

## Challenges Faced by Student with Autism Spectrum Disorders in An Inclusive Environment: Lived Experiences in Malaysian Polytechnic

Siti Suhaila binti Samian<sup>a</sup>, Rafiuddin bin Rohani<sup>b</sup>

<sup>b</sup>Politeknik Ibrahim Sultan, KM10 Jalan Kong Kong, 81700 Pasir Gudang, Johor, Malaysia

E-mail: [sitisuhaila@pis.edu.my](mailto:sitisuhaila@pis.edu.my). 019-7776378

**Abstract:** Educational opportunities that are widely open to individuals with disabilities up to the higher education level pose a challenge for educators to meet the needs of these students. It is also a challenge for students to adapt to the new environment. This research aims to explore the experience of student with learning disabilities; an autistic student who had successfully completed his diploma in Malaysian Polytechnic. The research questions are; 1) What are the challenges does this student face during his studies? ; 2) How is the educators acceptance towards the autistic student? 3) How is the peers acceptance towards the autistic student? and 4) What is the student's expectation of the learning environment in the higher learning institution? The study sample was an autistic student who had completed his diploma and currently pursuing his degree at the same institution. From the qualitative study, which the phenomenological study was conducted, it was found that the student's internal problems were a major challenge in his life as a student in higher learning institution. There ~~are~~ were still some lecturers who did not recognize the characteristics of autistic students and there ~~are~~ were friends who bullied him throughout his studies. Some suggestions were made for future research purposes.

**Keywords:** autism students; educator's acceptance; peer's acceptance; student's expectation

## INTRODUCTION

The emphasis on inclusive education began to gain attention as it became one of the key indicators of performance in the Malaysian Education Development Plan (MEDP 2013-2025) and the Education Development Plan 2015-2025 (Higher Education). This is a passage from the action plan to Improve Teaching and Learning for Students with Disabilities at the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), 2012. This demonstrates the country's commitment to the importance of implementing inclusive education for people with disabilities in higher learning institutions.

Access to equal education for children with disabilities is also contained in the Law of Malaysia, Act 685 under Section 28 (1), which states: "Education system must be inclusive, actively seeking out children who are enrolled, and responding flexibly to the circumstances and needs of learners ". "Persons with disabilities have the right to indiscriminate education and equal opportunity to inclusive education at every level of learning and long life learning".

Inclusive education is a form of education offered to students with special needs to study with typical students in a classroom with the goal of maximizing their potential. It provides a space and opportunity for students with learning disabilities such as slow learner, mentally retarded, down syndrome and autism to experience a learning environment with peers with specialized tools and guidance from educators to enable them to study. It is imperative to provide education to the disabled in the quest for equality and access to education to all, without exception.

Accordingly, a Guideline for the Implementation of Inclusive Policy in Higher Education Institutions has been prepared by the Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE) in 2019 to continuously provide education facilities and support systems for disabled students in public higher education institutions, nor private.

These guidelines focus on the conducive learning environment and the disabled-friendly facilities to enhance inclusive education best practices in HEIs. In addition, it will benefit not only the disabled through education, but it will also impact the typical students and the general public as well as foster a culture of caring and caring community for the disabled among the HEIs and the local community.

## **BACKGROUND OF STUDY**

Inclusive education is doubtful due to lack of awareness, sensitivity of teachers and education administrators, parenting attitudes, peer acceptance, and community. This causes educational discrimination to continue (Helen E. Lees, 2014). To ensure the inclusive education practice is expanded, children need to be educated at all levels of education, whether they are in primary, secondary or tertiary level. Education institutions should ensure that every school staff values the diversity of their students and sees it as an asset and sees it from a different perspective (Braunsteiner & Mariano-lapidus, 2018).

However, the lack of trained or incompetent educators is a major obstacle in the delivery of the teaching and learning process in the classroom. Educators need to adapt or deliver specific teaching methods to students with disabilities compared to typical students (Vlatka Domović, Vizek Vidović Vlasta & Dejana Bouillet, 2016). Undoubtedly, there is a high level of awareness about inclusion in any level of education, but there is an equal need for teachers and educators training in order to avoid misconception, and misunderstanding in daily practice (Livingston, K. 2016).

Inclusive education does not offer student with flexibility of curriculum. They have no choice. They tend to study using the same curriculum, same teaching materials with their typical peers. No student-centered approach among the disabled students. Students tend to be independent to pursue their study especially in higher education level (Mathew M, CJ. & Neelima, G, Jha. 2015).

Parents want their special children to be with their typical peers but often overshadowed by the fear of children being excluded, teased or being bullied (Campbell, J. 2016). Study by Marlina (2017) found that the level of peer acceptance in children with special needs is largely in the category of being ignored and even rejected by their peers. This will lead to an unhealthy environment for disabled students to be accepted. Marina (2017) also stated that peer rejection can cause to the deficit of social skills and behavioural issue among them. Therefore, it is crucial to be accepted by the peers so that they could gain positive vibes and simultaneously, they develop good social skills among their peers.

## **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

The challenges faced by disabled students in obtaining inclusive education in higher education institutions lead to the importance of this study conducted to identify the real challenges faced by the student. Peer acceptance will help to built confidence, self-esteem and positive attitude to disabled students. It is very important to maintain a more conducive learning environment while providing trained educators so that they tend to better accommodate the student in a more open educational environment.

## **SIGNIFICANT OF STUDY**

The findings of this study can be used as a basis for educators, peers and administrators to be more sensitive to students with disabilities in the classroom and the environment in general. It will help students feel comfortable in an environment where they are accepting more their citizenship than their other classmates. This study could also help the educators to determine the teaching methods and best assessments for the students due to their capability.

## **OBJECTIVE**

The qualitative study conducted to achieve the following objectives:

1. to explore educators acceptance towards
2. student with disabilities in the classroom; to identify the challenges faced by the disabled student in inclusive environment during his studies at higher learning institution;
3. exploring student's expectations of the
4. inclusive environment for the disabled.

## RESEARCH QUESTION

The research question designed to achieve the research objective are:

- 1) How are the educators acceptance towards the autistic students?;
- 2) How are the peers acceptance towards the autistic students;
- 3) What are the challenges do students face during his studies? ; and
- 4) What is the student's expectation of the inclusive environment at the higher learning institution ?.

## SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The study was conducted at an educational institution that offers technical and vocational education. The study sample was a student with learning disabilities in the autism category. The scope of the study focuses on his experience in ~~furthereing~~ completing his diploma level and currently in undergraduate studies. The study involved one student due to the only student with autism who was identified to pursue study at the selected institution. The study also involved three educators who have previous experiences teaching the students at diploma level.

## METHOD

This study used the qualitative approach. This approach was chosen because it is a scientific method of observation for collecting non-numerical data. Qualitative refers to the meaning, concept, symbol, description of an object, and not to the number or measurement (Creswell, 2005). The data collected is more open and it involves the views, perceptions and experiences of the study sample.

### *Sample*

The study sample was an autistic student who is studying Bachelor of Tourism Management at Ibrahim Sultan Polytechnic, Johor in the fourth semester. This student was a graduate of the Diploma of Tourism Management at the same institution. The permission was gained from the student to conduct an interview for the purpose of the study.

## DATA ANALYSIS

This section contains the results of research findings obtained from interview that have been done and associated with the research objective.

### *Student's Background*

The student who was born at the General Hospital in 1997 is the eldest from four siblings. He was suffered from health issues in early stage of life like fever, cough and asthma. Being detected having difficulties at 10, his teacher suggested his parents to bring him over the hospital to diagnose his problems. His father is a contractor while his mother was a retired bank officer. He really enjoy watching cartoon as a motivation to learn English better. He can write in English very well and contributed an article to Japanese Wikipedia. He wrote about ultraman character using ID user: zerostylinx. He likes to write to release stress although it would take a long period to produce an article. He started his writing from 2011 till 2019. Meanwhile, he started his education journey at Politeknik Ibrahim Sultan, Pasir Gudang, Johor from 2015 till 2018 for Diploma Level and currently persuing his bachelor from September 2019.



Figure 1



Figure 2:

Figure 1 &amp; 2: Interview session with research sample (16.07.2019)

These are the result obtained from the interview done on 16<sup>th</sup> July 2019 to answer the objective constructed for the study.

- i. to explore educators' acceptance towards student with disabilities in the classroom;

**Question 1:**

How do you feel about your lecturers?  
Do you think they could accept you as you are?

**Answer:**

*"I do feel they could understand me. But finally I realized that not all of them could understand my condition. It's not their fault. I never told them my barriers in learning. I never told them that I have difficulties to understand their teaching in a short term. Sometimes they scolded me because I could not answer the question, but then when they realized and aware of my situation, they could understand and try to accommodate me as good as they can".*

**Question 2:**

If you're comparing the awareness of your presence among female and male lecturer, which one do you think are more aware about your presence, or your difficulty in classroom?

**Answer:**

*"Female lecturer, of course. They're more polite, try harder to understand me in many ways. Sometimes I felt sorry because they had to repeat the task so many time so that I could understand the requirement needed. They're so patient and did not give up to give their best"*

- ii. To identify the challenges faced by the disabled students in inclusive environment.

**Question 3:**

Do you think that the lecturers have knowledge about your condition as autism students in the class?

**Answer:**

*"I don't think so. As mentioned by special educator's lecturers, I am the only student with autism at the department. This is the first time for them accepting autistic students in the system. I am not sure if they are really mentally prepared to accept special students in mainstream class. It is crystal clear that when I am in the class, no one is aware of my presence at first. They taught me just like other students. Once they found something weird with me, then they realized that there is a special students in the class.*

**Question 4:**

Do you have any difficulties with your peers?

**Answer :**

*"Hmm...sometimes I do not think it is a problem. I think it's just about me. I feel weird among my classmates. It makes me tend to be quite in the class. Sometimes I don't know how to communicate with my friends. I tend to be alone. It is easier. I think they also don't know how to communicate with me.*

**Question 5:**

Do you have any experience being bullied by your friends? Is there any example?

**Answer:**

*"I don't know if I could describe it as a bully. They called me "ayam" just because of I'm allergic of chicken. It was before. At my first semester in Diploma level. Day by day, I think the environment is quite good for me. I am comfortable and my allergy was reduced. Slowly, they did not call me 'ayam' anymore.*

*Oh, one more thing. I am the only one in the class who brings a bottle of water to class. My friends always ask for the water without asking me whether it is enough for me or not. I think that one I considered as a bully...(sigh). I don't know how to avoid from the situation. I felt sorry for them when they felt thirsty but I also don't know how to express my feeling that I need the water too..." (laugh).*

**Question 6:**

Do you feel your peers give a support or cooperation to do assignments or tasks given by lecturers?

**Answers:**

*"This is the dilemma that I have to face every semester. It's hard for them to accept me in a group work unless I'm approaching them to do the task together. I knew that I am a bit late compared to them, so that they refused to put me in.*

**Question 7:**

Is there any hopes that you want to express to your peers?

**Answer:**

*"I knew it is hard when they saw an exceptional person in the class, among them. I could not run as fast as they can. I might bring them a trouble. It could make them have problem to fulfill the course requirement. I could make them feeling not satisfied with my performance which could affect their marks. The only thing that I really hope is that they could accept me as it is/I am. This is me. I could change myself but I always try to be a better person. Try not to be a burden to anyone"*

iii. exploring student's expectations of the inclusive environment for the disabled.

**Question 8:**

Now you're in mainstream class which is we call it as an inclusive environment. You learn with your typical peers. What bothers you?

**Answer:**

*"I am far from family. I am staying at the hostel. They put a very high expectation for me. They hope that one day I could earn myself and be an idol for my siblings because I am the eldest. They insist me to pursuing my study not so far from them, so that they can supervise me, my journey, problems and so on. It's a big responsibility that they put on my shoulder. I am worried if I could not take the responsibility.*

*I think I am different from others. I am easy to feel down anytime. I don't want to be drop out among my friends. It keeps bothering me.*

**Question 9:**

What are your expectations to achieve in this inclusive setting?

**Answer:**

*I won't expect more but there's a few thing that I hope could support student like me in a future such as:*

- i. *Continuous financial support from any parties related;*
- ii. *Peers acceptance. Don't make me as a toy or spread the bullies;*
- iii. *Educator's awareness. Educators should be aware and mentally prepared to accept any kind of students difficulties;*
- iv. *It's okay... because I'm disabled, just treat me as typical student with some adjustments;*
- v. *Accept that I am different and give me a chance to prove that I can do my best with my limitation.*

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION



Picture 2: Muhammad Amir bin Mohd Rashidan, autism student

Based on the answers to the questions posed, it can be concluded that the sample of this study encountered problems similarly to other autistic students around the world. Low self-esteem is a challenge that he needs to overcome in order to compete with his typical classmates. He also trapped with his parents' high expectations which could affect his emotions, and self confidence. Parent should be involved in efficient delivery of a quality education service, so that they could see the student progress and achievement. Being bullied also one of the challenges faced by him. It tends to increase students' tension and dilemma on avoiding the situation and at the same time could spread the awareness among the peers to accept him as part of them. It is parallel with the study by Helen E. Lees (2014) which stated that bully could be one of the causes of student's tension. Institutions need to pay attention to the culture of bullying among students as it can cause behavioral problems and affect student's academic performance.

Student Welfare Department (intake session) needs to be aware of student entry with learning disabilities. In the meantime, educators need to be exposed to student's situation so that educators can be prepared to adapt to different learning methods for this type of students in a classroom. We should avoid discrimination and segregation as we meet specialized educational needs for inclusive setting. Inclusion could be a platform, a model of democracy in education especially for students with disabilities and valuing diverse community in society (Valle & Connor, 2011).

## CONCLUSIONS

Successful inclusive implementation will not be possible if the educational environment is not ready to accept students with disabilities in many aspects. Implementation of policies, cultures and practices should be integrated into successful inclusive education to provide equal opportunities for the disabled in education. Barriers need to be mitigated by both physical and perception barriers to accepting students with disabilities in the mainstream.

These perceptions of disability create barriers to inclusive implementation. It needs to be further strengthened in higher education and training programme. Acceptance of individuals with disabilities and cultural differences need to be included in curriculum development and more flexible. With the support, there is a partnership between the education world and the community that eventually leads to the involvement of all parties across education (Booth, 2011)

## REFERENCES

- Braunsteiner, M., & Mariano-lapidus, S (2018). *A Perspective of Inclusion: Challenges for The Future: Global Education Review*, (October) 32-43
- Booth, T., Ainscow, M. (2011). *Index for Inclusion: Developing Learning and Participation in Schools*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed, substantially revised and expanded. Bristol: Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education.
- Cresswell. J.W. (2005). *Educational Research: Planning, Conducting and Evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research*. New Jersey Pearson Education Inc.

- Jonathan Campbell (2016). *The Importance Of Peers In Inclusive Education For Individuals With ASD*. Interact website <https://researchautism.org/the-importance-of-peers-in-inclusive-education-for-individuals-with-asd/>
- Helen E. Lees (2014). *Addressing Tensions and Dilemmas in Inclusive Education: Living With Uncertainty*. European Journal of Special Needs Education, 29:2, 257-259.
- Inclusive education: *Overcoming The Barriers*. Interact website <http://www.unescobkk.org/education/inclusive-education/what-is-inclusive-education/overcoming-barriers/>
- Livingston, K. (2016). "Teacher Education's Role in Educational Change." *European Journal of Teacher Education* 39 (1): 1–4.
- Marlina (2017). *Teacher's Attitude and Peer Acceptance to Children with Special Needs in Inclusive Primary Schools*. 9th International Conference for Science Educators and Teachers (ICSET). *Journal Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*, volume 118.
- Mathew, M, CJ & Neelima, G, Jha (2015). *Issues, Challenges of Inclusive Education and Strategies through ODL Mode*. National Seminar on Energizing Inclusive Education through ODL Mode.
- Valle, J. W., Connor, D. J. (2011). *Rethinking Disability. A Disability Studies Approach to Inclusive Practices. The Practical Guide Series*.
- Vlatka Domović, Vizek Vidović Vlasta & Dejana Bouillet (2016): *Student Teachers' Beliefs about The Teacher's Role in Inclusive Education*, European Journal of Special Needs Education.