

Exploring the effectiveness of support systems for preschool staff in implementing inclusive education for children with autism in Malaysia



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ABSTRACT

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This study seeks to examine the effectiveness of support systems available to preschool staff in implementing inclusive education for children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in Malaysia. Inclusive education is essential for promoting equity and meaningful participation of all children, yet preschool educators often encounter significant challenges when supporting children with ASD, including limited resources, insufficient training, and inadequate institutional support. Adopting a qualitative approach, this research will involve semi-structured interviews with five preschool teachers to explore the nature of support they receive, evaluate its effectiveness, and identify barriers and gaps in existing practices. The findings are expected to reveal the types of support systems currently in place, their impact on classroom practices, and the challenges teachers face in fostering inclusive learning environments for children with ASD. Moreover, the study will document teachers' recommendations for strengthening support structures and professional development opportunities. By highlighting key factors that influence the success of inclusive practices, the study contributes to advancing early childhood education in Malaysia and ensuring children with autism are better supported to thrive in inclusive preschool settings. This study documents teachers' experiences and recommendations, offering original insights to improve sustainable support structures and bridge practice-policy gaps in Malaysian preschool inclusive education.

Contribution/ Originality: This study makes an original contribution by examining the effectiveness of support systems for preschool teachers working with children with autism in Malaysia. It is one of the few that has investigated the effectiveness of support systems for preschool teachers in Malaysia working with children with autism. It captures teachers' real experiences, exposing emotional and professional gaps, while offering practical, context-driven recommendations to build stronger inclusive education systems.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background Study

In recent years, Malaysia has taken important steps toward creating more inclusive learning environments for young children. Inspired by global movements such as the Salamanca Statement ([United Nations Educational](#)

Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 1994) and the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4 emphasizes the importance of ensuring that all children, including those with special needs, have access to quality education. The Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013–2025) also underscores this commitment by highlighting inclusive education as a national priority. In this context, more children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are now being enrolled in mainstream preschools. However, inclusion is more than just placing a child with autism in a regular classroom. These children often require tailored teaching strategies, consistent routines, and specialized communication approaches to participate meaningfully (Low, Lee, & Che Ahmad, 2017). This means that the success of inclusion depends heavily on the skills, knowledge, and emotional readiness of preschool staff.

Studies have shown that when teachers feel supported, whether through proper training, access to experts, helpful school leadership, or peer encouragement, they are more confident and capable in working with children with ASD (Chua & Low, 2024). Unfortunately, many educators in Malaysia still report feeling underprepared and unsupported in this area. There is often a lack of practical resources, coaching, or emotional backing, especially in public preschools or rural areas (Plantin Ewe, 2024; Razali, Toran, Kamaralzaman, Mohamad Salleh, & Mohd. Yasin, 2013).

Although the intentions behind inclusive education are strong, what happens inside the classroom often tells a different story. To truly move forward, we need to better understand the kinds of support systems available to preschool educators and how well these systems work. Only then can we make informed improvements that benefit both teachers and the children they serve.

1.2. Problem Statement

While inclusive education has become a buzzword in policy discussions, the reality for many preschool teachers in Malaysia is much more complicated, especially when it comes to teaching children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Despite national policies that promote inclusion, many educators still feel as though they are “on their own” when it comes to supporting these children in the classroom (Chua & Low, 2024). Teachers often point to the same issues: not enough training, no access to expert guidance, too few teaching materials tailored for children with autism, and a general feeling of being overwhelmed (Low et al., 2017). In fact, what’s missing in most conversations is a clear look at the actual support systems that teachers rely on or wish they had. Things like coaching from specialists, supportive school leaders, mental health resources, and even simple peer-to-peer sharing are often either inconsistent or completely unavailable (Plantin Ewe, 2024).

Although some research has touched on the challenges of inclusion, few studies have focused on the systems designed to support preschool staff in these efforts. We still lack sufficient knowledge about which supports are available, which are effective, and what gaps need to be addressed (Razali et al., 2013; Sukumaran, 2021). Most importantly, the voices of teachers, those on the front lines, are often missing from these discussions. This study, therefore, aims to shed light on the current support systems available to preschool educators in Malaysia. By listening to their experiences and understanding their needs, we can begin to develop more meaningful, sustainable strategies that not only support teachers but also improve outcomes for children with autism in inclusive classrooms.

1.3. Research Objectives

This study aims to explore how support systems contribute to the successful implementation of inclusive education for children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in Malaysian preschools. The objectives of the study are:

1. To identify the types of support systems (emotional, instructional, and administrative) currently available to preschool staff working in inclusive education settings.

2. To examine preschool educators' perceptions of the relevance, accessibility, and overall effectiveness of these support systems in supporting the inclusion of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD).
3. To explore existing gaps and determine what additional support or improvements are required to enhance inclusive practices for children with ASD in preschool environments.

1.4. Research Questions

1. What types of support (emotional, instructional, administrative) do preschool staff receive to help include children with ASD?
2. How do preschool staff feel about the effectiveness of these supports in meeting the needs of an inclusive classroom?
3. What additional support or improvements do teachers think are needed to better include children with ASD in preschool?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Inclusive education is becoming increasingly important worldwide, especially in early childhood settings where young children begin to learn about differences and acceptance (Boyle, Topping, & Jindal-Snape, 2020; Florian & Spratt, 2013). In Malaysia, there is a growing interest in including children with autism in mainstream preschools, following global efforts to promote equality in education (Low et al., 2017; Razali et al., 2013). However, many teachers face difficulties when trying to put these inclusive ideas into practice (Hussin, Zain, & Suppiah, 2023; Sukumaran, 2021). This literature review examines four key themes: the roles and experiences of preschool teachers, the support systems available to them, the effectiveness of these systems, and the gaps that still need to be addressed. Both local and international research are utilized to better understand what is effective and what areas require improvement in supporting inclusive education in Malaysian preschools.

2.1. Theme 1: Nature of Preschool Teachers' Roles and Experiences

Laser et al. (2024) highlighted the teacher's roles as being pivotal in the special needs center. The teacher needs to play different roles, such as a leader guiding the class, assessing and planning, designing the environment to meet a child's needs, supporting the family, interacting with all involved agencies that support the child's needs, working collaboratively with other educators, and preparing the child for the transition to the next level of education. The teacher's role is complex, and they have suggested planning various curricular approaches to help teachers achieve effective teaching methods. Similar ideas were shared by O'Brien, Nagro, Binkert, Szocik, and Gerry (2024), who added more points to their research, emphasizing that teachers must have field experience before taking up a position to work with children with special needs.

Their research shows that many teachers do not have field experience yet but join and take up the role as a teacher, and they face difficulties. They expressed that field experiences are crucial in special needs education teacher preparation. The teacher who wants to work with children with special needs should engage in an authentic learning classroom and learn from established teachers there. During this time, the new teacher needs to learn how to plan and conduct structured learning with guidance from experienced teachers. The supervisor supervising this teacher needs to provide feedback to improve their teaching methods. Kaur and Salian (2025) expressed their findings from the research focusing on teachers prepared to work in inclusive settings; however, these teachers face difficulties due to a lack of training and knowledge about children with special needs. A major barrier to inclusive education is the insufficient training of educators. Many teachers lack the necessary skills to manage diverse classrooms effectively (UNITAR, 2022). Most of these teachers have difficulty understanding how to use support services and teaching materials. This research supports what O'Brien et al. highlighted previously that it is

important for teachers to have field experience in preschool centers under a special needs care teacher before fully joining as a special needs teacher.

2.2. Theme 2: Existing Support Systems

Support systems are critical to helping teachers do their jobs well, particularly in inclusive classrooms. In Malaysia, there are policies aimed at promoting inclusion, but the actual support available in preschools can be inconsistent. Some teachers work in schools with access to special educators or therapists, while others, especially in rural or privately run centres, have to manage on their own (Plantin Ewe, 2024; Sukumaran, 2021).

Many teachers feel as though they are navigating inclusion alone, without sufficient backup from specialists or school leadership (Hussin et al., 2023). This is especially true for kindergartens that are not under government oversight. Even when resources exist, they are often stretched thin or not autism-specific, making it difficult for teachers to apply what they learn in real-life classroom situations.

In contrast, international research shows that when teachers are part of a strong support network with regular mentoring, collaboration, and access to expert guidance, they feel more confident and equipped to support all learners (Boyle et al., 2020; Lynch & Watson, 2019). Laser et al. (2024) and O'Brien et al. (2024) mentioned that there are many support systems available in the special needs school center, and the teachers need to identify them. They believe that teachers who have experience with the working field will know when and how to use support systems effectively. The support systems aim to reduce families' burden financially and mentally.

Sulek et al. (2025) mentioned that clinical decision support systems are available for autistic children, their parents and their practitioners. This clinic aims to support the child and the family with proper guidance in making decisions about their lives using a holistic approach. In early childhood settings, meaningful collaboration between teachers, families, and therapists has been found to make a real difference (Smith, Holloway, & Thériault, 2017). Malaysia is moving in that direction, but many support systems still need strengthening and better coordination (Lee, 2022).

2.3. Theme 3: Effectiveness of Support Systems

Support systems are only as effective as their impact. Research shows that targeted, hands-on training can empower teachers to implement inclusive practices more confidently and effectively (Donath, Lüke, Graf, Tran, & Götz, 2023). Teachers who receive ongoing, relevant professional development tend to feel less overwhelmed and more successful in supporting their students.

Mullick, Tang, and Lin (2025) found through their research that the effectiveness of support systems was weak because the participants expressed the view that resources are inadequate, the staff are not well trained, and the policy or guidelines of the school are not clear. Sulek et al. (2025) mentioned that not everyone is familiar with how to use the clinical decision support system for autistic children and their families due to a lack of knowledge about this system. It also appears that this system may only assist the children and families of autistic children, and not many places are providing these services. In Malaysia, however, many professional development programs are short-term, general, or too theoretical. Teachers often walk away from workshops without the tools they need to actually help children with autism in the classroom (Sukumaran, 2021; Yahya & Mohamed, 2024). Teachers benefit more from continuous, practice-based support than from one-off courses (Wood, Kettler, & Moore, 2011).

Florian and Spratt (2013) argue that inclusive teaching must be flexible and responsive to students' changing needs. That means teachers need more than just training. They need ongoing support and collaborative spaces where they can reflect, ask questions, and learn from each other. In some schools, this is already happening. But in many settings, teachers still do not have enough time or resources to build these systems into their everyday practice (Plantin Ewe, 2024; Razali et al., 2013).

2.4. Theme 4: Gaps and Unmet Needs

Even with policies in place and growing awareness, there are still major gaps in the way inclusive education for children with autism is delivered in Malaysia. One of the biggest issues is the lack of autism-specific training. Many teachers enter the classroom with only a basic understanding of special education, leaving them unprepared for the unique challenges autism presents (Donath et al., 2023; Low et al., 2017).

There is also a shortage of professionals, such as speech therapists, behavioural consultants, or educational psychologists, who can support teachers and guide intervention strategies. Without this support, teachers are often left to figure things out on their own, which can be frustrating and disheartening (Evans, Jones, & Pring, 2015; Lee, 2022).

Another area that needs attention is the relationship between schools and families. Strong partnerships with parents are essential, especially when working with children with autism. Yet many teachers find it hard to communicate consistently with families due to time constraints or cultural and language differences (Hussin et al., 2023; Smith et al., 2017).

In short, while there is a shared commitment to inclusion, the support structures around teachers still need to catch up. With better training, more accessible expert help, and stronger collaboration among educators and families, inclusive education for children with autism can become not just a goal but a lived reality in every Malaysian preschool.

Research shows that while inclusion is supported in theory, it only works well when teachers have the right knowledge and support (Donath et al., 2023; Florian & Spratt, 2013). Many preschool teachers in Malaysia feel unprepared to support children with autism and often work without enough help or resources (Johnson, Soares, & Gutierrez de Blume, 2021; Low et al., 2018; Yahya & Mohamed, 2024). Although some support systems exist, such as training and access to specialists, they are often limited or hard to access, especially in private or rural preschools (Hussin et al., 2023; Plantin Ewe, 2024). Teachers also need more training focused on autism and better ways to work with families (Razali et al., 2013; Smith et al., 2017). These issues demonstrate that there is still significant room for improvement. This study will explore how support systems for preschool teachers can be strengthened to make inclusive education more effective for children with autism in Malaysia.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to explore the kinds of support preschool teachers receive when working with children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in inclusive classrooms. This design was chosen because it allows the researcher to gain a deep understanding of real-life experiences within Malaysian preschools.

Using a qualitative approach made it possible to gather detailed and meaningful information from teachers about the challenges they face, the support systems in place, and their suggestions for improvement. Semi-structured interviews were used to guide conversations while giving teachers the freedom to share their thoughts openly.

Since the focus was on a small group of teachers with direct experience teaching children with ASD, the goal was not to generalize the findings but to learn from their stories and identify practical ways to strengthen inclusive education in similar settings.

3.2. Population and Sampling

A purposeful sampling strategy was used to determine participants (Creswell, 2014). The study sample consisted of five Malaysian preschool teachers who met the following criteria: (1) have experience in an integrated classroom; (2) have a child with ASD in their classroom; (3) volunteered to participate in the research; (4) live in Malaysia. The identities of the teachers are kept confidential in accordance with research ethics. In this context,

teachers are identified by the notation "T" for teacher, followed by an accompanying participant number (for example, T1). All participants were female. The age range of the participants was 23 to 39 years. Among the five participants, one teacher worked at a mainstream preschool, and four teachers worked at private preschools. The participants' teaching experience ranged from 5 to 20 years. Not all teachers had taken special education courses during their undergraduate education.

3.3. Data Collection Instruments

The data were collected through semi-structured interviews, a key method in case study research (Saglam, 2024). The interview questions were designed based on a thorough literature review (Solarino & Aguinis, 2021). There were 6 questions in the questionnaire as follows: "Challenges Teachers Face in Inclusive Programs", "How Teachers Cope with These Challenges", "What are different ways you cope in an inclusive classroom?", "What methods work best for teaching both autistic and non-autistic students together?", "Do you face challenges with students' learning or understanding?", and "How Teachers Cope with These Challenges and the Methods used?". The teachers also filled out a demographic form that gathered details like age, gender, and teaching experience.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Interviews Data Presentation

In response to the research questions, the following table displays the interview schedule used to collect data from respondents.

Table 1. Theme 1: The challenges faced by preschool teachers who have students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

No	Challenges	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5
1	Behaviour challenges	/	/	/	/	/
2	Students learning and understanding	/	/	/	/	/
3	Environment issue - large student-teacher ratio classrooms	x	/	x	x	/
4	Minimal administrative backing	/	/	/	/	/

Table 1 presents the challenges faced by preschool teachers when working with children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). All five participants report difficulties in managing behavioral issues, such as lack of focus, difficulty following instructions, and disruptive actions like throwing objects. Teachers also indicate that students with ASD struggle with comprehension, self-care skills, and communication, requiring additional instructional support. Furthermore, large student-teacher ratios are highlighted by some teachers (P2, P5) as limiting their ability to provide individualized attention, although others (P1, P3, P4) do not consider this a major issue. Importantly, all teachers agree that minimal administrative backing, including insufficient resources, lack of special education training, and absence of support staff, significantly hinders their ability to create inclusive classrooms.

Table 2. Theme 2: Strategies Used by Preschool Teachers to Support Inclusion.

No	Coping strategies	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5
1	Classroom techniques	/	x	x	x	/
2	Differential instruction	x	x	/	/	/
3	Communication skill	x	x	x	x	x
4	Assistive technology	x	/	x	x	x
5.	Still developing skill	/	/	/	/	/
6	Modifying lesson plan	x	/	/	/	/
7	Using individualized education plan (IEP)	/	/	x	x	x
8	Implement behavior management skills	x	x	x	x	/

Table 2 illustrates the strategies used by preschool teachers to support the inclusion of children with ASD. Participants 1 and 5 incorporate classroom adaptations such as structured seating and visual cues to create supportive learning environments, while Participants 2, 3, and 4 do not adopt these practices, likely due to limited resources or training. Participants 3, 4, and 5 implement differentiated instruction to meet diverse learning needs, but Participants 1 and 2 do not explore this approach in depth. None of the teachers report confidence in using communication strategies such as simplified language, visual prompts, or gestures, which indicates a significant barrier in effectively engaging ASD students. Only Participant 2 employs assistive technology, while others exclude such tools, possibly due to lack of awareness or accessibility. All teachers acknowledge that they are still developing their skills and emphasize the need for more professional development to strengthen their capacity. Participants 2, 3, 4, and 5 adjust their lesson plans by simplifying content, integrating visual aids, and including hands-on activities, whereas Participant 1 does not adopt this practice. The use of Individualised Education Plans (IEPs) remains inconsistent, with Participants 1 and 2 applying them while others do not. Notably, only Participant 5 applies behaviour management techniques such as positive reinforcement and structured routines, suggesting that most teachers require further training and guidance to manage behaviour effectively in inclusive classrooms.

Table 3. Theme 3: Methods that work best for preschool teachers in inclusion settings.

No	Coping strategies	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5
1	Differential instruction	/	x	/	x	x
2	Small group	x	x	x	x	/
3	Visual aids	x	/	x	x	x
4	Positive reinforcement	x	x	x	x	x
5.	Sensory-friendly classrooms	/	x	x	x	x

Table 3 presents the methods that preschool teachers find most effective in inclusive settings. Participants 1, 3, 4, and 5 implement differentiated instruction, small-group activities, and visual aids to support the diverse learning needs of children with ASD, while Participant 2 does not consistently apply these methods. All teachers recognize the value of positive reinforcement, yet its application varies, with some relying more on praise and rewards than others. Only Participant 1 adapts the classroom into a sensory-friendly space, an approach that supports ASD students' focus but is not widely practiced among the group. These findings indicate that while teachers attempt to personalize instruction, the strategies are unevenly adopted, reflecting gaps in training and professional support that could help strengthen inclusive practices.

Table 4. Theme 4: Teacher training and professional development.

No	Coping strategies	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5
1	Special education courses	x	x	x	x	x
2	Inclusive training	x	x	x	x	x
3	Self-learning / In-class learning	/	/	/	/	/
4	Interested in attending special needs/ Inclusive courses	/	/	/	/	/

Table 4 highlights teachers' training and professional development in inclusive education. None of the participants attend formal courses in special or inclusive education, and all rely mainly on self-learning and in-class experiences. Despite this limitation, every teacher expresses strong interest in receiving further training, showing their motivation to improve their knowledge and skills. The absence of structured professional development opportunities leaves teachers underprepared to address the complex needs of children with ASD, yet their willingness to learn presents a clear opportunity for capacity building. This table underscores both the gaps in current training systems and the teachers' commitment to strengthening their competence if provided with accessible and relevant support.

4.2. Findings

This section presents the findings based on the three research objectives and corresponding research questions. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with five preschool teachers working with children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in inclusive settings.

RO1 / RQ1: Types of Support Systems (Emotional, Instructional, and Administrative)

What types of support (emotional, instructional, administrative) do preschool staff receive to help include children with ASD?

1. Emotional Support

All teachers expressed emotional fatigue in handling children with ASD without adequate support. Emotional backing primarily came from peers, but there was no structured support such as mental health services or counseling.

"Sometimes I feel like I am doing everything alone and it's emotionally exhausting." (T3)

Teachers felt that emotional support was essential to sustain their motivation and avoid burnout.

2. Instructional Support

While some teachers applied strategies like differentiated instruction, visual aids, and Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), usage varied. Confidence in these approaches was inconsistent.

"I have tried using picture cards, but I am not sure if I am doing it correctly. No one taught me." (T2)

"Visual schedules helped one of my ASD kids follow routines better. I made them myself using a laptop." (T1)

Only one teacher reported using assistive technology, and most felt uncertain about how to adapt lessons effectively. Many relied on their own experimentation due to a lack of training.

3. Administrative Support

All participants indicated that administrative support was insufficient. They reported a lack of assistant teachers, inadequate classroom resources, and little policy guidance on inclusion.

"It's really hard to give attention when I have 25 students and no assistant. I feel bad for the child." (T4)

Despite these challenges, teachers demonstrated resilience and personal dedication to supporting their students.

RO2 / RQ2: Teacher Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Support Systems

How do preschool staff feel about the effectiveness of these supports in meeting the needs of an inclusive classroom?

Teachers generally felt that current support systems were not effective. Most relied on self-taught methods and expressed uncertainty about whether their efforts were sufficient.

"I don't have training in special education. I just do what I think works, but I always wonder if it's enough." (T5)

This self-doubt was common among all participants and highlighted a strong need for professional development and expert consultation.

RO3 / RQ3: Gaps and Recommendations for Support Improvements

What additional support or improvements do teachers think are needed to better include children with ASD in preschool?

The teachers unanimously called for several critical improvements to better support inclusive education for children with ASD. They emphasized the urgent need for formal training in special education to equip them with the knowledge and strategies required for managing diverse classroom needs. Additionally, they highlighted the importance of having access to shadow teachers who can provide one-on-one support for children with autism.

Managing large class sizes was also seen as a significant barrier, and teachers advocated for smaller class sizes to allow for more individualized attention. The use of assistive technologies was another key recommendation, as such tools can enhance communication and learning for ASD students. Lastly, teachers expressed a strong desire for expert support from psychologists or therapists, who could offer guidance, intervention strategies, and professional insight into handling complex classroom situations.

"I really want to attend courses about autism. I think we need experts to come to our schools." (T1)

They also suggested stress management programs and more collaboration among teachers, administrators, and parents to build an inclusive school culture.

The findings highlight several key challenges and the ways teachers are coping with them. First, teachers pointed out that the classroom environment itself poses significant challenges. Many schools lack the necessary educational resources, and overcrowded classrooms make it difficult to provide individual attention to children with ASD. With student-to-teacher ratios as high as 1:25, teachers struggle to meet the diverse needs of their students, especially when no assistant or shadow teacher is available to support them. This finding is supported by [Hussin et al. \(2023\)](#), where in their research they mentioned that “teachers find it hard to give enough attention to children with ASD because classrooms are overcrowded, and there aren’t enough assistant teachers. A study shows that many Malaysian teachers struggle with inclusive education due to a lack of resources and support, making it even harder to meet the needs of these children”.

Second, managing behavioral challenges is a major concern. Some children with ASD have difficulty following instructions, participating in activities, or maintaining focus. Teachers also reported that some children throw toys, struggle with self-care skills, or face communication barriers, making classroom interactions more complex. [Ali and Rahman \(2023\)](#) highlight that teachers find it challenging to manage behaviors such as difficulty following instructions, joining activities, and communicating in children with ASD. Many teachers feel unprepared due to a lack of training, which further complicates classroom interactions.

Third, teachers feel they lack the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively support children with ASD. Many admitted they are unsure how to manage behavioral issues or adapt their teaching methods. They recognize the need for professional training to equip them with the right strategies and tools for inclusive education. Despite these challenges, teachers have found ways to support their students. To manage behavioral issues, they stay close to the children, repeat instructions patiently, and use gentle guidance techniques such as holding their hands during activities. Some teachers engage children in play to build rapport and encourage participation. [Ali and Rahman \(2023\)](#) agreed as well. Based on their study

When it comes to teaching strategies, teachers modify lesson plans, use Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), incorporate visual aids, and organize small-group activities. They also make the classroom more sensory-friendly and use positive reinforcement, such as stickers, to motivate children with ASD. However, all teachers strongly believe that they need more professional support. They feel that having assistant teachers or special education experts would make a significant difference in creating a truly inclusive learning environment. [Yahya and Mohamed \(2024\)](#) agree that, despite challenges, teachers support children with ASD by adjusting lessons, using visual aids, small-group activities, sensory-friendly spaces, and positive reinforcement. These efforts contribute to a more inclusive classroom.

4.3. Discussion

Inclusive education in early childhood is essential for the overall development of children with ASD, helping them build social skills and independence. However, for inclusion to be truly effective, both teachers and schools need better support. This study reveals that preschool teachers are doing their best, but they are struggling with limited resources, behavioral challenges, and a lack of professional training. Theme 1. Emotional Demands and the Need for Well-being Support. One of the strongest themes to emerge was the emotional strain experienced by teachers working with children with ASD. Teachers described feeling overwhelmed and unsupported, especially when left to handle classroom complexities alone. As T3 shared, “*Sometimes I feel like I am doing everything alone, it’s emotionally exhausting.*” Although some relied on informal peer support, there were no formal systems in place to help them manage stress, anxiety, and burnout. This emotional burden is consistent with the findings of [Johnson et al. \(2021\)](#), who argue that emotional exhaustion among teachers in inclusive settings can lead to reduced job

satisfaction and instructional effectiveness. Supporting teacher well-being is not a secondary issue; it is foundational to sustaining inclusive practices.

While they have developed their own strategies to support children with ASD, they need structured training to enhance their skills and confidence. According to Charman, Taylor, and Drew (2017), Children with ASD often exhibit challenging behaviors due to difficulties in sensory processing, social communication, and emotional regulation. Teachers, therefore, need specialized strategies to address these behaviors effectively. Research Donath et al. (2023) underscores that high-quality professional training significantly improves teachers' abilities to implement inclusive strategies effectively. Theme 2: Instructional Limitations and Professional Learning Gaps. Despite their lack of formal training, teachers made creative efforts to adapt their teaching strategies. Some used visual aids, simplified lesson plans, and hands-on activities to support students with ASD. However, many were unsure of their effectiveness. T2 noted, *"I have tried using picture cards, but I am not sure if I am doing it right. No one taught me."*

This sense of uncertainty points to a larger issue: the gap between what teachers want to do and what they are equipped to do. Donath et al. (2023) emphasize that professional training significantly improves teachers' confidence and ability to implement inclusive strategies. Without access to structured learning, teachers rely on trial-and-error approaches, which, while commendable, are insufficient for complex needs such as those associated with ASD. Theme 3: Administrative Constraints Hindering Inclusion. Administrative support was reported to be minimal or inconsistent. Teachers worked in overcrowded classrooms, often with student-teacher ratios of 1:25, and without the assistance of teaching aides or shadow teachers. These factors made it difficult to provide the individualized attention that children with ASD often require. T4 shared candidly, *"It's really hard to give attention when I have 25 students and no assistant. I feel bad for the child."* 4. Teachers' Motivation and Call for Systemic Support. Despite the barriers, the teachers in this study showed remarkable motivation and a desire for improvement. All participants expressed interest in professional development related to ASD and inclusive education. As T1 said, *"I really want to attend courses about autism. I think we need experts to come to our schools."* This desire reflects a growth mindset and a readiness to embrace inclusive practices if given the tools to do so. Florian and Spratt (2013) argue that teachers' confidence in inclusive teaching increases significantly when they are offered continuous learning opportunities and specialist guidance. The teachers in this study are not resistant to change; they are simply calling for the systemic support necessary to enact it. Loreman (2017) and Boyle et al. (2020) found that successful inclusive education depends on manageable class sizes, sufficient staffing, and access to teaching resources. In the absence of these, inclusion becomes a struggle rather than a support system. Preschools also play a crucial role in making inclusion successful. Providing necessary teaching materials, reducing class sizes, and assigning assistant teachers or shadow teachers would go a long way in supporting both educators and children (Johnson et al., 2021). According to Loreman (2017), successful inclusive education relies on well-resourced schools, adequate staffing, and ongoing teacher support. Without these elements, inclusion remains a challenge rather than an opportunity for meaningful learning. Research suggests that smaller class sizes and adequate resources are crucial for successful inclusion (Boyle et al., 2020). A study by Sharma and Sokal (2016) also emphasizes that teacher workload and classroom conditions significantly impact inclusive practices, reinforcing the need for systemic support.

Ultimately, inclusion goes beyond simply placing children with ASD in mainstream classrooms; it is about providing the necessary support to help them learn, grow, and thrive. This requires ongoing teacher training, sufficient school resources, and accessible professional guidance to create a truly inclusive learning environment (Donath et al., 2023; Hussin et al., 2023; Yahya & Mohamed, 2024). With these improvements, inclusive education can become a meaningful and enriching experience for everyone involved. Studies have consistently shown that teachers' confidence and success in inclusive education are closely linked to their level of training and professional development (Ekins & Grimes, 2009). Florian and Spratt (2013) further highlight that professional learning

opportunities play a crucial role in equipping teachers with inclusive strategies, particularly for managing ASD-related challenges.

4.4. Implications for Findings

This study offers important insights for improving inclusive education for children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in Malaysian preschools. The findings suggest changes are needed in classrooms, school management, and education policies.

1. Teachers Need More Training

All the teachers in this study said they wanted proper training in how to teach children with ASD. They are open to learning; they just need the right opportunities. Regular workshops, hands-on training, and guidance from experts should be part of teacher development.

As [Donath et al. \(2023\)](#) point out, good training helps teachers feel more confident and prepared. Schools should focus on practical strategies like behaviour management, communication techniques, and using Individualized Education Plans (IEPs).

According to [Hussin et al. \(2023\)](#) and [Yahya and Mohamed \(2024\)](#), teachers often feel unprepared to handle ASD students and need guidance from special education experts and therapists. Schools should arrange workshops, mentoring programs, and regular consultations to help teachers gain the skills and support they need. Many schools are not fully prepared for inclusive education, which impacts its success.

2. Schools Need More Support Staff and Smaller Classes

One of the biggest problems teachers face is having too many children in one class without help. With 25 or more students and no assistant teachers, it's hard to give enough support to children with ASD. Hiring teaching assistants or shadow teachers, and reducing class sizes, would make a significant difference. [Boyle et al. \(2020\)](#) also explains that schools need enough staff and manageable class sizes for inclusion to work effectively. Schools should treat these supports as essential, not optional.

3. Teachers Need Emotional Support Too

Teaching children with ASD can be stressful, especially without proper support. Many teachers in this study felt tired, alone, and emotionally drained. Schools should take care of their teachers' well-being by offering counseling, support groups, or stress management programs. [Johnson et al. \(2021\)](#) and [Yahya and Mohamed \(2024\)](#) warn that burnout is common in inclusive settings. Taking care of teachers' mental health helps them stay motivated and effective in the classroom.

4. Inclusion Works Best When Everyone Is Involved

Teachers say they need help from others, not just from colleagues, but also from parents, therapists, and school leaders. Inclusion is not just the teacher's job; it's a team effort. When everyone works together, schools can create a better environment for all children. This supports the views of [Donath et al. \(2023\)](#) and [Florian and Spratt \(2013\)](#) who believe that successful inclusion requires strong teamwork and shared goals across the school.

Inclusive education is more than policy. It's a daily reality shaped by teacher preparedness, classroom conditions, and institutional support. This study paints a clear picture: when teachers are equipped with training, supported emotionally, and given the right resources, they can build classrooms where every child, including those with ASD, can truly belong. Inclusion cannot rest solely on the shoulders of teachers. It must be a shared responsibility across schools, administrators, policymakers, and communities.

Another study from UNITAR explored the collaboration between mainstream teachers and Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCo). It revealed that unclear role definitions, poor communication, and limited institutional support often undermine the effectiveness of this partnership, ultimately affecting the quality of support provided to students with special needs ([UNITAR, 2024](#)).

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations can help improve inclusive education for preschool children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in Malaysia. There is a clear need for continuous professional training focused on inclusive education and ASD-specific strategies. Educational institutions and relevant authorities should offer regular, practical training through workshops, on-site coaching, and mentoring to build teachers' confidence and competencies in supporting diverse learners (Donath et al., 2023; Johnson et al., 2021). For inclusive practices to be effective, classrooms must be furnished with appropriate teaching tools such as visual aids, sensory materials, and assistive devices. Additionally, the appointment of shadow teachers or teaching assistants is essential to help manage large classrooms and support the individual needs of children with ASD (Hussin et al., 2023; Yahya & Mohamed, 2024).

Behavioural challenges are a major concern in inclusive classrooms. Teachers should be trained in practical behaviour management techniques, including the use of positive reinforcement and structured routines. Schools should also facilitate access to special education professionals who can provide expert advice and guidance (Donath et al., 2023). Inclusion should be supported by interdisciplinary collaboration. Teachers would benefit from regular input from therapists, psychologists, and special education experts through mentoring, consultations, and team-based planning. This would enhance the quality of support available to children with ASD.

Teaching in inclusive settings can be emotionally and physically demanding. Schools should prioritize teachers' mental health by providing access to counselling services and peer support programmes. Reducing class sizes and workload would also help prevent burnout and ensure more sustainable teaching practices (Johnson et al., 2021). Effective inclusion is not the responsibility of teachers alone but requires coordinated efforts from school leaders, parents, and specialists. Creating a school culture that values collaboration, awareness, and shared responsibility is vital. Whole-school strategies and inclusive policies should guide classroom practices (Donath et al., 2023).

Since children with ASD have unique learning profiles, teachers should be trained to create and implement IEPs. These plans help tailor instruction to meet each child's specific developmental and educational needs (Donath et al., 2023). To ensure the long-term success of inclusive education, policymakers must allocate adequate funding for training, staffing, classroom adaptations, and specialist services. Schools should be empowered to adopt evidence-based practices that support meaningful and equitable learning for all children (Johnson et al., 2021).

Awareness programs can also help promote acceptance and understanding of ASD. Every child with ASD has unique needs, so teachers should be trained to develop and implement Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) (Donath et al., 2023). These plans help tailor lessons to support each child's learning and development. Policymakers should ensure schools receive enough funding, resources, and training to effectively implement inclusive education. Schools should adopt proven strategies and best practices to create better learning experiences for ASD students (Johnson et al., 2021). By taking these steps, schools can create a nurturing and inclusive environment where every child, regardless of their abilities, can learn, grow, and thrive.

6. CONCLUSION

This study highlights the real challenges preschool teachers face in creating inclusive classrooms for children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Teachers struggle with managing student behavior, handling large class sizes, and working with limited resources, all while lacking proper training (Hussin et al., 2023; Yahya & Mohamed, 2024). Despite these difficulties, they use strategies like individualized education plans (IEPs), visual aids, and behavior management techniques to support students with ASD (Donath et al., 2023).

The study has both academic and practical contributions. Academically, it adds to the research on inclusive education by identifying gaps in teacher training, classroom support, and school readiness (Donath et al., 2023). These insights can help guide future studies and inform education policies. In practice, the study emphasizes the need for better teacher training, improved classroom resources, and collaboration with special education experts

(Johnson et al., 2021). Schools should take a team-based approach, involving teachers, administrators, parents, and specialists to create a more inclusive environment (Hussin et al., 2023). Supporting teachers' well-being through workload management and mental health support is also essential for sustaining effective inclusion (Yahya & Mohamed, 2024). By providing proper training, resources, and support, this study advocates for an education system where all children, regardless of ability, can learn and thrive.

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