

Teachers' Readiness in Dealing with the Puberty Stage of Adolescents with Autism at SLB Negeri Surakarta

Angelina Dian Ajeng P*, Sugini, Joko Yuwono

ajengprabhandani@student.uns.ac.id

Universitas Sebelas Maret

ABSTRACT

This study aims to describe teachers' readiness in facing the puberty period of autistic adolescents at SLB Negeri Surakarta. Puberty is an important developmental phase that brings various challenges, especially for adolescents with autism who often experience difficulties in understanding physical and emotional changes. This condition requires teachers to be well-prepared in providing proper guidance to help autistic adolescents navigate this stage successfully. This research employed a qualitative approach with a case study design. The subjects consisted of three autism classroom teachers as the main informants and other teachers as significant others. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and documentation studies, then analyzed using data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing techniques. The results indicate that teachers have a good level of individual readiness in facing the puberty phase of autistic adolescents. The readiness aspects include supportive physical conditions, mental readiness by creating a comfortable learning environment, and emotional readiness through patience and empathy. Teachers also demonstrate awareness, motives, and goals in providing guidance, supported by knowledge and teaching skills through individual approaches, simple communication, and visual media. Collaboration with parents, discussions with colleagues, and informal training also strengthen teacher readiness. In conclusion, teachers at SLB Negeri Surakarta show adequate readiness, although further training and knowledge enhancement are needed for optimal and sustainable puberty guidance for autistic adolescents.

Keywords: Teachers, Readiness, Puberty, Autism

INTRODUCTION

The growth and development of children is a continuous process that extends until adulthood. Adolescence represents one of the critical stages in a child's developmental journey (Ponidjan et al., 2025). This period is characterized by various dynamic changes, particularly the onset of sexual maturity or puberty, which marks a natural biological transition toward reproductive capability (Simangunsong et al., 2024). Puberty is experienced by all individuals, including children with autism. Autism is a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by difficulties in communication, limited interests, and social interaction impairments (Indrawati & Wahyudi, 2017).

Physical changes that occur during puberty often cause discomfort and confusion among adolescents with autism, who may not fully understand the transformations happening in their bodies. Such circumstances may lead to behavioral challenges, including irritability, emotional instability, risky behaviors, and inappropriate sexual acts (Indrawati & Wahyudi, 2017). Interviews with parents of male adolescents with autism revealed that these children tend to become more sensitive, easily angered, anxious, and sometimes make sexually suggestive remarks (Opar, 2021). Previous research also reported deviant sexual behaviors among autistic students at SLB CMM, such as touching their genitals, hugging peers of the opposite sex, or rubbing their genitals on the floor (Jannah, 2016). Similarly, Buyani et al.

(2024) found that early-pubertal adolescents with autism often touch their genitals in public. These findings underscore the crucial role of teachers in supporting autistic adolescents through the puberty phase. Teachers must recognize that students are progressing toward adulthood and therefore require proper guidance and supervision.

Jung and Lee (2020) observed that adolescents with autism often display aggressive behaviors due to communication barriers and emotional regulation difficulties. Therefore, teacher readiness is a critical aspect in addressing the complex behavioral and emotional changes that accompany puberty. A similar situation is evident at SLB Negeri Surakarta. Based on interviews with an eighth-grade teacher, many students with autism exhibit behaviors such as attraction toward the opposite sex, curiosity about bodily changes, and inappropriate acts like undressing in public. These situations highlight the real challenges teachers face in managing student behavior and providing suitable guidance.

Teachers' knowledge and sensitivity regarding puberty can help autistic adolescents understand physical changes and develop appropriate behavioral responses (Jannah, 2016). Early preparation before puberty is essential for adolescents with autism. Widyasti (2009) emphasized the need for collaboration among teachers, parents, and therapists to provide early intervention and special attention to the sexual behaviors of children with autism. However, Ortega et al. (2023) revealed that most teachers have not received adequate training in managing puberty-related behaviors among adolescents with autism, often leading to confusion in handling such cases at school. Furthermore, Retnawati (2017) found that teachers implement learning strategies through three phases pre-instructional, instructional, and follow-up using visual aids such as anatomical charts and simulation dolls to teach topics like menstruation. However, these efforts are still constrained by internal challenges, such as tantrums and communication limitations, and external challenges, such as insufficient training and lack of parental involvement.

Based on these conditions, this study aims to examine teachers' readiness in addressing the puberty phase of adolescents with autism, particularly at SLB Negeri Surakarta. Preliminary observations and interviews revealed that the school has approximately 40 students with autism, several of whom have entered puberty and exhibit restlessness due to limited understanding of bodily changes, such as touching their genitals, staring at or approaching the opposite sex too closely, and demonstrating poor social boundaries. SLB Negeri Surakarta previously held a workshop on puberty for female students and parents, focusing on menstruation and self-care, with teachers participating as facilitators. However, workshops or training programs specifically aimed at enhancing teachers' understanding and handling of puberty among autistic students have not yet been conducted. Therefore, this research seeks to explore the teachers' readiness in addressing puberty among adolescents with autism at SLB Negeri Surakarta.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design with a case study approach. According to Sugiyono (2023), qualitative research is often referred to as a naturalistic method because it is conducted in a natural setting. A case study focuses on a particular case, which is then collected and analyzed comprehensively (Sugiyono, 2023). The research was conducted at SLB Negeri Surakarta over eight months, from November 2024 to August 2025, covering the preparation, implementation, and reporting stages. The sampling technique used was purposive sampling, in which participants were selected based on specific criteria. The primary participants consisted of three classroom teachers of students with autism (RS, EK, and NK) who had taught learners in the pre-puberty stage. The supporting samples included three additional teachers who served as significant others to the main participants (WW, WU, and SA). The supporting samples were chosen based on their close interaction and professional relationship with the autistic classroom teachers.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and documentation studies. The interviews were conducted with three autistic classroom teachers and three significant others to gain in-depth information about teachers' readiness in addressing puberty. The interview guide was developed based on the readiness aspects proposed by Slameto (2021, p. 113), which include physical condition, mental condition, emotional condition, needs, motives and goals, as well as skills, knowledge, and understanding acquired through experience. The documentation consisted of photos of teacher-parent discussions about challenges in guiding students with autism, regular teacher meetings addressing student issues including puberty, teachers' participation in workshops on puberty, as well as Teaching Modules and student assignments prepared by the participating teachers. To ensure the validity of the data, source and technique triangulation were applied to verify the accuracy of the collected information. Data analysis was conducted using Miles and Huberman's interactive model, which involves three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. The entire research process aimed to provide a comprehensive and contextual understanding of teachers' readiness in managing the puberty phase among adolescents with autism at SLB Negeri Surakarta.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study examines teacher readiness based on Slameto's (2021) aspects of readiness, which include physical, mental, and emotional conditions, needs, motives, and goals, as well as skills, knowledge, and understanding that have been acquired:

a. Physical Condition

Interviews with the research subjects (RS, EK, and NK) revealed that all three teachers possess good and healthy physical conditions that support their teaching performance, especially when teaching students with autism and preparing for the puberty phase of autistic adolescents. They maintain their physical health by adopting a healthy lifestyle, engaging in exercise, and maintaining proper dietary habits. However, RS mentioned that at certain times her physical stamina decreases, leading to reduced physical activity while teaching. The statements from the significant others (SO) WW, WU, and SA confirmed that all three subjects had excellent physical conditions that supported their teaching tasks. According to Slameto (2021), physical condition affects a person's ability to perform tasks. Similarly, Fatimah et al. (2024) emphasized that teachers' physical health plays an essential role in determining their work performance, as health directly influences the effectiveness of teaching. Moreover, physical fatigue has been found to significantly affect not only teachers' professional experiences but also broader aspects of their lives (Madigan et al., 2023).

b. Mental Condition

Interviews with subjects and their significant others revealed that RS, EK, and NK prepare their mental condition for dealing with the puberty phase of autistic adolescents by positioning themselves as parental figures, maintaining patience, thinking positively, and developing a comprehensive understanding of autistic adolescents with empathy. These findings indicate that the teachers are mentally prepared to understand and accept the characteristics and behaviors of autistic students through empathetic approaches. This aligns with the study of Restukurnia et al. (2024), which found that teachers working with autistic children exhibit patience and intense engagement. Their deep understanding of autism serves as the foundation for building emotional connections and overcoming challenges. Similarly, Restukurnia et al. (2024, p. 301) stated that deep understanding and empathy are key factors in establishing positive relationships with students with autism.

c. Emotional Condition

According to Slameto (2021, p. 114), emotional conditions are related to both positive and negative motives. The interview results show that RS, EK, and NK prioritize patience in facing autistic adolescents entering puberty. They employ various emotional management strategies, such as showing affection, developing self-management skills, and maintaining emotional control when dealing with unexpected behaviors. This demonstrates a high level of emotional readiness. This result supports Hikmawati and Kholifah (2022), who noted that teachers of autistic students must possess exceptional patience. Beyond patience, RS, EK, and NK also create a supportive and calm learning environment, build close communication with students, and tailor their interactions to the students' interests. This finding is consistent with Sukinah et al. (2010, p. 154), who reported that managing sexual urges in autistic adolescents involves multiple parties, including teachers, who should create a positive environment, maintain communication, and apply personal approaches.

d. Needs, Motives, and Goals

The study found that RS, EK, and NK demonstrated deep awareness of the importance of preparing autistic adolescents for puberty, which subsequently shaped their motives and goals. RS emphasized the importance of teaching knowledge about physical and emotional changes to help autistic adolescents control themselves and maintain hygiene. This aligns with Utami (2023), who emphasized that preparation for puberty among children with special needs involves teaching self-care and body awareness through daily hygiene routines. RS's goal was to equip autistic adolescents with the knowledge and emotional readiness to face physical and emotional changes during puberty, consistent with Astuti and Andanwerti (2016), who highlighted the importance of teaching appropriate gender understanding and ethical behavior. EK recognized that puberty is a complex issue that must be addressed early due to autistic adolescents' limited understanding and emotional control. She consistently integrates puberty education into daily learning through concrete methods and communication with parents. This aligns with Suhanto and Dwihadiah (2023), who stated that sexual and puberty education should be delivered continuously and consistently, not only occasionally. EK's teaching goal is to help autistic adolescents understand bodily changes using varied and concrete learning media, consistent with Khotimah (2019) and Syarifah & Chamidah (2018), who emphasized the importance of tailored strategies and practical methods in teaching puberty. NK also demonstrated awareness and motivation to teach puberty to autistic adolescents to help them go through the stage with minimal difficulty. This corresponds to Cummins et al. (2020, p. 13), who found that teachers and parents use supportive strategies such as social stories to help autistic girls understand puberty. NK uses visual media to enhance students' comprehension, consistent with Restukurnia et al. (2024), who found that teachers employ visual aids, films, and interactive games to engage students with communication difficulties. Furthermore, RS, EK, and NK conduct regular discussions with fellow teachers and parents to share experiences and problem-solving strategies, consistent with Nursahida et al. (2024), who emphasized the importance of two-way communication and collaboration between teachers and parents in sexual and puberty education.

e. Skills, Knowledge, and Understanding Acquired

Interviews showed that RS, EK, and NK agreed that teachers must understand adolescent development, sexual education, social skills, teaching strategies, and effective communication when dealing with puberty in autistic adolescents. This aligns with Nursahida et al. (2024), who emphasized the importance of teachers' understanding of sexual education to deliver accurate and appropriate instruction. Similarly, Nugroho (2011) found that teachers' positive attitudes toward autistic students' puberty support their readiness in terms of knowledge. The three teachers gained knowledge from

various sources, including workshops, social media, personal experience, colleagues, literature, and experts. EK also noted that discussions with lecturers and professionals serve as valuable learning sources, while NK relies on books for references. These findings are consistent with Nursahida et al. (2024), who found that teachers expand their knowledge through seminars, books, peers, and the internet. In teaching puberty-related topics, the teachers do not use specific materials but integrate puberty content into other subjects, adapting it to students' characteristics and abilities. They also use diverse visual media such as videos, pictures, puzzles, and handmade materials to enhance understanding. This reflects Suhanto (2023), who found that teachers use cheerful yet firm communication with repetitive instruction to help autistic students learn effectively. Similarly, Syarifah (2018) and Khotimah (2019) noted that using simple language, real objects, and visual aids improves autistic adolescents' comprehension. At SLB Negeri Surakarta, teachers also hold regular monthly meetings divided by educational level and type of disability. These meetings serve to discuss challenges and solutions related to autistic students. Although puberty is not yet a specific agenda item, it is discussed implicitly during teacher discussions.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research results involving three autism class teachers at SLB Negeri Surakarta, it can be concluded that teachers have demonstrated adequate readiness in facing the puberty period of adolescents with autism. Physically, teachers are generally in good health, although some experience reduced activity due to age factors. Mentally and emotionally, teachers show patience, empathy, and parental attitudes when guiding students through puberty-related changes. In the aspects of needs, motives, and goals, teachers are aware that autistic adolescents experience puberty similar to typical adolescents; thus, they feel responsible for providing appropriate guidance to prevent inappropriate behaviors and foster proper understanding of physical and emotional changes.

Teachers' readiness is also reflected in their knowledge, skills, and understanding gained from workshops, peer discussions, self-learning, and practical experiences. Learning materials are adapted to students' characteristics using visual media and simple language, supported by adaptive communication strategies. Collaboration among teachers, parents, and the school community further strengthens this readiness. In conclusion, teachers at SLB Negeri Surakarta have shown individual and responsive readiness to face the puberty phase of autistic adolescents. However, systemic support and continuous professional development are still required to optimize and sustain the effectiveness of guidance and education.

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