender relationships including romantic connections and non-romantic ones. In relationships with romantic inclinations, physical interactions such as hand-holding and hugs were more prevalent with some even reporting instances of cheek kisses exchanged with the opposite-gender partners. This behavior often mirrors what was observed among peers engaged in romantic relationships. Conversely, students without romantic engagement typically maintained relationships with the opposite gender similar to platonic friendships.

Table 5
Interview Results of Students with Intellectual Disabilities

No.	Question Item	Answer Description
1.	Since what grade did you understand about relationships with the opposite gender?	a. Since 5th grade primary school. b. Since grade 7th of junior high school. c. Knowing the relationship with the opposite gender but forgetting which grade. d. Not knowing the relationship with the opposite gender. e. Had no idea what grade it was. f. Since the 2nd year of high school. g. Since 9th grade of junior high school. h. Since 6th grade primary school. i. Since primary school, the grade had been forgotten. j. Has known opposite-gender relationships but forgot the grade.
2.	What do you know about relationships with the opposite gender?	a. Relationships with the opposite gender mean close relationships and love for friends of the other sex. b. Relationships with the opposite gender were similar with friends of the other sex. c. Relationships with the opposite gender when called sweetheart. d. Relationships with the opposite gender implied dating with girls. e. Relationship with the opposite gender was playing with friends. f. Relationships with the opposite gender were about talking and playing together. Sometimes there may be problems.

Student attributed this to parental and teacher restrictions, emphasizing the importance of focusing on learning and maintaining appropriate boundaries with the opposite gender at the age. These insights were obtained from interviews and observations conducted within the school environment.

Romantic opposite-gender relationships also showed positive outcomes for students immersed in the acts. Participants acknowledged increased enthusiasm for school attendance and learning activities, particularly sports and recreational pursuits such as basketball or ping pong. During the interview process, discrepancies in responses prompted triangulation with teachers familiar with students to ascertain the accuracy of statements made by students with intellectual disabilities. When student's answer differed from a previous response, triangulation was conducted with a familiar teacher to verify the accuracy of the statement.

Various supportive factors influencing the maintenance of romantic relationships were essential to be considered when exploring opposite-gender relationships among students with intellectual

disabilities. These aspects included positivity, openness, assurances, social network, and task sharing, all of which were manifested in students with intellectual disabilities, as detailed in the following subsequent discussions.

Positivity

Positivity was defined as an attitude fostering pleasure in a relationship, a method of communicating, and praise included in a favorable attitude (Ogolsky & Stafford, 2023). It had the potential to significantly influence an individual's sense of security, compassion, and happiness (Gomez-Lopez et al., 2019). Furthermore, this aspect of positivity played a crucial role in building positive relationships often through deliberate acts of receptive attention that could enhance closeness between individuals of the opposite gender.

The results of interviews conducted with students with intellectual disabilities showed that positivity also had beneficial effects. Students expressed that the opposite-gender relationships gave the feeling of being valued, thereby increasing the happiness in attending school. This discovery was supported by the results of interviews conducted with H1 who was a 14-year-old male among students with intellectual disabilities in the following statement.

> *main bersama, ya kayak main basket dan main handphone HP saat jam istirahat (H1)*
> Playing together, which included engaging in activities such as basketball and using cell phones during break time, was a common occurrence among students. (H1)

The establishment of relationships of the opposite gender by students with intellectual disabilities at Special School X made the participants enthusiastic about doing activities at school, as detailed by R, O, and H2 in the interviews.

> *Sering bareng sama romi, ya jalan-jalan. Jumat itu jalan, muter-muterin kelas. Terus istirahat. Terus P5. Terus pulang. (Subjek R)*
> Often, R and the other individual would go for walks together. On Fridays, students would stroll around the classrooms, take a break, attend P5, and then head home. (R).

> *Setiap hari jumat setelah senam bersama, kadang jalan-jalan berdua keliling sekolah dan foto-foto berdua. Suara dia bagus, dia suka nyanyi tenda biru, itu lagu favorit dia. (subjek H2)*
> Every Friday after gymnastics, students would sometimes walk around the school together and take photos. The participant had a good voice and enjoyed singing Tenda Biru, which was the favorite song. (H2)

Kita sering main pingpong dn basket bareng kalau jam istirahat atau jam olahraga. M juga kadang ngasih jajan, makanan ringan gitu. (Subjek O)
Students often played ping-pong and basketball together during break time or sports time. M also frequently gave snacks including jaja. *(O)*

Furthermore, the existence of opposite-gender relationships among students with intellectual disabilities also augmented the enthusiasm for engaging in religious activities both within and outside the school environment. D and F in the interviews stated the following to confirm the observation.

H orangnya juga lucu. Kadang dia buat aku juga jengkel, seperti dia gak mau shalat pas di sekolah jadi aku kejar-kejaran sama dia. (D)
H was amusing but sometimes funny, specifically when declined to pray at school leading to a chase in the field. (D).

Kami selalu beribadah bersama, kebetulan saya beribadah di gereja yang sama dengan G. Jadi kami selalu bertemu di gereja, saya juga suka dengan G karena dia cantik dan rajin beribadah bersama saya. (F)
Students always worshiped together, attending the same church as G and regularly meeting. The participants also admired G for her beauty and dedication to worshiping together. (F)

The positivity aspect existing in the opposite-gender relationships of students with intellectual disabilities at Special School X was examined. The research concluded that students with intellectual disabilities also experienced the exact activities carried out by adolescents in general occurring during puberty. The activities carried out were interactions that showed positive activity through playing, spontaneously and repeatedly joking, as well as participating in worship activities. The positivity aspect also dramatically affected social interaction skills of students with intellectual disabilities due to the activities or positivity carried out by these students in understanding the feelings of others (Ardha, 2017).

Openness
Openness was characterized as an attitude of openness, idea exchange, and active listening (Ogolsky & Stafford, 2023). It served as a crucial aspect of opposite-gender relationships, providing a framework for assessing individual expectations within the relationships (Thompson & Vangelisti, 2016). Typically, openness in opposite-gender relationships manifested through verbal communication, intensifying conversations and relationships between individuals of the opposite gender (Stefanie, 2016).

The interviews with students with intellectual disabilities showed that openness in opposite-gender relationships served as a standard for building healthy connections. This was evident in discussions with various students with intellectual disabilities.

Kalau marahan sama dia itu, minta maafnya susah. Kadang kalau cewek biasa kan sehari dua hari, kalau dia ini bisa sampai 5 hari. Kadang di diemin, kalau video call ngga di angkat. Tapi kalau lagi baik-baiknya ditelpon langsung angkat. Tapi dia nyebelin. Pokoknya dia nyebelin itu, dia suka marah. Buat ini ngga boleh buat itu ngga boleh. Dia itu sebel kalau ada yang nakalin aku. Dia kelas 1 SMA, dia tata boga. Udah sampai di tahap sayang. Tahap sayang itu menurut aku, dia tipe yang ngga manja. Mandiri dia nya. Kalau cewe-cewe lain kan Sukanya ngerayu, kalau di aitu engga. Dia tidak memaksa juga(E)
It was challenging to apologize when feeling angry towards the other sex. For most, it might take a day or two to reconcile extending to five days. Generally, calls and messages would be ignored but would respond promptly when in good spirits. The opposite gender could be frustrating, often expressing annoyance and getting upset easily. There were certain behaviors the gender disliked, particularly when someone mistreated the partner. Despite being in the first year of high school, student exhibited maturity beyond the age. Student was independent and not easily influenced by others' advances. (E)

Komunikasi sama indra via telepon wa atau voice note. Atau chat wa. Selama pacaran juga tidak boleh ngomong kasar dan mengacungkan jari tengah(T)
Communication with the other gender included WhatsApp calls, voice notes, or chats. Throughout the courtship, students adhered to guidelines prohibiting rude language or gestures such as pointing the middle finger. (T).

H selalu bilang dia sayang sama aku. Aku suka sama dia karena dia tulus sama aku, perhatian, dan penuh kasih sayang juga sama aku (D)
H consistently expressed love for the individual, who reciprocated the feelings, appreciating the sincerity, attentiveness, and affection. *(D)*

Examining the interviews conducted with students at Special School X, the research concluded that openness in students with intellectual disabilities was achieved through good communication within the relationships. The opinion was supported by Batoebara (2018) who stated that openness in relationships built by individuals of the opposite gender referred to the communication aspect to produce trust.

Assurances

Assurances comprised commitments made in a relationship (Ogolsky & Stafford, 2023). The quality of communication in a relationship would determine the level of commitment (Liana & Herdiyanto, 2017). Individuals in a relationship have the potential to mutually commit to addressing shared challenges (Yamaguchi et al., 2015). In the aspect of assurances, the language of love as described by Chapman played a crucial role in fostering positive relationships. This language included Affirmation, Quality Time, Receiving Gifts, Acts of Service, and Physical Touch (Zahra & Rakhmad, 2022). Students with intellectual disabilities at Special School X showed the use of love language in the relationships, as detailed in the following interviews.

ngga tau batasan itu apa, jadi cara B nunjukin cinta dan kesetiannya ya kami pegangan tangan, kadang pelukan juga, aku juga pernah dicium keningku sama B. Aku ngga nolak kalau B gituin aku, soale kata B dia sayang banget sama aku, B juga bilang kalau dia takut banget kehilangan aku. Aku juga disuruh ibunya B nginep, jadi aku tidur bareng sama B, sekamar sama B. Soale ibunya B kan, si mbah ku nyuruh ibunya B buat tidur bareng sama B biar romantis. Si mbah ku sama ibu ne B temen deket soale (F)

Students didn't understand what Batasan implied. Instead, B expressed affection and loyalty through gestures such as holding hands, occasional hugs, and even kissing student on the forehead. Despite not knowing the definition of Batasan, student didn't reject B's shows of affection because B often professed love and fear of losing. B's mother even suggested student stay over, leading to sharing the same room. This suggestion was influenced by the close friendship between the individual's grandfather and B's mother. (F).

Dia sama aku sering pegangan tangan, tapi sembunyi-sembunyi kalau lagi di lapangan bawah biar ngga di tau sama guru. Kadang I juga ngirim emoticon cium kalau lagi chat WA (T)

Students frequently held hands, specifically on the lower field where it was hidden to avoid detection by teachers. Additionally, students sometimes sent kiss emojis during conversations on WhatsApp. (T)

Kami sering main bareng, sering chatingan WA juga, dia juga sering ngasih-ngasih perhatian gitu, kayak nanyain udah makan apa belum, saling ngirim-ngirim gambar juga (D)

Students frequently engaged in activities together, including playing and chatting on WhatsApp. Moreover, the other gender consistently showed care and attention by inquiring about meals and exchanging pictures with each other. (D)

Based on interviews conducted with students with intellectual disabilities at Special School X, the aspect of Assurances was evident to entail a mutual commitment between two individuals in relationship. This was supported by Fauziyah (2021), who emphasized that commitment facilitates cooperation, fostering loyalty, openness, willingness to sacrifice, and trust within the relationship.

Social Networks

Social networks were defined as spending time with a partner and getting to know the partner's social environment (Ogolsky & Stafford, 2023). In relationships, these networks form through caring attitudes and behaviors by both genders (Dwijayani & Wilani, 2020). Theoretical exploration of social networks moves beyond traditional individual attributes such as gender, preferences, or age, focusing instead on dynamics of relationships and an individual's connection to social circle (Gamper, 2022). Participation in positive social networks was crucial for overall well-being and societal integration (Chu et al., 2023). These principles manifested in the relationships formed by students with intellectual disabilities, as evidenced in interviews conducted at Special School X.

Kalau di kelas kami membatik, mewarnai sama kuas batik bareng (R)

In class students made batik and coloring with batik brushes together. (R)

main bareng temen-temen ke daerah wisata, kayak di itu apa namanya… di pantai, parangtritis sama wisata kaliurang paling (R)

Students played with friends in tourist areas such as the beach, Parangtritis, and Kaliurang tourism. (R)

kadang D itu ke rumah aku buat belajar jahit, kebetulan sama-sama kelas jahit juga. Dia pulang dijemput ibunya, rumah kami juga deketan aja, hanya beda gang aja (H)

Sometimes D came to the house to learn sewing having sewing classes together. D also came home picked up by the mother because the friend's house was close by, just a different alley (H).

tiap ketemu G di sekolah saya selalu bilang kepada G untuk jangan lupa selalu berdoa siang dan teman-temannya (F)

Every time students met G at school and always reminded G not to forget to pray at noon and with the friends. (F).

In opposite-gender relationships among students with intellectual disabilities, social networks

comprised interactions and friendships (Mamas et al., 2020). Typically, social networks of students with intellectual disabilities were limited to family members and peers due to the greater challenges faced compared to non-disabled learners (Fullana et al., 2021).

Sharing Tasks

Sharing tasks entailed the willingness to complete tasks and activities together in a relationship (Ogolsky & Stafford, 2023). The quality of communication would strongly influence the task sharing leading to feelings of fairness and satisfaction in each gender included in the relationship (Carlson et al., 2020). Division of tasks in an opposite-gender relationship was also essential to understanding dynamics and needs of each individual who builds the relationship either romantic or non-romantic (Stefanie, 2016). It was also established in relationships developed by students with intellectual disabilities such as helping each other in completing activities occurring in the relationship (Rosse et al., 2014). The division of tasks carried out by students with intellectual disabilities named F and D was observed in the following interview results.

biasanya pacarku ke rumah untuk belajar bareng. Kayak kemaren ada tugas gambar, terus aku ga bisa gambar kan. Jadi B yang gambarin, B kerumah ngajak temennya (F)

Student's girlfriend typically visited the house to learn together. For instance, there was a drawing assignment that F struggled with. B ended up drawing it for F and afterward came home to invite the friend. (F).

H sering bantu aku pas HP kejatuh di kursi, bantu aku mencarinya. Dia juga sering bantu aku nulis tugas (D)

H often helped other students when the cell phone fell on the chair, assisting in searching for the phone. Additionally, H frequently assisted in writing assignments. (D).

In the opposite-gender relationships of students with intellectual disabilities, the sharing of tasks evolved due to social interactions. However, the full realization was hindered by the challenges posed by intellectual disabilities. Task-sharing in these relationships comprised various settings, spanning from familial to academic and social environments (Tongam & Yusuf, 2017). Interviews with students at Special School X showed that task-sharing primarily included mutual assistance in completing assignments and other activities.

Insights obtained from interviews with teachers at Special School X provided more insights into dynamics of opposite-gender relationships among students with intellectual disabilities. It became evident that the

unchecked use of mobile phones alongside unsupervised exposure to non-educational content facilitated the misuse of these communication devices. Consequently, students may have developed unhealthy fantasies including peers of the opposite gender. This phenomenon was augmented by the inherent challenges of intellectual disabilities, which compromised student's ability to regulate the impulses (Taufan et al., 2018).

Special School X implemented proactive measures aimed at safeguarding students with intellectual disabilities who had entered puberty to address these challenges. These measures included frequent reproductive health training sessions, allocation of classes with more engaged teachers to students in puberty, and imparting awareness about the boundaries of interactions with peers of the opposite gender. Additionally, the installation of CCTV cameras connected to the cellphone of an Islamic Religious Education teacher throughout the school premises served as a preemptive measure against negative behaviors that might have arisen from unchecked interactions.

Discussion

The research focuses on conducting thematic analysis concerning the understanding of opposite-gender social interactions leading to romantic relationships among students with intellectual disabilities. It also explores the risk factors and protective measures adopted by schools to mitigate the adverse outcomes of the interactions. The analysis was conducted for two weeks with 2-3 participants interviewed daily for 15-20 minutes each leading to the identification of significant themes.

In qualitative research, students with intellectual disabilities share diverse experiences regarding interactions with the opposite gender ranging from childhood friendships to more intimate relationships in adolescence. Most participants reported initiating the relationships in primary school while others began in junior or senior secondary school. The nature of interactions varied with some experiencing romantic relationships including physical contact such as holding hands and hugging influenced by the surroundings and media exposure comprising TV and YouTube. However, others maintained purely platonic relationships often guided by parental or teacher advice emphasizing the importance of focusing on education and maintaining appropriate boundaries when interacting with the opposite gender.

Theme 1: Understanding Social Interactions with the Opposite Gender

Participants unanimously describe opposite-gender interactions as close relationships characterized by mutual affection and similar to romantic relationships.

Students also perceive these interactions as usual and similar to other friendships including shared activities and emotional support. This perspective is shared by school teachers who emphasize the need for careful guidance during interactions.

Theme 2: Boundaries in Social Interaction with the Opposite Gender

The research shows a wide array of boundaries set by the participants including physical, emotional, social, and communication boundaries reflecting personal preferences, social norms, and ethical considerations. Certain participants prefer hidden relationships to avoid parental and teacher supervision, using digital communication as the primary mode of interaction. Furthermore, in-depth interviews with school staff emphasize the focus on self-development and awareness including an understanding of appropriate physical contact and expression.

Theme 3: Forms of Interaction at School

Physical interactions such as holding hands and hugging show the desire for physical closeness while digital communication underscores the role of technology in sustaining relationships beyond the physical boundaries of the school. Activities such as working together and mutual care among friends of the opposite gender suggest strong interpersonal relationships despite the norms and boundaries imposed within the school environment.

The research population consists of 15 students with intellectual disabilities from SLB X in Yogyakarta City, representing a large proportion of the school's student body which predominantly comprises disabled children. The methodology includes detailed interview processes, data collection and analysis, and comprehensive reporting stage to explain the participants' experiences and insights.

Distinctions exist between romantic and non-romantic opposite-gender interactions during students' puberty, with romantic relationships involving more physical contact. This disparity underscores social and emotional benefits of romantic relationships including increased school attendance and enthusiasm for learning. Additionally, factors supporting the sustenance of these relationships are identified comprising positivity, openness, reassurance, social networks, and task sharing, mirroring analogous dynamics observed in adolescent relationships at large.

Based on interviews with students with intellectual disabilities, certain participants report that the benefits of social interactions leading to romantic relationships are increased motivation to attend school and greater enthusiasm for learning during physical education lessons or sports. Social interactions of students with intellectual disabilities that occur with the opposite gender can provide emotional support,

increase understanding, and acceptance between genders. This is also supported by a research article by Honghao et al. (2021), which explores the intricate dynamics of social interactions among adolescents, particularly focusing on the cultivation of interpersonal skills within the framework of romantic relationships. The research underscores how these relationships serve as crucial platforms for adolescents to possess various interpersonal abilities including communication, tolerance, and supportiveness.

The qualitative analysis also explores various factors supporting and maintaining social interactions of students with intellectual disabilities leading to relationships including positive interactions, openness, reassurance, social networking, and task sharing. These aspects were observed in students with intellectual disabilities, reflecting similar dynamics found in relationships among the general adolescent population. Positive interactions and open communication are highly valued, as these aspects contribute to students' well-being and engagement in school activities.

The Relationship Maintenance theory proposed by Stafford and Canary was further adopted in the research (Ogolsky & Stafford, 2023). This aspect emphasizes the complexity and uniqueness of dynamics in interactions. The importance of a holistic and needs-sensitive method is also underscored in sexual and reproductive health education for students with intellectual disabilities. Understanding and openness to opposite-sex relationships including task sharing and social support contribute to the development of healthy social and emotional skills among students with intellectual disabilities.

Challenges originating from cell phone misuse and unsupervised interactions prompt the implementation of stricter protective measures by the school. Consequently, interviews with two teachers explore the school's protective factors or efforts in managing social interactions leading to romantic relationships during puberty among students with intellectual disabilities. An Islamic Religious Education teacher possesses comprehensive knowledge of students' interactions while the other teachers have been engaged in reproductive health education training for students with intellectual disabilities upon entering puberty. The results underscore the school's proactive measures aimed at mitigating the negative impacts of these interactions including vigilant monitoring by attentive teachers and the use of CCTV surveillance to deter inappropriate behavior among students with intellectual disabilities.

Despite the merits, the research faces limitations primarily on the research participants' (students with intellectual disabilities) constraints in expressing the feelings and experiences during puberty. Some participants exhibit reluctance to share the sentiments

and experiences during interviews, necessitating the experts to establish rapport and simplify questions for better comprehension. Additionally, certain participants struggle to understand the context of questions posed, necessitating adjustments in questioning methods to elicit relevant responses correlated with the interview's objectives.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research provided a comprehensive overview of how students with intellectual disabilities understand and experience social interactions leading to romantic relationships with the opposite gender during puberty. The results showed that these students perceived such interactions as close relationships, characterized by feelings of loving friends of the opposite gender. Students engaged in shared activities such as playing, chatting, and confiding in each other. Certain students with intellectual disabilities reported initiating these relationships as early as grades 5 or 6 in elementary school while others began during junior or senior high school.

However, there were risk factors associated with these social interactions including the influence of the surrounding environment and media such as TV and YouTube. These factors led to physical contact such as holding hands, hugging, and even kissing. Intellectual limitations could also hinder the ability to respond to changes during puberty appropriately. Furthermore, protective factors were crucial in mitigating these risks and included reproductive health training, strategic class placements, proactive teachers, and clear understanding of boundaries with peers of the opposite gender. Measures such as installing CCTV monitored by Islamic Religious Education teachers further helped prevent negative behaviors among students.

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