

CHALLENGES MALAYSIAN TEACHERS FACE IN THE INCLUSION OF AUTISTIC STUDENTS IN THE NORMAL CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

It has been reported that lack of professional skill and knowledge was one of the barriers faced by teachers in the inclusive education. The aim of this study is to explore the challenges that Malaysian teachers faced when having autistic students in the inclusive program as well as to examine Malaysian teachers' preparation on materials. The present study employed a qualitative research method with case study design through face-to-face interviews with five general classroom teachers from a secondary school in Kuala Lumpur. A self-developed instrument with 11 interview questions was used as an interview guide. Six major themes were found through thematic analysis: student's behavioral problem, student's cognitive problem, and environmental problem represented the challenges that Malaysian teachers faced when having autistic students in the normal classroom, while skillfulness, receptiveness, and environmental assistance represented the ways Malaysian teachers coped with the inclusive environment. The results of this study may help general classroom teachers who lack skills and knowledge on the inclusive education, to fulfill the needs of these autistic and mainstream students.

Key words: Inclusive Education, Autistic Student, General Classroom Teachers, PPKI Students.

Introduction

In the past, students with disabilities had limited chance of learning in public school. As mentioned in Smith, Polloway, Patton and Dowdy (2014), during 1970s, only 20% of students with disabilities got the chance to be educated in the public school (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Indeed it is unfair for students with disabilities to be deprived of education because they too have a right to being educated in the mainstream environment. The education services had dramatically changed in the middle of 1970s because there was collaboration between general classroom and special education teachers (Smith et al, 2014). The authors further stated that, the legal basis for special education to be incorporated into public school nowadays is provided by Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) of 2004. Based on the IDEA definition of disability, students with autism are also classified as those needing for special education. Like other disabled students from the special education category, autistic students also need equal access to academic instruction and social opportunities. According to Smith et al. (2014), "autism spectrum disorders are pervasive developmental disorders (PDD) that primarily affect social interactions, language, and behaviour" (p. 288). Primarily, students with autism need more attention from the teachers compared to the others.

In addition, Smith et al. (2014) claimed that there is a need for educating students from the special education category in general classroom settings as much as possible due to IDEA's key component where these students need education in the least restrictive environment. It can be understood that "least restrictive environment" is a setting that gives an opportunity for disabled students to be educated with mainstream students as much as possible. As reported by Heiman (2004), western countries have accepted the inclusion of autistic students in the general school in the last two decades according to four different models of inclusion, namely; 1) in and out, 2) two-teachers, 3) full inclusion and 4) rejection of inclusion (as cited in Manisah, Ramlee and Zalizan, 2006). Further, Manisah et al. claimed that teachers in United Kingdom and Israel prefer the 'in and out' model as it is believed to be more effective for the students with disabilities. In the study, some teachers reported that in and out model could benefit the students with disabilities to experience the two worlds, that is, where they acquire special instructions in regular learning experience as well as having the interaction with their peers in normal settings. The other model is the two-teacher model, in which there are two teachers teaching in one class simultaneously, with one of the trained teachers focusing on the students with disabilities. The next model is the full inclusion model and Manisah et al. claimed that the teachers involved in this inclusive program will be given additional support and cooperation by other teachers in the education system. The full inclusion model is believed to be the most beneficial for all and has been found in Malaysia.

Many studies have been conducted concerning the inclusive programs in the mainstream schools. Most of the studies revealed significant views of the teachers involved in the program. In the study by Manisah, Ramlee and Zalizan (2006), some teachers

from United Kingdom and Israel rejected the inclusion of students with disabilities completely because they thought special needs students should study separately and would never be able to reach the academic level of the mainstream students. Perhaps in Malaysia the teachers would be more willing to teach and consider this matter even though they would face some barriers in the inclusive program. Hence, the current study will provide information on the experiences of Malaysian teachers in teaching both disabled students, particularly the autistic ones, and mainstream students in the inclusive program.

Studies that have been conducted in India (Sharma, Moore & Sonawane, 2009), Pakistan (ul Hassan, Parveen & Riffat-un-Nisa, 2010), in Lebanon (Wehbi, 2006), in Nigeria (Fakolade & Adeniyi, 2009), and Ghana (Agbeneyga, 2007) pointed out similar concerns about teachers' lack of professional knowledge and skills to work with special needs students in mainstream settings (as cited in Ballhysa & Flagler, 2011). It is particularly problematic when teachers deal with autistic students who have disabilities in terms of social interactions, language and behaviour. Perhaps it would be less demanding for the teachers if they only teach these students in the special education class. Nevertheless, the current study would focus on the challenges of general classroom teachers faced in the inclusive program that involve autistic students as well with the mainstream students. Hence this study will examine how general classroom teachers involved in this program experience teaching throughout the inclusive program.

Rodina (2006) claimed that the methodological framework developed by Vygotsky for special education and psychology was relevant for contemporary practical work with inclusive education. In terms of the development of special needs children, Vygotsky formulated two kinds of theory namely, general cultural-historical theory of human development, and theory of disontogenesis. Theory of dysontogenesis was also known as theory of distorted development (Daniels, Cole & Wertsch, 2007). This theory shows a good societal view on children with disabilities. According to Vygotsky, social implications are the major problem of any disability rather than biological in nature (Daniels, Cole & Wertsch, 2007). For example, the interaction of an autistic child with other people should be focused more rather than on the biological factors of the autism. So, this theory has directed the focus point on the strengthening and empowerment of individual skills, rather than the weaknesses of an individual.

Thus, the objective of this study is to explore the challenges that Malaysian teachers faced when having autistic students in the inclusive program. The outcomes of this study will provide an insight of experiences by general classroom teachers in the full inclusion education that involving autistic students. Instead of focusing on the weaknesses of the autistic students, the teachers may focus on their enthusiasm in learning. This study will provide information for parents of disabled students particularly those with autism on how teachers deal with them in school. Therefore, it is also hoped that parents would not hesitate to send their disabled children to go to school for the sake of their children's education. In the findings of this study, teachers' ways of coping with the inclusive environment also will be discussed and these contributed to the success of the inclusive program. Hence, it would be benefit to the readers who seek for the information of inclusive education particularly on teachers' coping strategies.

Research design

This study was administered through qualitative approach where it lets the respondents feel their experiences in their own words and understanding, hence this approach deals with the respondent's subjective experiences and feelings because everything will be analysed according to their point of view. Specifically, the methodology of this study was derived from a case study research design and a semi-structured interview was conducted to gather appropriate data relevant to this study. Five mainstream classroom teachers from a secondary school located in Kuala Lumpur were selected as the respondents of this study through a purposive sampling technique. Most of these teachers were reported as did not receive any kind of training. Plus, these teachers have at least three months of experiences in teaching autistic students in the inclusive program. The data collection of this study was conducted in two days where the researchers met the respondents at school. The researchers provided an informed consent for every respondent to sign and to explain some rules regarding their participation in this research.

A self-developed instrument with 11 interview questions was used as a guide in carrying out the interview sessions. This instrument was designed to have two sections according to the research questions of this study. A pilot study had been carried out to one of the general classroom teachers at the same school who had three years of experiences in teaching the autistic students in the inclusive program. The purpose of conducting pilot study is to identify which item of the questions are acceptable and understood by the subject. Some of the interview questions which had to be replaced and deleted by the researchers as to accommodate the respondents' understanding. After the actual research of this study was carried out, a thematic analysis has been applied for the data analysis.

Research Findings

The findings of this study were developed through the thematic analysis. Fifteen categories have emerged from the raw data and were further categorized into six general themes. They were then discussed by including quotations from the interview of the general classroom teachers. Two sections were organized in the findings of this study according to the following research questions:

Table 1: Thematic analysis of research findings

Research Question	Themes	Categories
What are the barriers Malaysian teachers faced when teaching autistic students in inclusive program?	Student's behavioral problem Student's cognitive	Over involvement of autistic students, isolation of autistic students Slow learning speed, different treatment

	problem	needed
How do Malaysian teachers cope with the problem they face?	Environmental problem Skillfulness Receptiveness Environmental assistances	Difficulties in school, difficulties in classroom, no information provided by school, lack of skill The need for training, developing qualities of a good teacher Teacher's acceptance of autistic children, improving teacher-student relationship Classroom acceptance of autistic classmates, help extended to autistic children, autistic students' strengths

Barriers Malaysian Teachers Faced to have Autistic Students in Inclusive Program

i) Student's Behavioral Problem

The autistic students' behavioural problems are not the disciplinary type of problem. It refers to their response in the inclusive class where they are known to cause some disruptions to the teaching and learning session. The behavioral problem can be categorized into two types namely over involvement and isolating oneself. According to the fifth respondent of this study, she reported that the autistic student's behavior cause disruption during lesson as the student was not normally behaved. Therefore, there is a need for supervising the student's behavior as the teacher needs to give extra attention to him. It can be illustrated through her statement below:

He is talkative. Loves to ask questions. After that, as long as he does not receive the answer, he wants us to give attention to him only. So, that is the problem. Haa, another one, he is active. Cannot sit still at his place, he wants to walk. That's it. Have to control his act, his behavior.

From the interview, it can be seen that the teacher needs to control his behavior to make the class activities run smoothly. It is undeniable that this kind of barrier would be faced by all inclusive teachers who have students with autism in the general classroom. But, if the teacher perceives this barrier as a positive development of the autistic students, they may cope with it well. It is pertinent to say that different teachers have different ways of perceiving the autistic student's behavior. On the other hand, the autistic students also have several characteristics that bring about teachers' concern more concentrated on them during the lesson. Most of the teachers reported that the autistic students were in their own world. As the fourth respondent said:

Autism is like, they will be like sometimes daydreaming, how to say, sometimes they are in their own world, ha, they will be like when we talk, we already finish teaching, and they will ask again the question, repeat, and sometimes they like to sing, suddenly they are singing.

When the autistic students start to daydream, they become lost in their own world and this required the teacher to repeat the lesson. So, it is kind of interrupting the teaching and learning session. The major striking characteristic of the autistic student is his innocence. It means he will do what people ask him to do. He cannot differentiate between what is right and what is wrong such as:

What is his problem? Living skill, he is innocent right. Lately, there is a boy asking aa aaaa asking, "you are girly right?" His classmate. Ha, he replied, "nope, I'm a boy". "Show it". Ha, then he opens his pants. Ha that is the problem, he does not know that such things can embarrass him.

Due to his innocence, it is feared that he would be a target for bullying by other students. Usually, this incident happens in the classroom when the teacher is not around. It worsens when his classmates try to provoke the autistic student as he does not know between right and wrong. Thus, it is crucial for supervision by the general classroom teachers on this matter.

ii) Student's Cognitive Problem

The autistic student's cognitive problem the challenge faced by the teachers due to the autistic children's cognitive impairment in learning. Specifically, the teachers cannot teach at the same speed to all students in the general classroom. One of the teachers noted that he is a slow learner therefore she needs to provide him another brief explanation after giving general instructions to the class. As she said:

First, maybe the difficulties happen when there is a group work with other mainstream students. Hmm.. Maybe he is a bit slow compared to other students. Because other students already started the exercise but he was still confused. What to do, what to do. So, there was a time when I gave instruction to the class, to all

students, but I would explain the instruction again to him. Must be personal with him. He need extra attention and extra instruction.

The learning speed between the autistic student and the other mainstream students is different. To overcome that, the teacher needs a longer time to spend with the autistic students as the students require extra explanation about the lesson. The major problem with autistic students' cognitive ability is that they are said to have a short-term focus in class. It means that the students cannot give full attention from the beginning till the end of the class. Thus, the general classroom teachers need to provide more guidance to the autistic children in the inclusive program.

iii) Environmental Problem

The environmental problems that the general classroom teachers faced refer to the general difficulties in teaching the inclusive program including the geographical area, class condition, and etc. One of the environmental problems is the language and communication problem between the teachers and students such as:

This is not Sekolah Jenis Cina (SJC), this is Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan (SMK), as we don't have Sekolah Menengah Cina (SMKJC), right? So, he (the autistic student) wants to enter Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan where he does not understand the language. They (autistic students) don't understand Bahasa Melayu, don't understand English.

The difficulty in understanding Bahasa Melayu and English among Chinese students form the Chinese Vernacular Schools joining the National School is a very important matter as the teachers cannot carry out the teaching and learning in the class smoothly. This is because every subject in Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan or National School is delivered in Bahasa Melayu except for the English subject. So, if the students cannot understand well the language in the textbook, the teachers would have to repeat it or translate it in a way that they could understand. Other than this problem, the teachers also face some difficulties in the classroom where most of them claimed that the inclusive classes are usually placed in the last class:

Top class, no problem. If last class, they could not understand everything I speak. They must see the answer. This part. Ha, because when you give activity, they could not understand your instruction. I must use language translation, then only they will understand.

Teaching the last class together with autistic student has created some challenges in the inclusive program. From the information given, students in the last class seem to have trouble in understanding teacher's instructions during class activities. Again, there is a need for the teacher to translate the language to accommodate their understanding. What can be concluded is that teaching a class with the inclusive program would also have to depend on the general classroom environment. If the general classroom students cause some difficulties to the teacher during teaching and learning, the teacher would become exhausted with the inclusive program and this aggravates their problem. It can be seen that in terms of behavioral problem, the other students cause more trouble in the class rather than the autistic students. As one of the teachers said:

Actually we need to supervise, but there are too many students in the class, 25 students, including the naughty one, I think I spend more time with the naughty student rather than him (the autistic child).

The information above indicates that teachers have difficulties in terms of dealing with a large number of students and spending more time with the other students in the inclusive program. Eventually, there is a need for help from the other teachers in the inclusive program to overcome this problem. From the interview, all respondents speak about getting help from the special education teacher. They called the special education teacher as the guidance teacher. The teaching will be difficult in the absence of a guidance teacher as she has limited time to guide the autistic student in the inclusive program. One of the general classroom teachers said:

Usually this inclusive student will enter the class together with the guidance teacher only. Even then it is not for all subjects and not at all the time. So, the guidance teacher will only be present during certain times only. Not full time.

From her statement, there is a dire need for the guidance teacher to be all around the time during the inclusive program. This means, she faced some difficulties when the guidance teacher was absent. So, the school authority must enforce some regulations in dealing with this matter.

About the environmental problems, some of the general classroom teachers did not receive any information on the special students who were included in the inclusive program. This posed a problem to them in class as they did not have the autistic student's background. One of them never heard about autism and it was her first time hearing about it in the interview session. As she said:

As there are various kinds of problems in PPKI right, a variety of problems, they did not inform that this student cannot do anything, they did not explain to us. They only informed that this student would be coming into this inclusive class. And the training for me on how to handle the inclusive, sorry to tell you I don't know, that is why when you said about autism, I asked what is it. Because the general classroom teachers are not exposed to it.

Certainly, the inclusive program is said to be challenging because the teachers did not receive proper information about the autistic student. So the teachers need to do extra tasks by getting the information from special education teachers. The teacher also reported that they have not received any kind of training from the school authority. She further said:

No. I have never seen my colleagues in the mainstream classroom, we called it as the mainstream, been sent for training. Since I come to this school, already eleven years. I have never heard. This inclusive program started in 2008, here in this school, 2008 in this school.

For the past nine years since the inclusive program had been established in that school, the general classroom teachers were never trained on how to handle the special students who had been included in the class. So, everything depends on the teachers' own methods on how to fulfill both of these students' needs.

Coping Strategies by Malaysian Teachers with the Inclusive Environment

i) Skillfulness

Skillfulness refers to some expertise possessed by the general classroom teachers in teaching both the autistic and mainstream students in the inclusive program. The teachers can handle the students and are able to cater to both of the students' needs in the classroom. Out of five respondents of this study, only one teacher received training from the school. Being a skillful teacher is important to tackle the difficulties in teaching autistic student in the inclusive program.

Skillfulness has been described by the teachers as a way of coping in the inclusive program. Some of the teachers feel sympathetic towards the autistic student as he faced hardship in understanding the lesson. Therefore, the teacher put some effort in helping the student. It can be illustrated through the following statement:

He is not a big problem, but I need to strive harder. It means striving harder to ensure every student does not get left behind. All will get the input that I teach. So for me, if I were given the mainstream students to teach, that is an advantage for me, but if I have to teach the inclusive students, I will accept, but on condition that I have to work harder.

Thus, the teacher has to put some effort because they feel responsible for the students. This can be considered as one of the qualities of a good teacher as the teacher is willing to teach and accept the child. Even though some teachers need help from the guidance teacher, being a good teacher also can be described as the teacher's effort to tap the autistic student's potential such as:

Another thing is we must know his potential. What talent does he have. When we know what his talent is, we can help him focus on this skill only. So that he has something to do after completing high school.

The teacher also has to discover the autistic student's potential so as to make him learn better for his future. Rather than forcing the student to learn at the same pace with the mainstream students, she tries to find his particular talent or skill. This way she has some qualities of a good teacher and it represents her skillfulness to cope with the inclusive environment.

ii) Receptiveness

Teachers' receptiveness refers to the degree of their willingness in teaching the inclusive program with the inclusion of the autistic student. As they were inclined to receive the autistic students in the class, therefore it becomes one way of coping with the inclusive environment. Teacher's receptiveness in teaching autistic students together with mainstream students is very important. Without their willingness, many problems would occur in the inclusive program. This can be illustrated by one of the teachers who provides positive feedbacks in teaching autistic student together with mainstream students. As she said:

Don't mind. It's okay if there are autistic students. But maybe this school that has inclusive students is not one with big problems that made us (teachers) cannot accept them, right. So, it's normal. Can accept this inclusive student.

From these statements, teacher's acceptance in teaching autistic student together with mainstream students is important to make the lesson run smoothly. When the teacher accepts their presence in the normal class, the challenges could be overcome. Teacher's acceptance is also determined by their satisfaction in teaching the inclusive class. For example, another teacher said:

I feel very satisfied. Because for me, he is not a big problem, indeed not a big problem, he also does not create any problem to his friends.

By having high satisfaction towards the autistic student, the teacher shows her willingness to teach him together with the other mainstream students. Other than that, teacher-student relationship is built on the information about teacher's happiness with the autistic student in the inclusive program. Some of the teachers are happy with the autistic students in terms of his response in class exercise. As the teacher said:

Happiness? Making me happy (when), he does what I asked him to do. Haa, he responds faster than the other mainstream students do. The other mainstream students are lazier, ha that class.

It can be suggested that the relationship between the teacher and autistic students in inclusive program may help a lot in the teacher's willingness to accept their presence.

iii) Environmental Assistances

The third way of coping with the inclusive environment was getting environmental assistance. This refers to the support that the teachers received in the class. The inclusive class was provided with support from the other mainstream students, special need teachers and the autistic students' specialty. Having positive environment may help teachers to overcome the challenges that they faced in the inclusive program. It is suggested that, if the mainstream students were supported, the inclusive education in their classroom would run well. As the last respondent said:

But it's normal. One thing his classmates were also supportive in the class. If he can answer or anything, they will give him a big applause.

Based on her statement, having supportive classmates and being accepted by them are quite important for the autistic students to survive in the inclusive environment. These factors also helped the teacher a lot as her feelings are being taken care of by the supportive environment. The teacher does not have to face the challenges alone, rather she and her students can share the positive environment together.

Other than classroom acceptance, being helped by the guidance teacher and Senior Assistant of Special Education also contribute a lot to lighten the difficulties in the inclusive program. One of the teachers said:

We will tell the guidance teacher, what, if we say this teacher has to do like this, do something how to help the student. Or the guidance teacher will help me in teaching and learning session. We used to discuss with the guidance teacher first. If she cannot answer, solve, we will see the Special Education's senior assistant.

All teachers mentioned in the interview that they would get help from other guidance teachers to overcome any issue in the inclusive program. So, this has become one of the ways for them to cope in the inclusive environment. Some of the teachers also mentioned about the general classroom students helping them a lot in the inclusive program. For example, one of them said:

I do sometimes ask my student to explain to him because some of them are capable of explaining, so they will explain. And I will guide others after I finish my teaching, I will explain to them. Explain to him again.

From this statement, it can be seen that other students would help the autistic student in the class as the teacher had no time to divide her attention. Perhaps the autistic student would understand more by getting the explanation from his classmates. So this can be another way of coping with the inclusive environment and would facilitate the teacher in the teaching and learning process.

The autistic student's strength also did help a lot in the class as the teachers reported that he showed good response to the teacher and some of the teachers noticed that he was interested to learn as compared to other students. It can be illustrated through the following statement:

Aaaa, I'm happy when he asks. Because when a student asks it means he wants to do. He wants to know. He is interested with my lesson and there is a time when he writes and he comes to the front and asks me on the spot, at that time.

Most of the teachers were happy with the autistic student's responses in the class when he showed some interest in learning. This indicates the autistic student also has high level of curiosity. It can be seen here that, the autistic student's strength also helped the teachers a lot in coping with the inclusive environment. Certainly, many teachers prefer students who are fast and interested in learning as well as showing a high level of curiosity. So when they have those students, the class would run smoothly and this would increase the teachers' satisfaction in teaching.

Discussion

Autistic students who are being included in the general classroom may develop their social behavior, academic skills, self-esteem and sense of community as compared to those who are not being included in the inclusive program (Girli, 2012). Teachers who find students' behaviour a problem in their inclusive class may probably do so because they have just received new autistic students. If the autistic students have been included in the program for several years, the tendency for autistic students not to become angry and aggressive in the class will be lower (Rovira, 2014). This indicates that, time is important for general classroom teachers to get to know their autistic student because if the teachers have a longer relationship with them, the students will produce less behavioral problem in the class.

Majority of the respondents in this study were teaching autistics students for their first time because according to them, the autistic students who were being included in the inclusive program were Form One and Form Three students. Most of the

teachers teach Form Three and the upper Forms in the school. So, that will be their first time meeting autistic students in the inclusive classes. Cassady (2011) found that the teachers who teach inclusive program were more concerned with the autistic student in the general classroom due to their problems in social skills, behavioral outbursts, changing curriculum and very few training and supports. Similarly, the autistic students in this study were reported to have problems in terms of less interaction and some social weaknesses. Therefore, the teachers need to provide full supervision to the autistic students in the class in order to fulfill their needs.

Vander Wiele (2011) noted that some of the students with disabilities may not cope well in the inclusive program and it led to frustration when they were not able to finish their work with other fellow classmates. This is not surprising because these students have moderate to severe cognitive disabilities including students with autism. Hence, their lack of speed in finishing tasks given by the inclusive teacher made the teacher becomes frustrated since she cannot help with their slow pace. Likewise, the general classroom teachers in this study also face similar problem in terms of the autistic students' cognitive ability. For example, the teachers need to provide different treatment to these students in the inclusive program since the autistic students were not on par with other mainstream students with respect to learning speed.

Other than the autistic students' problem in the class, the general classroom teachers in this study also complained about problems that emerged from the setting. It cannot be denied that the inclusive program's flow of teaching depends on the setting because some school and classroom difficulties can be regarded as unexceptional barriers that teachers face throughout the lesson. For example, the teachers in this study did not receive any information about the special needs students who were being included in the inclusive classes. As the teachers did not receive any training from the school, their lack of skill brings about some challenges in dealing with these students.

Corresponding to this kind of environmental problem, other studies also indicate that the teachers feel that they are not well-prepared in teaching students with various needs (Hemming & Woodcock, 2011) as they need help by educational assistant and teaching materials to cater for these students in the inclusive classroom (Olinger, 2013). Without any skill and without any help by the educational assistant, they need a lot of energy to fulfill every student's needs in the inclusive program as they were expected to teach both kinds of students effectively. So, these teachers were stuck in between two situations where they cannot fulfill certain needs of students with special needs and teaching inclusive classes which is beyond their capabilities and specializations (Mock & Kauffman, 2002). Therefore, teaching inclusive program was very challenging for the general classroom teachers as they lack skill and knowledge of students with various disabilities.

As cited in Gaad (2011), studies by Alghazo and Gaad (2004) and Gaad and Khan (2009) who conducted studies on the UAE teachers' perception towards inclusive education and they found the following:

"On the surface, some learners may have the label 'included,' but they are implicitly excluded from the class activities. Equally, the class size in UAE schools can be quite big, and incurring extra work because of the presence of learners with special needs, with no incentive, support or training, can take its toll on the teachers" (p.77).

The researchers further stated that one of the UAE teachers was having problem with an autistic student as she felt burdened to teach the inclusive education together with him because the student kept interrupting her lesson and she also has limited knowledge on autism. Likewise, this study found that Malaysian general classroom teachers also faced challenges in terms of the environmental problem such as the class size, no training provided by the school, and the teachers also claimed to have limited knowledge on autism. Thus, there is a dire need to provide essential training to overcome this problem.

According to Rovira (2014), the behavioral problems of the autistic student are reduced when the student learns in a comfortable and productive way in the inclusive program. This can be one of the ways to cope with the inclusive environment as the general classroom teachers were competent in reducing the barriers that they faced during the lesson. Moreover, not all teachers are capable to create a comfortable environment for the students in the inclusive classes. However, some of the respondents in this study have created a comfortable environment for the autistic students to reduce the behavioral problem. This was by following the autistic students' preferences. In other words, being a skillful teacher can help them a lot in the inclusive environment.

This study however does not concur with a study conducted by Manisah, Ramlee and Zalizan (2006) who found that some teachers from other countries rejected the inclusion of students with disabilities completely because they thought special needs students in inclusive class should study separately and as they would never be able to reach the academic level of the mainstream students. Nevertheless, findings from this study show that majority of the respondents accepted the presence of autistic students in the inclusive classes because the autistic students were not causing great trouble for the teachers during the lesson. So, it can be concluded that not all teachers in inclusive program rejected the presence of autistic students in the mainstream classes. As Watson and McCathren (2009) said, a truly inclusive system can be created through commitment and willingness to support every student in the community. Hence, teacher's receptiveness is one of the important requirements to establish a truly successful inclusive system at school.

On the contrary, studies conducted by Alghazo and Gaad (2004) and Gaad and Khan (2007) found that the general classroom teachers in UAE preferred to deliver the special education traditionally rather than practicing the full inclusion (as cited in Gaad, 2011). It means these teachers rejected the practice of full inclusion of students with special needs in the mainstream classroom. Even though majority of the Malaysian teachers in the current study accepted the presence of the autistic students in the inclusive classes, the researchers noticed that some of the teachers did reject this kind of students in their class. Alghazo and Gaad (2004)

and Gaad and Khan (2007) also stated that teachers' willingness and acceptance of the principle of inclusion are the most important matters in this inclusive education (as cited in Gaad, 2011). Again, teachers' receptiveness towards students with special needs especially the autistic students, is paramount in implementing the full inclusion at schools.

Having supportive classmates and being accepted by them are two very essential ingredients for the autistic students to survive in the inclusive environment. This factor also assisted the teachers a lot where supportive environment could offset the teachers' negative emotions. It means that they do not have to face the challenges alone, but they can share the positive environment with their students. In addition, Rovira (2014) claimed that the supportive environment also facilitated the autistic students to increase their self-esteem once they have become comfortable with the mainstream students in the same classroom. It can be illustrated through the finding of this study where the mainstream students helped the autistic students when the teachers did not have time to repeat the explanation to their autistic counterparts. So the situation benefits both teachers and autistic students in the inclusive program.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, this study was to explore the barriers Malaysian teachers faced in the inclusive program as well as their ways of coping with difficulties in the inclusive environment. Six emerging themes were identified from the interview transcription based on the research questions. Among the challenges that general classroom teachers faced in the inclusive education settings were student's behavioral problem, cognitive problem and environmental problem. Additionally, the ways of these teachers cope with the inclusive environment came from themselves, through their skillfulness, receptiveness, and environmental assistance.

The findings of this study were discussed with regard to some similarities and differences found in other studies in Malaysia as well as in other countries. Other than the problems of students with autism, environmental problem also has been discussed in the findings. The greatest limitation in this study is the difficulty in finding the right respondents. This is because the study will be conducted only for general classroom teachers who have the inclusion of autistic students in their class. Certainly, the inclusive program has already been implemented in Malaysia for a long time, but the autistic students were not included in all inclusive programs in various secondary schools.

Future research should continue investigating this similar topic to evaluate various kinds of problems which may emerge from different kinds of settings. Future research also should explore different ways of coping in the inclusive environment because these varieties of ways may contribute to the field of inclusive program in terms of promoting some ideas in dealing with inclusive classes. Perhaps other teachers in different settings may have different levels of skillfulness and receptiveness to cater to the needs of both of mainstream and autistic students. Therefore, variables such as age of the teacher, gender, years of teaching, and level of experience with autistic students should be explored to determine what are the successful ways on how to deal with both kinds of students.

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