

A STUDY OF GENERAL PERCEPTIONS ON THE SUITABILITY OF AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER (ASD) STUDENTS IN CURRENT SPECIAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS INTEGRATION (PPKI) IN MALAYSIA.

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ABSTRACT

The effectiveness of the recent schooling system in providing special needs children with special education has gained the highlights in Malaysia. Recently, many reviews were made via mass media by the involving parents of these special children precisely autistic children. These parents are comparing the implementation of special needs education in Malaysia with other developing and developed countries. In Malaysia, the special education provides education opportunities to all special needs students. It does not segregate these special children especially these autistic children according to their special needs. In the government school, they are placed together with other special students. This might hinder the effectiveness of handling the children with the specific needs. Therefore, this paper aims to investigate the current practice in special education and to suggest effective ways in providing special education to the autistic children. Subsequent to this, other influential factors namely characteristic of teachers and facilities are also probed. Several methods of this paper have been described. This research used qualitative approach which includes distribution of interviews to parents, teachers and consultant as well as referring to journal reviews. The results of this investigation showed that ASD students can be placed together with other mixed disabilities students in PPKI school but with some conditions. Teachers need to follow the ideal ratio when handling ASD students. It is hoped that the results can be used to mend the existing special needs education system in Malaysia especially to place occupational therapists in PPKI schools and suggest to offer more trainings and teaching and learning facilities to the PPKI schools.

Key words: Autism Spectrum Disorder, Special Education Integrated Program, Suitability.

INTRODUCTION

Each individual is unique, special and gifted by the Creator regardless of the disability or incompetency. Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a well-known disability and diagnosis among children in Malaysia. It is a 'spectrum' and thus one individual diagnosed with ASD is genuinely unlike to one another (Baraka, Melo, & Veloso, 2017; Oliveira et al., 2017). Children with ASD can be varying from the potential, capability and competency. One may have speech delay but able to operate machines or able to speak in one language. One may be quiet and developed global development delay (GDD) but having a photographic memory. An ASD individual may also couple with other disability such as Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) or cerebral palsy. Because of this discrepancy, children with ASD in Malaysia is categorized or labeled with the learning disability or difficulty. Baraka et al. (2017) stated that this can be seen from the seven (7) categories of disability as prescribed by the Department of Social Welfare Malaysia.

Special Education Integrated Program or formally known as *Program Pendidikan Khas Integrasi* (PPKI) is an educational program for a pupil with special educational needs which is only attended by pupils with special needs in a special class in a government school or government-aided school (Buku Pengoperasian PPKI Ministry of Education Malaysia, n.d.). According to Education for Special Education Regulations 2013, special education is a form of instruction that is designed to meet the needs of students with disabilities, so that they can learn the same skills and information as other children in school. It can also be defined as the needs to provide classes for children who have special needs because of their physical or learning problems (Merriam-Webster's dictionary, 2018).

In a recent PPKI system, ASD students with mixed disabilities and needs are placed together with other special children. However, there are some raising concerns among the parents and practitioners as these ASD students need to be dealt one to one by a teacher. ASD students are required to perform the suggested activities following the PPKI syllabus and they were assessed by their class teachers. Some ASD students had shown negative feedback and low achievement when they were assessed in PPKI class as they could not focus and reluctant to give cooperation to the PPKI teachers.

Nevertheless, the scenario was different when these ASD students were brought by their parents to consult the government or private occupational therapist (OT) for extra consultation and treatments in the hospital and academies. These special students managed to show positive feedback and achieved intended goals for the suggested activities. Besides, some of the ASD students who went for schooling in National Autism Society Association of Malaysia (NASOM) seldom showed any form of disruptive behavior and managed to perform the suggested activities. The assessment conducted also showed different ideas of these students' achievement.

In regard to this issue, Datin Paduka Seri Rosmah Mansor has initiated a program called Permata Kurnia in 2012. This new education program is exclusively organized for ASD children with the help from Occupational Therapists and Permata Kurnia Management. In Malaysia there is currently one Permata Kurnia center operated in Sentul, Kuala Lumpur. This great effort shows the significance of segmenting special students according to their special needs. In Melaka, "Community-Based Rehabilitation" or commonly known as Pusat Dalam Komuniti (PDK) Batang Pinang is also moving towards grouping the ASD students in one building. Thus, this paper intends to explore the suitability of placing ASD students with other special children under PPKI system and to probe the effectiveness of the method of implementation in the PPKI system in providing special education particularly to the ASD students in Malaysia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A: The Integrated Special Education Program (PPKI)

The Integrated Special Education Program (PPKI) (Merger Plan) for primary school children with disabilities in primary and preventive mainstream curriculum was introduced in 1962 (Ministry of Education Official Portal, n.d.). The aim of this program is to provide opportunity for the pupil with special educational needs to learn and optimize their skills in improving the quality of life. In order to serve pupil with special needs, teachers need to be equipped with the knowledge and skills of special education. There are various centres for teachers training for special education in Malaysia such as *Institut Pendidikan Guru Kampus Ilmu Khas*, *Institut Pendidikan Guru Aminudin Baki*, and *Institut Perguruan Melaka*.

It seems easy to operate a PPKI program in school by having a comprehensive guidelines from the manual called *Buku Pengoperasian PPKI* but there are a lot of limitations. Building structures, facilities, expertise and classroom settings may be the greatest hurdles of the implementation. Other developing countries include Occupational Therapy (OT) session in the special education program (Occupational Therapy Service Process in Special Schools, n.d.) Whilst in Malaysia we only have *Bahagian Pendidikan Khas* (3PK) to provide training for teachers in medical aspect (Bahagian Pendidikan Khas Ministry of Education Official Portal, n.d.). There are twelve (12) departments throughout Peninsular Malaysia with the help from Ministry of Health. In line with the aspiration of the National Blue Ocean Strategy (NBOS), Ministry of Health is helping out with this issue by providing expertise under the school program (Kim & Mauborgne, 2018).

B: Occupational Therapy (OT)

Occupational therapy (OT) is a client-centered health profession concerned with promoting health and well-being through occupation. Its aim is to enable people to participate in the activities of everyday life.¹ Occupational therapists have a broad education in the medical, social behavioral, psychological, psychosocial and occupational sciences which equips them with the attitudes, skills and knowledge to work collaboratively with people, individually or in groups or communities (World Federations of Occupational Therapists, 2012).

OT is a rehabilitative treatment through specific activities by patients who have physical, psychological, or social problems aiming to help them achieve to reach their maximum level of abilities in order to be as independent as possible in all aspects of daily living. OT is essential in helping ASD students who might have difficulties in social and psychological aspect. Occupational therapy is one of the health care professions that provides assessments and interventions for children and adolescents with autism spectrum disorder (Kadar, McDonald, & Lentin, 2015). Sensory reactivity is a diagnostic criterion for Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), and has been associated with poorer functional outcomes, behavioral difficulties, and autism severity across the lifespan (DuBois, Lymer, Gibson, Desarkar & Nalder, 2017). For example, they may have difficulty sitting on the mat for story time, standing in line, or managing lunch items. Children may fidget, move too much, avoid tasks, or be preoccupied with aspects of the environment namely sound distractions. Sensory processing difficulties may reduce a child's self-care skills — grooming, dressing, bathing, and toileting. Parents may report struggles with hair combing, teeth cleaning, haircuts & nail trimming (Bourke-Taylor, 2011). It is considered a spectrum disorder, as the abilities of children with autism may vary greatly from one child to another (Bumin, Huri, Salar, & Kayihan, 2015). OT may have different perceptions in handling ASD students. Difficulty to hold a pencil may relate to weakness of muscles and need a therapy called joint compressions. This is a technique among the OT because this is what they learnt while doing the OT understudy. Socialization interpretation among the ASD students may differ from OT's perspective. A teacher may presume by putting them under one roof might give them the benefit of socialization. This simple contradiction in defining the meaning of socialization may show the clear gap between these two professionals. Das et al. (2012); Sally et al. (2016) suggested seven (7) core competencies need to be met in order to deal effectively with special education needs which are professional knowledge, classroom management, collaboration, assessment and evaluation, instructional techniques, individualized and adaptive instruction and assistive technology.

C: Laws and Regulations.

There are substantive rights provided under the law to procure justice and equality for betterment of the children with ASD in Malaysia namely Persons with Disabilities Act 2008 and United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Malaysia ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1995 with several reservations. As a consequence of its obligations under the CRC, in 2001, Malaysia enacted the Child Act 2001 (Child Act). In 2008, Malaysia enacted the Persons with Disabilities Act (PWD Act). In 2010, Malaysia ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)

with two reservations. However, Malaysia has yet to ratify the Optional Protocol to the CRPD. There is no national Act specific to children with disabilities. The rights of children with disabilities to care, protection and development are subsumed primarily within the Child Act and the PWD Act and fall under the Constitutional umbrella of protection of fundamental liberties under the Malaysian Federal Constitution.

Children with ASD in Malaysia are undeniably protected under the above law. Practically the implementation of the said law is more crucial. Following a PPKI system, students with multiple disabilities are stationed under the same roof. This may bring challenges to the teachers and barriers to the potential children. Focus need to be distributed to multiple needs and demands.

Researchers blamed the setting of the classroom where ASD students were mixed with other learning difficulties hence teachers prefer to have a general teaching strategy rather than having an individual education program (IEP) for every ASD student based on their requirement (Loi, & Mohd Hanafi, 2017). It is important to suggest that Ministry Of Education plays a major role in providing special facilities for the special needs students to receive more effective education (Azhar, & Norshidah, 2017). In addition, Disability (OKU) National Council of Malaysia may enhance their role in protecting these special children needs through special educator program following Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) from United States. CEC laid out seven (7) initial preparation standards for special educator to adopt. This may be useful for the beginners of special educators from various backgrounds.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative research that use a semi structured interviews. This research is done by purposive sampling which focuses on a few types of individuals in dealing with ASD students namely consultant / teacher trainer, PPKI teachers, occupational therapist from government and private academies and parents of ASD students. 11 respondents whom are 1 consultant / teacher trainer, 5 PPKI teachers, 3 occupational therapists and 2 parents are involved in this research. Respondents are interviewed based on themes. In the findings, the respondents' details will be shared. Themes are based on their responds towards three themes which are highlighting on their opinions on the suitability of placing ASD students in the similar class with other mixed disabilities students, opinions on method of implementation in PPKI schools and other suggestion in improvising current practice in PPKI School in Malaysia. Since the respondents are identified from different role in this research, they were asked questions which are slightly different according to their professions or roles. The analysis is done by the thematic data interpretation.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this research, total samples are 11. Their age ranged from 25-35 years and above. They are coded as R1- R11. Among them R1-R5 are PPKI teachers, R6-R9 are consultant/ teacher trainer and occupational therapists and the remaining are R10-R11, whom are parents of ASD students. R1, R2, R3, R6, R9, R10, R11 declared that they have been experiencing dealing with ASD students for 5- 10 years while R4, R5, R7 and R8 had experience of 10 -20 years. Their responds are categorized into three themes.

Theme 1: Opinions on the suitability of placing ASD students with other special children under PPKI system

The results suggested that the ASD students can be placed together with other special students in PPKI schools but it is subjected to a condition where it has to follow the student ratio per teacher and classroom settings.

R5 and R11 mentioned they agree if the ASD students are separated from other special students.

R1, R2, R6, R7, R8, R9, and R10 stated that they are unsure whether ASD students need to be placed in the same class with other mixed disabilities students. While R3 and R4 informed that they disagree that the ASD students to be segregated from other mixed disabilities students.

R11, R7 and R8 stated that the best ratio of the ASD students to teacher is one to one however R1, R2, R6, R9 and R10 indicated that the ratio would be two to one while R3, R4 and R5 described four to one as the best ratio in dealing ASD students. This happened as their justification might be based on different observations and settings.

Theme 2: Opinions on the effectiveness of the method of implementation in the PPKI system in providing special education particularly to the ASD students in Malaysia.

- Teaching Competency

R2 and R3 described their teaching competency as good while R1, R4, R5 defined themselves at excellent level in teaching competency.

- Comparison with NASOM and PERMATA KURNIA

R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6, R7, R8 and R9 mentioned that they are aware and have good understanding of PPKI program, NASOM and PERMATA KURNIA. All of them mentioned that there are differences in implementation of these 3 programs in Malaysia. .

R1,R2,R3,R4,R5,R6,R7 and R8 stated unsure whether NASOM and PERMATA KURNIA adopt better methods than PPKI program and R9,R10, R11 stated that they agree NASOM and PERMATA KURNIA adopt better methods in dealing with ASD students as they additionally mentioned that each program (inclusive PPKI) has its own strength and weakness. They added that the syllabus of PPKI is indeed very comprehensive however, teachers in PPKI program and other practitioners found it to be too ideal as there are many constraints faced in reality namely lack of teachers, insufficient teaching aids, improper classroom settings and less training.

- Strategies to improve PPKI system in PPKI schools

R1,R3, R4, R5, R6, R7, R8, R9, R10 informed that more trainings and courses should be provided to the teachers in PPKI schools in Malaysia.R2 and R11 stated that the aids support should be provided in PPKI schools.

Theme 3: Additional Suggestions in improvising the current practice of PPKI schools in Malaysia

R6 informed that occupational therapists need to be placed in schools to provide treatment to the ASD students. R6's suggestion is very significant and it can be an eye-opener in this issue. He stated that as practised by other developing and developed countries, occupational therapists are placed in schools to provide therapies not only in the hospitals or clinics. This is vital as occupational therapist can offer their expertise in explaining any social, cognitive, psychological and even from the biological limitation of any special student. Their views are undeniably different with the PPKI teachers when they assess these special students. They have to work hand in hand in order to ensure that these special students can have improvements in the learning and treatment objectives.

Besides, R6 and R11 also informed that PPKI together with NASOM and PERMATA KURNIA should collaborate continuously in terms of discussing the issues in PPKI schools and to improvise the service offered in PPKI schools. Thus, the researchers feel that there is strong need to have an inter-ministry link between ministry of education and ministry of health to improvise the current practice in PPKI schools.

R1, R2, R3, R4 and R5 in PPKI revealed that teachers are required to assist students in PPKI class and they also have to assist students whom are in Inclusive Program. This program is meant for any identified Asperger students who can join main stream like ordinary students. It is found that, whenever these teachers take turns to assist their students to go to join the main stream class, the PPKI students will be left with other PPKI teachers and there might be conditions where they can be left with the assistant teachers in their PPKI class.

Therefore R1, R2, R3, R4 and R5 mentioned that if more trained teachers are placed in PPKI schools, limitations can be reduced in PPKI schools. Other than that, R1, R2, R3, R4 and R5 also mentioned that each PPKI student is given Individual Education Program (IEP). The idea of this approach is to ensure that the special students will be assisted according to their special needs however, problem may arise when the teachers have to deal with a number of mixed disabilities students at one time in the same classroom setting.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

PPKI is an established program since 1962 and widely known as a comprehensive module among teachers and practitioners. The ASD students can be placed together with other mixed disabilities students if the classroom settings is suitable. However, there are some loopholes in its implementation in PPKI schools that also need to be improvised. More training should be offered and teaching aids should be provided in line with the current needs of teachers and special students. Furthermore, occupational therapists need to be placed in all schools in Malaysia. PPKI, NASOM and PERMATA KURNIA also should work hand in hand to provide the best practise to the ASD students. Since this research only discuss thoroughly about the program and its suitability to the ASD students as well as the methods of implementations, therefore, it is suggested that future researcher can focus deeper on the teaching strategies in PPKI program. We do hope this paper will contribute significantly to the Ministry of Education specifically the special education department and will bring more impact and better insight to the existing PPKI program. Disability (OKU) National Council of Malaysia can play a major role in helping to collaborate and to establish professional standards for teachers in the field of special education.

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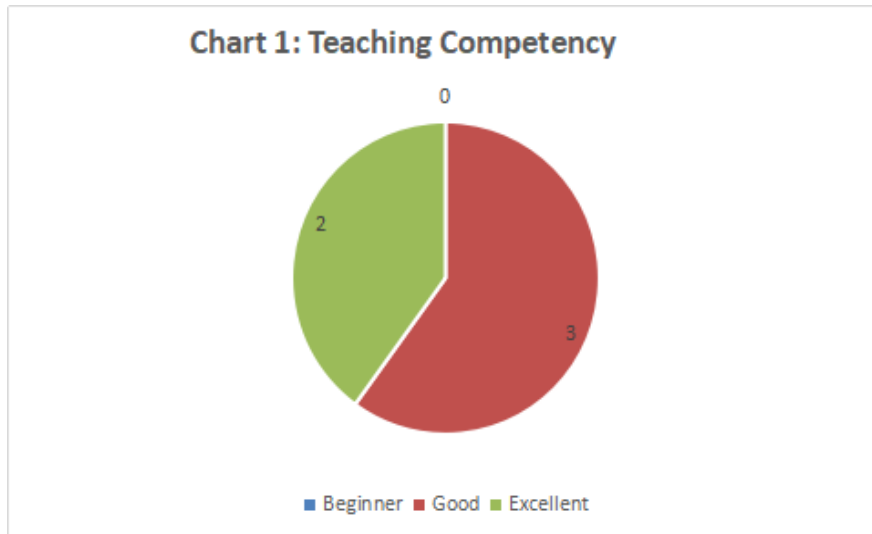
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Appendix 1: Respondents details

Table 1: Demography

Item	Category	Finding	
		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Female	8	72.7
	Male	3	27.3
Age	25 year old and below	0	0
	25 - 35 year old	6	54.5
	35 year old and above	5	45.5
Experience in dealing with mixed disabilities students	1-5 years	1	9.1
	5-10 years	7	63.6
	10-20 years	2	18.2
	20 years and above	1	9.1
Profession / Role	Teachers	5	45.4
	Occupational Therapists	3	27.3
	Consultant/ Teacher Trainer	1	9.1
	Parent	2	18.2



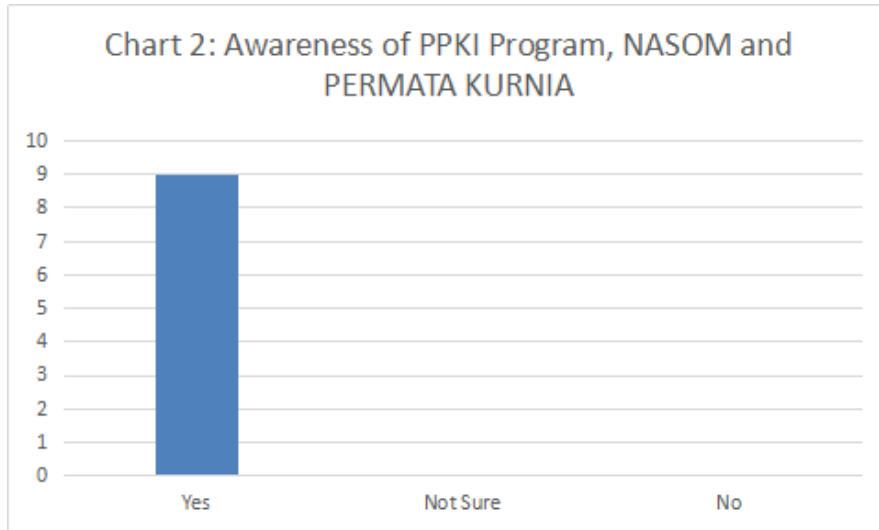


Table 2: General Perception on the Current Practice of PPKI Program and Suggestions

Perception	Category	Finding	
		Frequency	Percentage
NASOM and PERMATA KURNIA adopt better method	Yes	3	27.3
	Not sure	8	72.7
	No		
ASD student should be placed in the same class with other mixed disabilities students	Yes	2	18.2
	Not sure	7	63.6
	No	2	18.2
Ratio of ASD students in class	One to one	3	27.3
	Two to one	5	45.5
	Four to one	3	27.3
Strategies to improve PPKI program	Increase aids support	2	18.2
	Provide training and courses	9	81.8
	Improve syllabus	0	0
	Provide school support	0	0
	Follow the students ratio	0	0