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Situational Analysis among Therapy Practitioners in Autism Rehabilitation Centres in Perlis: A Preliminary Study

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Abstract

Notwithstanding the prevalence of Autism in Malaysian society, addressing the outdated lack of data on the needed skills of therapy practitioners is needed as updated data implicates significant impacts beneficial to all parties. Providing the latest data also informs the specific actions needed to reduce Autistic-related problems in Malaysia. Hence, this study seeks to conduct a situational analysis of the needs of therapy practitioners at autism rehabilitation centres in Perlis. A qualitative survey method is used. Ten therapy practitioners from two autism rehabilitation centres in Perlis participated in the survey. Findings indicate that therapy practitioners require skills to communicate, socialise, provide treatments, teach, obtain knowledge, control emotions, and think. Additionally, reflex integration, speech therapy, handling behavioural cases, and hippotherapy are skills that participants have not learned but are considered essential in treating autistic children. Further, therapy practitioners stay in their profession because of their love for children, desire to improve skills

and experience, contribution to the community, and religion. Several ongoing issues faced by parents with autistic children are children's problematic behaviours, lack of time, knowledge, money, and difficulty communicating with their children. As for parental consciousness of the significance of rehabilitating their children, the result shows a high level of awareness. Implications from this research highlight the need for additional training for therapy practitioners to improve services and facilities to deal with autistic children at centres and motivate and guide parents using their practical knowledge to provide interventions at home.

Keywords: Situational Analysis, Therapy Practitioners, Autism Rehabilitation Centres, Parental Consciousness

Introduction

Autism or Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) has been defined and widely used across research contexts in both the globe and Malaysian setting (see Bujang & Jima'ain, 2020; Galvan et al., 2020; Kusrin et al., 2020; Ramachandram, 2019; Sufian & Hamid, 2018; Taresh et al., 2020; Yunus et al., 2020; Zainun et al., 2019). The World Health Organization (WHO) (2021) generally describes ASD as people suffering from participating in social interaction and communication; a part of ASD involves individuals exhibiting certain behaviours or patterns of atypical activities, such as poor transitioning from one activity to another, focusing on details, and expressing unusual reactions towards sensations. Bujang et al (2020) stated that individuals diagnosed with ASD may also experience difficulties in obtaining an education.

From the literature, society's acceptance of ASD is increasingly positive over time. Soltanifar et al (2015) stated that if a society remains with this positive stigma, it can be transformed into positive support for parents with ASD children. Regardless, Khairul Azhar (2018) has stated that several members of the society continue to have a negative attitude towards ASD, and this has impacted the growth among ASD children. Using a quantitative method specifically through surveys, the researchers seek to determine the society's perceptions of ASD children in the state of Perak, Malaysia. The survey participants are teachers, parents, and guardians from a pre-school offering special education. The study's findings are as follows: (1) Society generally has high knowledge about children with ASD, (2) Attitudes of society towards ASD are high, and (3) Positive perceptions of the society towards ASD are high.

Narrowing the literature available on ASD in the Malaysian context, Zainun et al (2019) commented on the Malaysian context and statistics from the National Autism Society of Malaysia (NASOM) have stated that an estimate of 9,000 children is born with ASD every year. Ramachandram (2019) cautions on the rise of ASD-diagnosed cases among children in Malaysia and there is a growing concern for more interventions to be taken to help these children. This is certainly true as Bujang et al (2020) highlighted more than 13,000 families across Malaysia are having a challenging time taking care of their autistic children. The major focus is on providing support and care for their ASD children. Further, specifically in Perak, a state in Malaysia, the president of Autism Rangers, Mohd Shaiful Rizal Mohd Saed has called for the need to establish more facilities to help people with ASD across the state so that they can live in the society and have a normal life (Zaini, 2019).

Next, as reported by Zaini (2019) on the Autism Rangers President's comments for more facilities to be provided to ASD individuals. This simply infers the need for autism

rehabilitation centres. From a health policy point of view, rehabilitation is a common term used to provide individuals with a platform to experience health strategies implemented to function optimally (Nugraha et al., 2020). Commonly, rehabilitation centres involve programmes that include a wide range of parties collaboratively working together to achieve the needs with disabilities, e.g., autism, and help them to live in the society (Lang et al., 2010). In autism rehabilitation centres, as the symptoms of ASD are related to social interaction and communication, programmes implemented in such centres often aim at improving these aspects along with some behavioural difficulties an individual may face (Ceccarelli et al., 2020; Lang et al., 2010; Nugraha et al., 2020).

As such, there are several therapies for autism that can be implemented in rehabilitation centres. Sufian and Hamid (2018) shared the use of functional therapy as a method to build ASD individuals' confidence and self-efficacy in the long term. It helps these individuals to be skilful at interacting with others in society and the surrounding environment. Further, it helps shape normal behaviours and attitudes and improves their academic performance in daily education. Kusrin et al (2020) have discussed the use of social stories as one of the therapies available for ASD individuals. It is a method introduced by Carol Gray in 1991 where short stories are shared with autistic individuals to enable them to understand how society works (Kusrin et al., 2020). Yunus et al (2020) discussed the use of occupational therapies that integrate sensory-based, sensory skills, and social and communication skills-based interventions as ways to help ASD individuals survive in society.

Problem Statement

According to therapists and teachers at rehabilitation centres, most parents who send their autistic children to the centres are from the well-to-do group, the middle 40% income group or M40 and above. These include professionals such as doctors and lecturers. However, this data needs to be re-assessed, and detailed demography needs to be provided as if it is as it shows. Then, the said raising awareness is still limited within certain groups of the community, specifically the highly educated group of people (Ramachandram, 2019). Ramachandram (2019) noted that the previous data on socio-demographic background of parents with ASD children was in 2006, which was more than a decade ago. Similarly, the data gathered needs to be updated as claimed by (Han et al., 2021). They have also mentioned in the context of Singapore that data on Autism must always be updated to ensure the service and needs of ASD patients are taken care of. An awareness campaign targeting other community groups require special attention from the local government and agencies.

The development of services for disabled children and their families is primarily in the hands of professionals or therapists working in government and non-government organizations (NGOs). As a result, services are frequently designed to meet the needs of the professional therapist and organization rather than just on the needs of the child or family (Shorey et al., 2019). In addition, the happening of the Covid-19 pandemic has led to the need for more attention on how various parties can aid ASD patients (Lim et al., 2020). The Star, a local newspaper reported in July 2018, Autism Buddies Founder, Puan Sri Dato' Akmal Abdul Salam commented that though "public awareness of autism is high, their understanding is still low". She added that the education services authorities face a challenging task having to provide facilities and develop programmes to support the needs of people with autism. Likewise, in the News Straits Times, July 2018, UniMAP Vice-Chancellor, Datuk Dr. Zul Azhar

Zahid Jamal stated that autism centres can provide the needed support required by parents and caregivers to manage their autistic children at home. Hence, therapy practitioners are much depended on for their skills and this study aims to conduct a situational analysis among therapy practitioners to know what skills are still needed and how they can improve their services to meet the needs of autistic children.

Thus, the main purpose of this study is to conduct a situational analysis on the needs of therapy practitioners at existing autism rehabilitation centres in Perlis. Hence, the objectives of this study are as follows

1. To investigate the skills needed by the therapy practitioners in providing treatment to children with autism.
2. To study parents' realization towards rehabilitating their autistic children.
3. To identify issues faced by parents in managing their autistic children.

Literature Review

Toran et al (2010) in their study acknowledged the rise of cases of autism among children, there is a need for more special educators to be trained to educate these children to face and reduce the negative challenges posed by autism. This study thus sets to determine the extent of training and knowledge on autism received by special educators. It also determines if special educators have the confidence to educate autistic children. A set of questionnaires adapted from Schwartz and Drager (2008) is translated to the Malay language and distributed to the participants who have been involved in a talk on autism in the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. Findings show that the training courses remain insufficient, and the participants only have a moderate extent of knowledge on autism. Further, special educators only possess a low level of confidence in teaching which is considered worrisome. The researchers recommend that more formal training must be provided, and the quality of the training must be raised to ensure special educators have practical knowledge on handling autism.

Next, in another study done by Han et al (2021), they found that people with autism tend to experience a drastic decline in the quality of services offered to them. This is especially prominent in autistic adults who have graduated from secondary education and are thrust with fear, frustration, and uncertainty as they move on to adulthood. Thus, this research identifies the perspectives of service providers for people with autism. The researchers also recruit autistic adults and the parents/caregivers of autistic children to obtain their views as well. The researchers have conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews after obtaining approval from the institutions' Institutional Review Board. Interview guides are used and the interviews are recorded, transcribed, and coded using QSR NVivo 12 Software. Three main themes are identified from the interviews conducted, where the respective authorities are improving the access to autism-specific services for the people, creating flexible supports in an inclusive environment, and addressing stigma and changing societal attitudes. The researchers exert the need for autism-related services to be amplified for the people.

With reference to the literature reviewed, the complexity of ASD has caused several complexities, especially on treatments and interventions to the parents. Asian parents with children who are diagnosed with ASD are generally facing more risks of unemployment, divorce, and poorer mental health than those Asian parents who do not have such children.

Children who are diagnosed with ASD are generally experiencing meltdowns, expressing disrupted behaviours, and exhibiting other psychological and physical disabilities that can be very stressful to parents (DeGrace, 2004; Hartley et al., 2010; Kuhlthau et al., 2005). Further, the Asian culture greatly values collectivism over individualism and as such, Asian families typically shape their identities as a group rather than being individuals. When there is a child that is diagnosed with ASD, families are automatically devalued and the child experiences shunning and isolation (Langguth, 2003; Lauber & Rossler, 2007; Pirju, 2015). The researchers have used a meta-summary method for performing qualitative studies related to Asian parents with autistic children. Extraction and analysis of data are done through the methods suggested by (Sandelowski and Barroso, 2007). Generally, findings show that: (1) Asian parents are generally uncomfortable and incapable of handling children with ASD; (2) Parents continue to remain stereotyping children with ASD with some negative perceptions, thoughts, and made-up imaginations; (3) Parents are experiencing a great deal of stress and depression when handling ASD children; (4) Children become isolated and lose the ability to socialise with others. Methods to cope with ASD children are such as (1) stepping up and out, (2) self-actualization and child-centeredness, and (3) reliance on religion and traditional methods.

Additionally, the literature has also provided coping strategies for parents and practitioners in dealing with children with autism. Bujang et al (2020) advocated the IKHLAS concept which is one such way to provide parents and practitioners with a way to help cope with children with ASD. The IKHLAS concept is comprised of the following words: *Ilmu* (knowledge), *Kasih sayang* (loving), *Harapan* (hope), *Latihan dan intervensi* (training and intervention), *Amanah* (Trust), and *Sokongan* (Support). In *Ilmu*, parents must have a holistic knowledge on autism and the know-how of handling children with ASD; *Kasih Sayang* in Islamic teaching refers to the responsibilities of the parents to fulfil their duties and roles as parents to love the children, and show no bias towards any children; *Harapan* refers to believe in God and God will not mistreat any child – parents must show strong faith and believe that the child will grow to be better individuals; *Latihan dan intervensi* refer to providing early interventions that will aid ASD individuals to live in a better, positive life from all aspects in future; *Amanah* refers to the trust given by God to the family, and that children need to receive education and achieve self-efficacy; *Sokongan* refers to supporting the children from all dimensions in life so that they can live a full life.

Following the outbreak of COVID-19 and the occurrence of the pandemic, there is a potential issue of paediatrics and caregivers experiencing challenges in managing children with ASD. Lim et al (2020) has written an article that aims at highlighting the implications of COVID19 on these children. In terms of sharing information, caregivers should inform the changes children are experiencing in an appropriate manner and language as well as provide reassurance that they are taken care of; coping with change involves adapting new routine that is suitable; adjusting to new routines involves educating the children to practise ways to reduce the risks of getting infected; maintaining connections with loved ones requires more social connections through technology to reduce anxiety among children; self-care of caregivers involves caregivers to care for themselves and deal with stress appropriately and properly; managing the child's anxiety involves allowing children to participate in activities that enable them to express their feelings, teach coping and calming skills, and, get help from psychologists and/or psychiatrists when needed.

Next, in an interesting review by Ceccarelli et al (2020) on “Fundamental motor skills intervention for children with autism spectrum disorder: A 10-year narrative review”, they noted that ASD is a pervasive neurodevelopmental condition that is characterized by an impairment in social interaction and communicative skills, as well as the presence of repetitive and restricted behaviours. They added that for autistic people, social difficulties represent barriers to physical activity and that rehabilitation programmes usually target social interaction, communicative skills, and behavioural difficulties as their primary foci. This review directs therapy practitioners on their roles in rehabilitation centres.

In another article, Tsang et al (2019) discuss the importance of early detection of ASD, early signs of ASD, actions to be taken if suspected to have ASD, early interventions that are available for children, how to support individuals with ASD, and if there is a role for complementary and alternative medicine. Early detection is crucial in obtaining an early diagnosis and intervention programmes for the children. The detection is done by observing if children show atypical language use, poor social interaction and behaviour, and express rigid thoughts. Various examples of early interventions can be done, such as occupational therapy, speech-language therapy, Picture Exchange Communication System, the TEACCH programme, and applied behavioural analysis. Children with ASD must be supported through specialised learning environments and family physicians. Finally, alternative medicine such as traditional Chinese medicine, acupuncture, transcranial magnetic therapy, and sensory integration therapy should be taken at sparse since the evidence is insufficient.

Further, in Salgado-Cacho et al (2021)’s study, they found that the exponential increase of ASD prevalence in Western counties has called for an improvement of early detection and intervention to enhance developmental milestones. Using the method of a systematic literature review from various credible sources, the researchers have identified a few instruments that show high predictive value and easy application for ASD. They noted that BITSEA (Brief Infant Toddler Social and Emotional Assessment) evaluates children from 11 to 48 months old through a 42-item questionnaire. It identifies aspects such as social-emotional problems, behaviours, or deficits in social and emotional competence; FYI (First Year Inventory) is a screening parent report questionnaire to determine children who are at risk of ASD or developmental disorder; ITC/CSBS-DP measures language detection and evaluates social and communication behaviours. PREAUT-Grid observes how the child interacts with the paediatrician and mother; APSI (Autism Parent Screen for Infants) is designed to monitor early signs of ASD; STAT (Screening Tool for Autism in Toddlers and Young Children) assesses play, communication and limitation skills among children.

Hyman et al (2020) stressed that more accurate and culturally sensitive screening approaches are needed. Symptoms of ASD are neurologically based. Core symptoms are such as restricted social communication and interaction, showing repetitive patterns of behaviour; atypical development may be abnormalities in understanding the intent of others, diminished interactive eye contact, and atypical use and understanding of gesture presage. The diagnostic criteria, DSM-5 can be used to detect ASD when three symptoms of social affective differences need to be present. It also introduces an approach to the severity rating of ASD. The severity level has three levels, with level 1 “Requiring Support”, level 2 “Requiring Substantial Support”, and level 3 “Requiring very substantial support”. The two domains for DSM-5 to detect ASD are (1) the persistent deficits in social communication across contexts,

and (2) restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviours, interests, and/or activities. The report also gave suggestions on ways to manage children with ASD and make appropriate evaluations.

Methodology

In conducting the current research, a qualitative research design is implemented. Qualitative research is a widely used research inquiry in social sciences and is generally used to better understand a phenomenon through in-depth interpretation and understanding (Elliot, 2018; Hemmler et al., 2020; Jansen, 2010; Mukhopadhyay & Gupta, 2014; Nowell et al., 2017). To conduct the research, a qualitative survey method is used to gather the necessary data by the researchers. The use of a qualitative survey is not to quantify the responses received to achieve generalisation, rather it aims at further describing the “how” and “why” respondents view a phenomenon being investigated in a particular manner (Jansen, 2010; Mohajan, 2018). The qualitative survey also offers another advantage to which it allows saliency and generating new ideologies from the data gathered, which close-ended questionnaires in quantitative inquiries often fail to achieve (Jansen, 2010; Mohajan, 2018; Popping, 2015). Furthermore, using a qualitative survey method comes with the rationale of avoiding any physical contact with the participants as Covid-19 is highly contagious and may be fatal when contracted (Akintunde et al., 2021; Singh & Sagar, 2021).

For the purpose of this study, the qualitative survey is constructed and designed to conduct a study on the skills needed by therapy practitioners at rehabilitation centres located in the state of Perlis, Malaysia. These autism rehabilitation centres are private sectors that have dealt with children under the age of 12. Three such centres have been identified and asked using the qualitative survey. The constructed qualitative survey is distributed to therapy practitioners through Google Forms, where links are attached for easy and immediate access. The survey consists of two parts, Sections A and B. Section A involves gathering the demographic data of the therapy practitioners, which includes gender, age, educational level, marital status, and job experience. Section B comprises of five open-ended questions that inquire on the skills needed by the therapy practitioners. Only 10 therapy practitioners (one male and nine females) from two of the centres in Perlis responded to the survey distributed.

To analyse the data, descriptive analysis and thematic analysis is used. In the descriptive analysis, the researchers analyse the demographic data obtained in Section A of the survey and present the data in the form of table. Thematic analysis, on the other hand, is a form of data analysis method frequently used in qualitative research inquiries, to which the researcher identifies codes from the data, organises and analyses the codes, and presents the codes into themes (Elliot, 2018; Hemmler et al., 2020; Moira & Delahunt, 2017; Mukhopadhyay & Gupta, 2014; Nowell et al., 2017; Popping, 2015). Moira and Delahunt (2017) also described thematic analysis as a method to distinguish patterns or themes in qualitative data. In the use of open-ended questionnaire, coding can be used to generate the necessary themes from the responses in further describing how respondents see a phenomenon being researched (Popping, 2015). In ensuring the trustworthiness of the data, inter-rater reliability is used whereby more than one researcher evaluate on the same data and come to a consensus that the data is valid (Nowell et al., 2017). For the purpose of this study, the researchers independently review the findings obtained in thematic analysis and

upon discussion, decide the final themes that have been represented in the responses gathered from the open-ended survey.

Findings

The findings of the study consist of Section A and Section B. Section A includes the demographic data which include gender, age, educational level, marital status and job experience. Section B has five open-ended questions explaining the need analysis of therapy practitioners at autism rehabilitation centres in Perlis.

Demographic Background

Table 1

Background of the Respondents

No.	Gender	Age	Educational Level	Marital Status	Job Experience
R1	F	21-30	Degree and above	Married	2-4 years
R2	F	21-30	Diploma	Not married	2-4 years
R3	F	21-30	Diploma	Not married	<1 years
R4	M	21-30	Diploma	Not married	<1 years
R5	F	21-30	Diploma	Not married	<1 years
R6	F	31-40	Degree and above	Married	>5 years
R7	F	21-30	Degree and above	Not married	<1 years
R8	F	21-30	Degree and above	Not married	<1 years
R9	F	21-30	Diploma	Not married	2-4 years
R10	F	21-30	Diploma	Not married	1-2 years

Table 1 displays the overall background information of the respondents who have responded to the research conducted. Each respondent is assigned with the pseudonym RX, with X being numbers. In the gender section, M refers to males while F refers to females. Further from the table, except respondent R6 who has an age belonging to the category of 31 to 40 years, the remaining respondents have ages between 21 and 30 years old. As for education level, six respondents have educational qualifications at the Diploma level, while the remaining four respondents have educational qualifications Degree and above. Also, among the respondents, only R1 and R6 are married while the remaining respondents are not married. Finally, from Table 1 five of the respondents (R3, R4, R5, R7, and R8) have a working experience of less than a year with Autistic children; three of the respondents (R1, R2, and R9) have a working experience between two to four years; one respondent (R10) has a

working experience between one to two years, and R6 is the only respondent who has a working experience of above five years with Autistic children.

Skills Needed by Therapy Practitioners

Section B of the questionnaire focuses on the need for therapy practitioners in autism rehabilitation centres in Perlis. There were five open-ended questions and the respondents' responses are as follows:

Table 2

Skills Needed by Therapy Practitioners

Respondent	Skills Needed by Therapy Practitioners
R1	Ability to communicate
R2	Ability to communicate and apply treatments effectively according to the children's progress
R3	Ability to teach
R4	Experienced, knowledgeable, and patience
R5	Ability to socialize and communicate as well as the ability to think critically and creatively
R6	Have the basic knowledge on handling and implementing interventions to Autistic children
R7	Patience
R8	Ability to give instructions to students regardless of verbal or non-verbal forms
R9	Able to regulate emotions and think out of the box; always flexible with the interventions conducted and practiced not only in the therapy centre but also in the community
R10	Ability to manage the behaviours of Autistic children

Table 2 shows respondents R1, R2, R5, and R8 have stated that communication is an important skill that must be practised by practitioners when providing therapies to autistic children.

The respondents have specifically mentioned the term "communication" or related terms in the questionnaire. Their responses are as follows:

Ability to communicate (R1)

Ability to communicate and apply treatments effectively according to the children's progress (R2)

Ability to socialise and communicate as well as the ability to think critically and creatively (R5)

Ability to give instructions to the students regardless of verbal or non-verbal forms (R8)

Another skill that must be practised is the ability to socialise, which this ability involves understanding and managing Autistic children's feelings properly. Two of the respondents have stated that:

Ability to socialise and communicate as well as the ability to think critically and creatively (R5)

Ability to manage Autistic children's behaviour (R10)

The ability to apply treatment is also viewed as crucial in ensuring appropriate treatments are given according to the children's progress. Respondents have stated that:

Ability to communicate and ability to apply the treatment according to the children's progress (R2)

Regulation of emotion and thinking out of the box... always flexible with the interventions conducted and practicable in the therapy centres as well as in the community (R9)

Another important skill that a therapy practitioner should possess is the ability to teach. It is viewed as an important skill that must be possessed among therapy practitioners for Autistic children. A respondent R3 has written his response as the "Ability to teach" (R3).

Knowing Autistic children is important to therapy practitioners to ensure their duties are executed properly. A respondent (R4) has stated that a therapy practitioner should be "Experienced, knowledgeable, and patience" They should also possess basic knowledge on how to manage and provide intervention to the Autistic children" (R6).

Patience is also viewed as an important element to therapy practitioners of Autistic children to ensure the emotions of the practitioners are well-managed. The respondents (R4 and R 7) have responded noted that "Experienced, knowledgeable, and patience" (R4) and similarly, "Patience" (R7).

Lastly, the ability to think is one of the skills therapy practitioners should possess when handling Autistic children. The respondents R9 and R5 have responded by writing,

Regulation of emotion and thinking out of the box... always flexible with the interventions conducted and practicable in the therapy centres as well as in the community (R9)

Ability to socialise and communicate as well as ability to think critically and creatively (R5)

Skills That Autistic Practitioners in Perlis Lack but Are Perceived to Be Necessary

There are four skills that the therapy practitioners have not learned while three of the respondents R6, R7 and R10 had responded that they did not need any new skills. Speech therapy seems to be the skill that is the most needed. The four skills include the following:

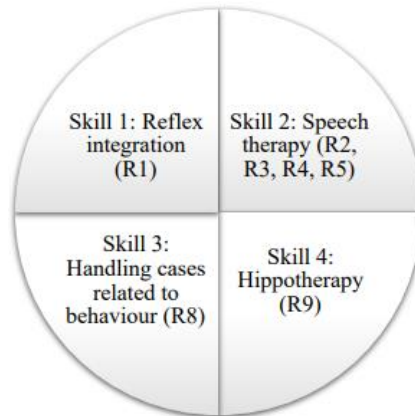


Figure 1: Skills that Autistic Practitioners in Perlis Lack but are Perceived to be Necessary

Reasons Why Practitioners in Perlis Continue to Contribute to the Autistic Field

Table 3

Reason Why Practitioners in Perlis Continue to Contribute to the Autistic Field

Respondents	Reason Why Practitioners in Perlis Continue to Contribute to the Autistic Field
R1	Interest and skill
R2	Interest and wanting to help
R3	To add to the experience
R4	To help society
R5	It is a source of strength and joy to me when seeing the improvement shown by these children and with the development shown is also able to delight their parents. By looking after these autistic children, I become a more grateful person with the sustenance and health provided by Allah SWT. For me, the parents of these special children are great, and this inspires me to contribute in learning and helping these special children, Insyallah.
R6	Fondness for children
R7	Parental and community awareness of the importance of identifying children’s growth and the importance of therapy.
R8	The thing that makes me want to continue to contribute in this field in the state of Perlis is to fulfil the demands of ‘Fardhu Kifayah’. Moreover, helping special children to be independent in their lives as well as seeing

	their family members happy is also to some extent our happiness. Insyallah.
R9	Because such children need us to help them achieve all the skills and stimuli parallel to their development.
R10	These children are in dire need of therapy to meet their needs to function in everyday activities and want to help them to achieve an optimal level of functionality in performing daily activities.

Based on the responses, there were multiple reasons given by the respondents as to why they want to continue contributing to this field in Perlis. Among the reasons include the respondents' love for children (R5, R6, R8, R9 and R10), interest and improving their skills and experience as therapists (R1, R2, and R3), and lastly, responsibility to the community (R7) and religion (R8).

Parent Awareness towards Rehabilitating Their Autistic Children

Nine out of 10 rehabilitation practitioners agree that parents of autistic children have the awareness to help rehabilitate their children except for R8. From the data collected, the majority of the respondents (90%) agree that the majority of the parents today do realise the importance of providing rehabilitation for Autistic children, while only one respondent (10%) disagrees with this statement.

Issues faced by parents with autistic children while rehabilitating their children

Respondents' responses are as follows:

Table 4

Issues Faced by Parents

Respondents	Issues Faced by Parents
R1	Behaviour
R2	Tantrum
R3	Attitude and learning
R4	Finance
R5	Emotional and physical stress due to the behaviour of the special children
R6	Behaviour management
R7	Understanding instruction, communication, focus and sensory
R8	Time constraint to practice suggested activity (home programme) consistently, special children need consistent and continuous motivation, especially at home. They need therapy, but we understand that parents have other commitments too.

R9	Time constraint because most are working parents. Financial constraints, lack of knowledge also become issues for parents to help their children.
R10	Lack knowledge/exposure about problems faced by autistic children and ways to manage it.

Based on the responses given above, five respondents (R1, R2, R3, R5 and R6) have indicated children's problematic behaviours such as tantrums as the main concern for therapy practitioners. Other concerns or issues include time constraints as many parents are working. Other issues include children's learning, knowledge about children with autism, financial constraint, difficulty communicating with the children, and children practising home programmes which need to be done continuously and consistently.

Discussion

Skills Needed by Therapy Practitioners

Based on the study, the researchers found that seven skills are needed by therapy practitioners are the ability to communicate, the ability to socialise, the ability to apply treatment, the ability to teach, knowledge, the ability to control emotion, ability to think. These findings were supported by the previous study.

Firstly, Lim et al (2020) have stated that caregivers should share the information in an appropriate manner and language. It is shown that ability to communicate and socialise are important to therapy practitioners. Next, Bujang et al (2020) stated that knowledge is one of the ways to handle children with ASD in his concept IKHLAS. In addition, social interaction, communicative skills, and behavioural difficulties are the most focused programmes in rehabilitation centres (Ceccarelli et al., 2020).

Further, one of the prominent skills therapy practitioners need to have is the ability to communicate as highlighted in the findings. Throughout the questionnaire distributed, the open-ended question where it asked about the opinions of the respondents on the most important skill therapy practitioners should possess, the frequently used word is "communicate." The World Health Organization (2021) has previously stated that ASD patients tend to suffer from social interaction and communication plays a vital role in ensuring ASD patients capable to express themselves in the society. Similarly, scholars across the globe generally agree that rehabilitation centres should focus on providing more social interaction and communication interventions to help ASD patients to overcome the difficulty to communicate (Ceccarelli et al., 2020; Lang et al., 2010; Nugraha et al., 2020). Since rehabilitation centres involve therapy practitioners, it is logical to assume that all members in the rehabilitation centres should possess the necessary knowledge and skills to provide communication-related interventions to help ASD patients of all ages to communicate.

Skills that Autistic Practitioners in Perlis lack but are Perceived to be Necessary

Based on the findings, there are four skills that the therapy practitioners have not learned but perceived as needed in the therapy for Autistic children, which are reflex integration, speech therapy, handling behaviour-related cases, and hippotherapy.

From the study, the reflex integration, as mentioned by one of the respondents, matches the fundamental motor skills as mentioned by Ceccarelli et al (2020) whose article mentioned "Fundamental motor skills intervention for children with autism spectrum disorder: A 10-year narrative review", stated that social difficulties for autistic people are barriers to physical activity, and that rehabilitation programmes typically focus on social interaction, communicative skills, and behavioural difficulties as their primary foci. These abilities are required for practitioners to learn and perform their duties in rehabilitation facilities.

Interestingly, none of the respondents has mentioned any methods related to the IKHLAS concept as proposed by (Bujang et al., 2020). It is unknown if the existing therapy practitioners are aware of this concept when providing therapy or treatment. Regardless, learning more skills related to providing therapy to ASD patients is considered important as they serve as a form of service to ASD patients (Han et al., 2021). If the service provided to treat ASD patients declines, the effectiveness of the rehabilitation centre may not be significant (Han et al., 2021). Evidently, ASD therapy practitioners should not stop at learning the skills taught when receiving the necessary professional education but rather continue to expand their repertoire through more training sessions.

While communication remains a priority from the respondents' point of view, respondents such as R2, R6, R9, and R10 share a common theme in the first open-ended question. This is evident where all four respondents have responded that there is a need for generally effective interventions to occur in rehabilitation centres to help ASD patients, and these interventions or treatments should be capable of, for example, managing ASD patients' behaviours. From a critical point of view, even though there is an increase of positive views on treating ASD patients (Soltanifar et al., 2015), Zaini (2019) with reference to the Autism Rangers that is located in Perak has highlighted that more facilities are required to provide effective interventions and treatments for the ASD patients.

Reasons why Practitioners in Perlis continue to contribute to the Autistic Field

From the responses, there are a variety of reasons why respondents intend to continue contributing to this field in Perlis. Among the reasons are the respondents' love for children, their desire to improve the children's skills, possess experience as therapists, their responsibility towards the community and religion.

Toran et al (2010) noted that special education teachers have low confidence in their ability to teach children with autism due to their lack of training. However, they showed interest to undergo advanced courses to enhance their competence in educating children with autism. Similarly, Brookman et al.'s (2012) findings also indicated that though Community Mental Health therapists serve many children with ASD and they perceive their job as challenging and frustrating due to limited training received; they are highly motivated to receive a comprehensive ASD training on identifying ASD characteristics and using intervention strategies. Therefore, there is a common interest and desire to learn shown by not only special education teachers but also therapy practitioners. This study also found that the interest and motivation of the respondents are the reasons they continue to remain and contribute to society in this field.

Parents' Awareness towards Rehabilitating their Autistic Children

Based on the survey results, the majority of parents with autistic children have the awareness to help rehabilitate their children. According to the respondent, 90 per cent agree that the majority of parents today recognise the importance of providing rehabilitation for Autistic children. This finding shows there exist a more parental awareness about autism as compared to an earlier study done a decade ago by Ting and Chuah (2010) on Malaysian parents' recognition of autistic behaviours. Their findings showed that parents had noticed the behavioural differences of their children but did not know that it was symptoms of autism. Another study by Adams et al (2012) noted that parents have noticed and are aware that some of the children with autism may have speech but others may have little or no speech at all. Thus, this study's findings indicate that parental concerns and awareness about autism continues to increase due to the many studies done in this area. Ramachandram (2019) also noted that higher parental education can contribute to increased awareness leading to early referral and intervention. Though the perceptions of society towards ASD have changed, as another decade passes by, facilities, interventions, and treatments remain an issue in treating ASD patients in Malaysia. Zaini (2019) has further mentioned that rehabilitation centres should serve as a proper platform for ASD patients to be treated and able to function effectively.

Issues faced by parents with Autistic Children while rehabilitating their children

According to the survey, the main challenges that parents of autistic children face when rehabilitating their children are problematic behaviours such as tantrums. Another concern or issue is a lack of time, as many parents are working. Other issues include children's learning, knowledge about autistic children, financial constraints, communication with children, and children practicing home programmes that must be motivated continuously and consistently. ASD has caused several complexities, particularly in treatments and interventions, which can be very stressful for parents with autistic children. Children with ASD frequently experience meltdowns, exhibit disrupted behaviours, and show other psychological and physical disabilities that can be very stressful for parents, (DeGrace, 2004; Hartley et al., 2010; Kuhlthau et al., 2005).

Conclusion

This study is carried out to seek answers on the skills needed by therapy practitioners at autism rehabilitation centres. Though the majority of therapy practitioners have limited experiences of less than five years, they realized that there are many skills needed to perform as a therapist and without adequate skills, they will not be able to carry out their duties to provide for the autistic children at the centre as well as fulfill the parents' hope and expectations. With this study, it would further enable the researchers to design a teaching and learning module for both parents and rehabilitation practitioners in Perlis. The situational analysis carried out and their findings will guide the researchers to develop a suitable module that is applicable for therapy practitioners at rehabilitation centres as well as for parents to provide interventions for their autistic children at home. This would help to reduce problems related to autism and improve the parents' and children's well-being.

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