

EXPLORING SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS' KNOWLEDGE IN MANAGING THE BEHAVIOR OF AUTISTIC STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to identify the knowledge of special education teachers in managing the behavior of students with autism. The research was conducted at PPKI (Special Education Integration Program) in schools within the Petaling Utama District, involving 10 special education teachers with at least five years of experience. Behavior management is a critical aspect of enhancing the readiness of students with autism to learn in the classroom. Therefore, teachers must possess comprehensive and in-depth knowledge of behavior management for practical application. The study employed a semi-structured interview method conducted online via Google Meet. The data analysis was performed using thematic analysis through the Atlas.ti application. The findings highlight the need for teachers' knowledge regarding the foundational understanding of disruptive behaviors in students with autism, strategies for behavior management, positive and negative reinforcement, awareness of behavior components in the Special Education Curriculum, and the implications of behavior management on effective teaching and learning (PdPc). The results of this study can serve as a reference and basis for improving educational systems that emphasize the importance of managing the behavior of students with autism, ensuring better learning outcomes and a conducive classroom environment.

Keywords: special education; behaviour management; autism; ppki

1. INTRODUCTION

Education is a fundamental right for every individual, including students with special educational needs. According to the Education Regulations in the Code of Practice for Special Education, students with special needs refer to children with disabilities such as visual, hearing, speech, physical, learning difficulties, or a combination of multiple disabilities. They are provided with a systematic educational pathway, either in special education schools or through the Special Education Integration Program and Inclusive Education Program. This education for all is part of the effort to ensure that every student, regardless of background or disability, is given equal opportunities to receive quality education (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2018).

Malaysia signed the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (PWD) on July 6, 2010, to commit to equal fundamental rights for all, including the right to education. This aligns with Article 28 of the Persons with Disabilities Act, which states that students with special educational needs are entitled to receive education without discrimination or

exclusion. Under the Zero Reject Policy (ZRP), this initiative guarantees that every student with special educational needs is admitted into the education system without rejection. This policy not only enhances access to education but also raises parents' awareness of their children's educational rights (Mohamad Azman, Rosli & Ramlah, 2019).

Data from the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2022 shows an increase in the number of students with special educational needs registered in the national education system. In 2022, a total of 105,785 students with special educational needs participated in learning at 6,499 schools offering Special Education Programs nationwide. This 8.81% increase reflects the country's commitment to providing inclusive education for students with special educational needs. Students with special educational needs include various categories, one of which is students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

Autistic students often exhibit unique behaviors related to impairments in three main areas: communication, social interaction, and repetitive behaviors (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). A study by Lord et al. (2020) emphasized several common behavioral characteristics, such as difficulties understanding verbal and non-verbal communication, stereotypical behaviors like hand-flapping or object-spinning, challenges in adapting to changes in daily routines or environments, and displaying aggressive or self-harming behaviors due to frustration or anxiety. Some behaviors are harmless, but others can pose risks to themselves or those around them, including in school environments.

However, the question arises: how prepared are special education teachers in terms of knowledge to manage the behavior of autistic students? Effective behavior management requires an in-depth understanding of autism and appropriate strategies to address challenging behaviors. This study aims to explore the level of knowledge among special education teachers in managing the behavior of autistic students. The study was conducted under the Integrated Special Education Program (PPKI) in the Petaling Utama District, Selangor. In the context of special education, behavior management is one of the most critical aspects. Poorly managed disruptive behaviors can hinder the learning process, not just for autistic students but also for other students in the classroom. According to Allam et al. (2021), research indicates that teachers' knowledge of managing the behavior of students with special needs remains inadequate. A lack of specific professional training and opportunities for skill development in behavior management has contributed to teachers' low confidence in addressing these challenges.

Thus, it is crucial for teachers to understand various behavior management techniques, such as positive and proactive approaches. For instance, teachers can use positive reinforcement strategies to encourage good behavior and reduce undesirable behaviors.

This study will provide deeper insights into the readiness of special education teachers in managing autistic students and identify the needs required to improve the special education system. Better knowledge of the challenges faced by teachers and students will help enhance the effectiveness of special education programs and ensure that students with special educational needs receive quality and inclusive education. Overall, every teacher must be aware and well-versed in managing the behavior of autistic students in the classroom. Special education teachers play a vital role in

supporting these students but need adequate support and resources to handle the challenges accompanying their responsibilities.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is categorized as one of the neurodevelopmental disorders, where autistic students face difficulties in social skills, communication, and imagination. According to the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (APA, 2013), autism is a broad-spectrum disorder and can be classified into three severity levels: mild, moderate, and severe. Each autistic student displays unique characteristics depending on the severity of their condition (APA, 2013). Autistic students not only experience challenges in social interaction but may also exhibit disruptive behaviors that can affect the environment and pose risks to themselves or those around them. These behaviors not only endanger the students but also hinder the learning process in the classroom. In this context, special education teachers play a crucial role in managing the behavior of autistic students. Teachers must possess knowledge about autism-related behaviors and skills to manage disruptive behaviors to create a conducive learning environment.

Research by Howlin (2019) highlights that behavioral characteristics vary greatly from one autistic student to another, creating challenges in providing a “one-size-fits-all” intervention approach. Every autistic student exhibits different behaviors in the classroom, requiring teachers to be prepared with diverse strategies to manage these behaviors effectively.

Special education teachers often face challenges in managing the behavior of autistic students. A study by Anis Shahirah Zulkifli and Suziyani Mohamed (2019) revealed that teachers require a high level of knowledge and intelligence to manage the behavior of special needs students professionally, based on appropriate behavioral philosophies and theories. This emphasizes the need for adequate training and support for teachers in behavior management.

Challenging behaviors are a major issue frequently encountered by special education teachers managing autistic students. Research by Banda et al. (2019) identified common challenging behaviors, such as students escaping learning situations, exhibiting aggression toward peers or teachers, lacking focus on learning activities, and struggling to adapt to classroom rules. Such situations often arise in the classroom, requiring teachers to remain vigilant and prepared to handle unforeseen circumstances. Che Ku Nuraini Che Ku Yahya et al. (2021) emphasized that teachers must have knowledge and expertise in managing the socio-emotional aspects of autistic students to enable them to learn effectively like their peers. Each student has a different tolerance level for new situations, which may trigger varying challenging behaviors. This often renders intervention approaches less effective and increases stress among teachers.

A study by Whitlock et al. (2020) identified several factors influencing the behavior of autistic students, including the physical environment, communication deficits, and social anxiety. Sudden changes in the environment, such as loud noises or excessively bright lighting, can trigger challenging behaviors in autistic students. Additionally, communication difficulties, such as the

inability to express their needs, often lead to aggressive behavior or tantrums. These issues make autistic students uncomfortable, prompting aggressive responses.

Discomfort in interacting with others can also lead students to withdraw or respond negatively. New social situations and environments may cause autistic students to feel uneasy. This discomfort further complicates their ability to express their emotions, with undesirable behaviors often serving as their medium of emotional expression. Murray et al. (2018) emphasized the importance of understanding the root causes of challenging behaviors to develop more effective management strategies. When special education teachers understand their students better, they can find solutions to manage undesirable situations using effective behavior management techniques.

Managing the behavior of autistic students requires a holistic, evidence-based approach. Several strategies can be applied by special education teachers to effectively modify the behavior of autistic students. These include positive reinforcement, Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), visual schedules, the use of "break time," and collaboration with parents. According to Cooper et al. (2021), positive reinforcement, such as praise or rewards, can strengthen desired behaviors. For example, giving a star sticker when a student successfully completes a task can be an effective reinforcement. ABA is one of the most widely used intervention approaches. Research by Leaf et al. (2022) demonstrated the effectiveness of ABA in reducing challenging behaviors and improving communication skills in autistic students. Using visual aids such as pictorial schedules or cue cards helps students better understand instructions. Knight et al. (2019) found this strategy highly effective for autistic students with communication deficits. Collaboration with parents is crucial to ensuring consistency in behavior management strategies at home and school. McConachie et al. (2019) stressed that involving parents in intervention programs enhances the effectiveness of behavior management.

A study by Naagarobini and Hasnah Toran (2023) examined the knowledge levels of special education teachers in managing the socio-emotional aspects of autistic students. The findings revealed that teachers' knowledge about socio-emotional management, developmental stages, and characteristics of autistic students in schools is low. This underscores the need to enhance teachers' understanding in this area to support the development of autistic students effectively.

Another study by Nur Hidayah Ahmad and Imaaduddin Abdul Halim (2023) found that the mean score for the knowledge level of special education teachers was high. Furthermore, there was a strong positive correlation between teachers' knowledge of positive reinforcement and its implementation practices with autistic students. Research by Hasnah Toran et al. (2010) emphasized the importance of training, knowledge, and confidence among special education teachers regarding autism. Although this study was published before 2019, it provides a foundational understanding of the ongoing need for continuous training to improve teachers' knowledge and confidence in managing autistic students.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

To examine the knowledge of special education teachers in managing the behavior of autistic students in primary school Integrated Special Education Programs (PPKI), a qualitative descriptive

study was chosen. Sampling is the process of selecting respondents from a defined population. This process provides relevant information and data that align with the research questions and helps determine more comprehensive research outcomes. The study involved ten special education teachers working in government primary school PPKIs in the Petaling Utama District. All participants held a Bachelor's Degree in Education and had at least five years of teaching experience at the start of the study. Purposeful sampling was employed to select participants from the population of teachers serving in identified primary schools, particularly those teaching special education students, including autistic students. These participants are referred to as Gpk1, Gpk2, Gpk3, Gpk4, Gpk5, Gpk6, Gpk7, Gpk8, Gpk9, and Gpk10 throughout the study.

3.1. Research Instrument

The research instrument utilized was an interview protocol. Specifically, a semi-structured interview format with open-ended questions was employed. This approach enabled the researcher to gather in-depth and detailed data regarding the knowledge of special education teachers in managing the behavior of autistic students. The interviews were designed with key questions serving as a guide to ensure the research questions were addressed. However, they also allowed participants the freedom to share their views, experiences, and additional information spontaneously. Open-ended questions were chosen because they allow participants to provide unrestricted answers, thereby revealing their perspectives more authentically. For example, a question like, "What strategies do you usually use to manage the behavior of autistic students?" gave teachers the opportunity to elaborate on their experiences in detail, including the challenges they faced and the solutions they implemented. These open-ended questions also allowed the researcher to explore unexpected insights and clarify responses by asking follow-up questions based on the context of the conversation.

3.2. Procedure of collecting data

Data collection involved several steps, starting with obtaining approval from relevant authorities, preparing the interview protocol, and conducting individual interviews that were recorded with participants' consent. The researcher conducted online interviews via Google Meet. The interview data were then transcribed and reviewed by the participants to ensure accuracy.

Data analysis is a method to derive accurate information. According to Noraliza (2022), data analysis involves transforming and integrating data to obtain useful insights for decision-making. The analysis was carried out thematically by identifying relevant themes and sub-themes based on the research questions. The process included transcription, coding, theme development, and data validation through triangulation and participant review.

To ensure the reliability and validity of the study, data triangulation was employed by comparing views from various participants. The interview questions were developed based on a literature review and reviewed by experts. The study adhered to ethical research principles, such as obtaining informed consent from respondents, protecting their identities, and ensuring data were used exclusively for academic purposes.

Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 40 minutes. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using thematic categorization with the assistance of the Atlas.ti application.

4. RESEARCH FINDING

A total of 10 individuals were selected as participants in this study. They consist of 2 male teachers and 8 female teachers. The table below provides information about the study participants.

Table 1: Participants' demography

Participant	Education Level	Major	Experience in teaching (years)
Gpk1	Bachelor's Degree	Special Education	5
Gpk2	Bachelor's Degree	Special Education	10
Gpk3	Master's Degree	Special Education	12
Gpk4	Bachelor's Degree	Special Education	13
Gpk5	Master's Degree	Special Education	10
Gpk6	Bachelor's Degree	Special Education	6
Gpk7	Master's Degree	Special Education	8
Gpk8	Bachelor's Degree	Special Education	17
Gpk9	Bachelor's Degree	Special Education	6
Gpk10	Master's Degree	Special Education	9

4.1. Special Education Teachers' knowledge

Based on the interview sessions conducted with 10 respondents, five themes were identified regarding the level of knowledge of special education teachers in managing behavior. The key themes to focus on in understanding the level of knowledge of special education teachers in managing the behavior of autistic students are: (1) basic understanding of disruptive behavior in autistic students, (2) student management strategies, (3) positive and negative reinforcement, (4) understanding behavioral components within the Special Education Curriculum, and (5) the implications of behavior management on the implementation of teaching and facilitation (PdPc).

4.2. Basic understanding of the disruptive behavior of students with autism

All participants in the study were able to describe the characteristics of disruptive behaviors commonly observed in autistic students. They identified behaviors such as yelling, throwing

objects, self-harm, harming others around them, and producing unwanted noises. The two respondents offered different perspectives but both emphasized the importance of understanding the causes of disruptive behaviors and adopting appropriate approaches to support autistic students.

“For me, disruptive behaviors among autistic students usually involve actions that interfere with learning, such as yelling, throwing objects, or refusing to stay seated. I understand that these behaviors are not done intentionally but are more of a way for them to express themselves when they feel uncomfortable or stressed. They may have difficulty controlling their emotions or understanding classroom rules. As a teacher, I think it's crucial to identify the causes of these behaviors, such as changes in routine or excessive noise, so that we can help them in the right way.”

4.3. Management strategies for autistic students

Eight participants in the study were able to explain the strategies they used to manage the behavior of autistic students. Data from the interviews revealed a variety of strategies, including positive reinforcement, visual techniques, routine management, and identifying behavior triggers to support autistic students in managing their behaviors.

“In my experience, I rely heavily on visual communication techniques, such as using picture cards or visual schedules, to help students understand what they need to do. I also implement a time-out approach to give them a break when they display disruptive behaviors. Additionally, I make an effort to identify the triggers for these behaviors. For instance, if a challenging behavior occurs due to noise, I provide earplugs or temporarily remove the student from the situation. A flexible approach tailored to each student's needs is very important.”

4.4. Positive and negative reinforcement

Six participants in the study were able to explain the positive and negative reinforcement techniques they used to manage the behavior of autistic students in their classrooms. The participants demonstrated how both positive and negative reinforcement are applied in special education contexts to effectively increase desirable behaviors and reduce challenging behaviors.

“For positive reinforcement, I often use rewards such as praise, stickers, or the student's favorite items when they exhibit good behavior. For example, if they manage to sit quietly or complete a task, I praise them with words like 'Good job! Thank you for following the instructions.' I find that students are more motivated to repeat the same behavior when given recognition. As for negative reinforcement, I try to reduce something that causes them discomfort. For instance, if noise is disturbing them, I will move them to a quieter place. This way, their behavior becomes more controlled without the need for punishment.”

Most of the participants in my study frequently used positive reinforcement and less often used negative reinforcement.

4.5. Behavioral management components in Special Education Curriculum

Almost all of the participants reflected different understandings about the behavioral management components outlined in the Special Education Curriculum, with most admitting that they were not very familiar with the behavioral components specified in the curriculum. This statement emphasizes the need for additional training to deepen their knowledge.

"I know that the Special Education Curriculum outlines components related to behavior, but I admit that I haven't delved deeply into that part. From what I know, it is more about helping teachers identify behaviors that may disrupt learning and providing approaches to shape positive behaviors. I have also read about the use of positive reinforcement and management techniques like visual schedules suggested in the curriculum. However, I feel I need more training to truly understand and apply these components better."

4.6. Implications of behavior management on Teaching and Learning (PdPc).

Almost all participants in this study emphasized that good behavior management plays a crucial role in creating a conducive learning environment, enhancing student engagement, and supporting the effectiveness of teaching and learning (PdPc) for autistic students.

"For me, behavior management greatly influences the smooth running of PdPc in the classroom. If students' behavior is not controlled, it can disrupt the attention of other students and make it difficult for me to conduct learning activities. On the other hand, when students' behavior is well-managed, the classroom atmosphere becomes more conducive, and all students can focus fully. For example, when I use positive reinforcement strategies, students are more motivated to follow rules and actively participate in PdPc activities. This approach not only helps me manage challenging behaviors but also improves the effectiveness of teaching."

5. DISCUSSION

Based on the teachers' perspectives, they understand disruptive behavior in autistic students as behavior that disrupts the learning environment, such as shouting, throwing objects, or acting out of control, which often stems from the students' inability to regulate emotions, cope with stress, or communicate effectively. Teachers also emphasize the importance of identifying triggers for these behaviors, such as a noisy environment or sudden changes in activities, in line with Mesibov et al. (2005) who stress the importance of understanding environmental factors in managing the behavior of autistic students. This approach indicates that teachers not only understand the behavior technically but also value the emotional and environmental context of the students in

addressing these challenges. Recent studies also support this approach. For example, a study by Abu Bakar and Tahar (2021) found that non-contingent reinforcement techniques can reduce disruptive behaviors in autistic students while completing tasks. Additionally, research by Noorshyam (2022) emphasizes the importance of best practices in managing the behavior of autistic children at the primary school level, highlighting teachers' knowledge and practices in behavior management. Furthermore, research by Mohd Yasin et al. (2016) shows that positive reinforcement methods, such as praise and rewards, can modify autistic students' behavior and have a positive impact during teaching and learning. Overall, teachers' basic understanding of disruptive behavior in autistic students demonstrates that they are aware that such behavior needs to be addressed through a holistic approach, based on understanding triggers and student needs. Nevertheless, there is a need to enhance this understanding through further training and exposure to more formal, evidence-based behavior management strategies.

The behavior management strategies used by teachers for autistic students include approaches such as positive reinforcement, visual communication, and routine management. Teachers apply positive reinforcement by providing rewards such as praise or access to preferred activities to encourage good behavior, as suggested by Cooper et al. (2020) in the principles of behavior reinforcement. Additionally, teachers use visual tools such as picture schedules to help students understand instructions and routines, as autistic students are more responsive to visual stimuli (Mesibov et al., 2005). Teachers also identify triggers for challenging behaviors, such as loud noises or tasks that are too difficult, and take steps such as providing a calming corner or reducing the workload to help students manage their emotions. Smith & Milne (2023) show that self-management training programs can enhance autistic students' ability to control their behavior. In this context, they explain that self-management techniques, such as breathing exercises and time-out techniques, should be familiarized with students so that they can use these self-regulation techniques when needed. This approach reflects the need for flexibility and the alignment of strategies with the individual needs of autistic students to ensure effective behavior management.

Positive and negative reinforcement play a crucial role in managing the behavior of autistic students. Positive reinforcement is used by providing rewards such as praise, stickers, or extra playtime when students demonstrate good behavior, which can increase their motivation to repeat the behavior, as stated by Skinner (1953) in the reinforcement principle. In addition, negative reinforcement is also applied by reducing elements that cause discomfort for students, such as moving them to a quieter place when they are overwhelmed by a noisy environment, or reducing task loads when students feel too stressed. This negative reinforcement approach aims to prevent the repetition of undesirable behavior, in line with Thorndike's (1911) operant reinforcement theory, which emphasizes the importance of reducing negative experiences to shape desired behavior. Cooper et al. (2020) state that the consistent use of a combination of reinforcement strategies results in significant behavioral changes for students on the autism spectrum. Therefore, both of these strategies, if used consistently and strategically, can help autistic students manage their behavior more effectively within the learning context.

Teachers have a basic understanding of the behavioral components in the Special Education Curriculum, which involves behavior management, the development of positive behavior, and the handling of challenging behaviors. These components are aimed at helping teachers identify the

causes of behavior and provide appropriate intervention steps, such as individual behavior plans for autistic students with different needs (Yell et al., 2009). While there is awareness of using positive reinforcement and tools like visual schedules in the curriculum, there is also recognition that deeper understanding and further training are needed to apply these strategies effectively. As stated by Mesibov et al. (2005), the behavioral components in the curriculum are designed to guide teachers in managing student behavior comprehensively and in a manner that is tailored to individual needs. This approach emphasizes the importance of ongoing support and training to ensure that teachers can implement effective behavior management in special education classrooms.

Behavior management has significant implications for the implementation of Teaching and Learning Facilitation (PdPc). When the behavior of autistic students is well-managed, it ensures a conducive classroom environment for learning, enhances students' focus, and reduces disruptions during the teaching process. Teachers are aware that uncontrolled behavior can hinder the smooth flow of PdPc, while effective management, such as the use of positive reinforcement strategies and consistent routines, allows students to engage fully in learning (Simpson, 2005). Furthermore, good behavior management also improves the teacher-student relationship, which is crucial in building a supportive learning environment (Kern & Clemens, 2007). Thus, proper behavior management not only enhances the effectiveness of PdPc but also contributes to the social and academic development of autistic students.

6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, behavior management among autistic students plays a crucial role in ensuring the smooth flow of the learning process. A deep understanding of disruptive behavior and the components of behavior management in the Special Education Curriculum can assist teachers in applying the right strategies, such as positive and negative reinforcement, the use of visual tools, and individual behavior plans. The implications of effective behavior management not only enhance students' focus and the effectiveness of Teaching and Learning Facilitation (PdPc), but also improve the teacher-student relationship, creating a conducive learning environment. Therefore, continuous training and support for teachers are essential to ensure that these strategies can be implemented effectively and tailored to the individual needs of autistic students.

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