

Impact of Shadow Aides in Supporting Behaviour Management for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Inclusive Classrooms

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ABSTRACT:

This study explores the impacts of shadow aides on the behaviour management of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in inclusive classrooms. This research was driven by the need to enhance inclusive education for those with ASD in Malaysia through the implementation of shadow aides. The main objectives of this study were to examine the impacts of shadow aide on the behaviour management of students with ASD in inclusive classrooms and the perspectives of parents and mainstream teachers on the effectiveness of shadow aides in inclusive classrooms. A qualitative approach involving classroom observation of two students diagnosed with ASD, one of which accompanied by a shadow aide and self-administered interviews were used with a parent and three mainstream teachers who taught those students. The classroom observations took place for a span of five consecutive weeks, two classes per week. Classroom observations were video recorded for further analysis of data. Findings revealed that differentiated techniques implemented by the shadow aide such as positive reinforcements, modelling and redirection, significantly improved student behaviour. The findings of the interview further supported that shadow aides not only impacted the behaviours of students but also provided one-on-one support, created a positive learning environment, social support and managed behavioural and emotional regulation. This research contributes to the field of special education by providing practical insights on how inclusive education can be enhanced for those with ASD through the implementation of shadow aides. Recommendations were made to guide further research in the field of special education and support the development of more effective approaches related to inclusive education in Malaysia.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Inclusive Education, Shadow Aides, Behaviour Management, Classroom Support.

1. Introduction

Inclusive education is gradually becoming a fundamental approach used in ensuring equal learning opportunities for all students, including those with Special Educational Needs (SEN) (Sulaiman et al., 2019). In Malaysia, inclusive education policies that have been implemented demonstrate the commitment of the country in integrating students with disabilities into

mainstream classrooms, including those with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) (Sulaiman et al., 2019). Nonetheless, integrating students with ASD into mainstream classrooms successfully comes with a set of challenges, especially in terms of behavioural management. These challenges often demand additional individualized support in the mainstream educational setting.

As part of serving additional support in an inclusive education setting, shadow aides who are trained individuals in the special education field have emerged as a form of support (Sabatin, 2020). Shadow aides provide assistance in learning, managing behaviours, and promoting social inclusion. Although the support of shadow aides is widely used in other countries, existing literature indicates that the use of such support in Malaysia is still limited and understudied. Hence, this gap emphasizes the need to explore the impacts of shadow aides in managing the behaviours of ASD students and how their presence influences the experience of inclusive education. This research examines the techniques used by shadow aides to enhance behavioural management, improve social interaction, and increase classroom participation. The focus of the research on the experiences of students with ASD and shadow aides aims to provide valuable insights into best practices for inclusive education in Malaysia and to contribute to the expansion of literature regarding successful behavioural support strategies for SEN students.

Inclusive education for children with disabilities is globally recognized as a fundamental right for all children. The Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025 emphasizes the importance of inclusion for children with disabilities, with a goal of enrolling 30% of special education students in inclusive programs by 2015 and 75% by 2025 (Sulaiman et al., 2019). However, Malaysia has a significant deficit of competent teachers and special education specialists. According to the Malaysian Education Blueprint in 2013, the government hired only 50 clinical psychologists, 157 speech therapists, and 157 audiologists. The Ministry of Education aims to increase resources for training specialists and special education instructors, as well as exchanging information and best practices (Sulaiman et al., 2019). Within this context, shadow aides represent a practical solution to bridge the gap between policy aspirations and classroom realities.

Shadow aides are professionals who work one-on-one with students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms to help them learn,

participate, and behave appropriately (Guo & Wang, 2025). Their role is particularly important for ASD students, who often struggle with social communication, interpreting verbal and nonverbal cues, and managing behavioural challenges (Hodges et al., 2019). By providing individualized support, shadow aides enable ASD students to participate in diverse educational experiences alongside their non-disabled peers. This study therefore seeks to address the knowledge gap regarding the specific contributions of shadow aides in inclusive practices and classroom dynamics in Malaysia.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this study are:

1. To examine the impact of shadow aides on the behaviour management of students with ASD in inclusive classrooms.
2. To examine the perceptions of mainstream teachers and parents on the effectiveness of shadow aides in inclusive classrooms.

Literature Review

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is best explained as a neurodevelopmental disorder (Hodges et al., 2019). It is distinguished by abnormal abilities or impairments in social interaction, verbal or nonverbal communication, repetitive behaviours, restrictive patterns, and interests (Halder et al., 2022). The term “spectrum” refers to the heterogeneity of symptoms, which vary in intensity and complexity (Halder et al., 2022). Children with ASD may learn, behave, and interact differently compared to neurotypical children (Hodges et al., 2019). Most children with ASD have trouble with social communication and find it difficult to interpret verbal and nonverbal cues, which hinders their ability to excel in mainstream classrooms.

Shadow aides are professional assistants who work one-on-one with students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms (Sabatin, 2020). Their responsibilities include reinforcing positive behaviours, modelling appropriate actions, redirecting disruptive behaviours, and supporting

academic engagement. Prior research discovered that shadow aides play a vital role in giving academic and psychological support to students enrolled in inclusive programs throughout the school year (Sabatin, 2020). Shadow aides allow ASD students to participate in diverse educational experiences alongside their peers, unlike in separate classrooms. Although several studies highlight the potential benefits of shadow aides, there is insufficient research on their specific contributions to inclusive practices and classroom dynamics in Malaysia. This underscores the importance of examining their role in behaviour management and inclusion.

The Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025 emphasizes inclusion, aiming to increase enrolment of special education students in mainstream classrooms (Sulaiman et al., 2019). However, challenges persist due to a shortage of trained specialists and limited teacher preparedness (Goh et al., 2024). Many mainstream teachers lack readiness and knowledge of how teaching strategies can be adapted to ensure inclusion (Goh et al., 2024). Teacher attitudes also influence the success of inclusive practices, with non-supportive attitudes reducing motivation and self-efficacy (Goh et al., 2024). Shadow aides represent a practical solution to these challenges. By working alongside mainstream teachers, they provide individualized support that bridges the gap between policy aspirations and classroom realities. Their presence ensures that ASD students are not only integrated but also supported in ways that promote meaningful participation and learning (Guo & Wang, 2025).

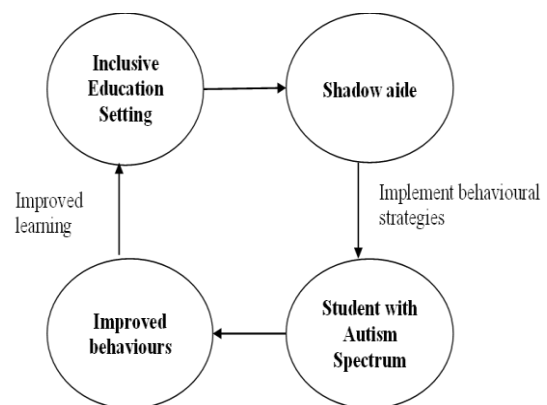
In countries such as the United Kingdom and Australia, teaching assistants are formally integrated into classrooms to support ASD students (Goh et al., 2024). These assistants work closely with mainstream teachers to monitor progress, manage behaviours, and facilitate inclusion. Such systems demonstrate the effectiveness of structured support roles in achieving inclusive education goals. In contrast, Malaysia lacks a formalized system for shadow aides. Their presence is often ad hoc, dependent

on parental initiative rather than institutional policy. This difference underscores the need for Malaysia to develop structured frameworks that recognize and integrate shadow aides into the education system.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by Bandura's Social Learning Theory (SLT). SLT emphasizes learning through observation, imitation, and modelling. Shadow aides embody this framework by modelling appropriate behaviours, reinforcing positive actions, and redirecting negative behaviours. Through these strategies, ASD students learn behavioural norms and social skills in real-time classroom contexts. This conceptual framework (Figure 1) guides the research design and analysis, linking theory, practice, and outcomes to demonstrate how shadow aides contribute to inclusive education.

Figure 1



2. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the impacts of shadow aides on the behaviour management of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in inclusive classrooms. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for in-depth exploration of classroom dynamics, behavioural interventions, and the lived experiences of students, parents, and teachers. The design enabled the researcher to capture real-time interactions and nuanced perspectives that quantitative methods may not fully reflect (Sabatin, 2020; Guo & Wang, 2025).

The research was conducted through classroom observations and self-administered interviews.

Classroom observations provided direct evidence of shadow aide practices and their effects on student behaviour, while interviews offered insights into the perceptions of parents and mainstream teachers regarding the effectiveness of shadow aides (Goh et al., 2024).

The study focused on two students diagnosed with ASD in mainstream classrooms. One student was accompanied by a shadow aide, while the other was not, allowing for comparative observation of behavioural management strategies. In addition, one parent and three mainstream teachers who taught these students were interviewed. This sampling approach was purposive, targeting participants who could provide relevant data on the role of shadow aides in inclusive classrooms. The small sample size reflects the constraints of the study but provides rich qualitative data for analysis (Sulaiman et al., 2019).

Two instruments were employed in this study. First classroom observations, conducted over five consecutive weeks, with two classes observed per week. Observations were video recorded to enable detailed analysis of behavioural interventions and student responses (Sabatin, 2020).

Classroom observations were carried out systematically to document shadow aide practices and student behaviours. The researcher recorded instances of positive reinforcement, modelling, redirection, and participation, as well as disruptive behaviours such as hitting tables, throwing paper, and leaving seats. Observation data were analyzed by reviewing video recordings and coding behavioural incidents. Techniques used by shadow aides were categorized into reinforcement, modelling, redirection, and participation strategies. Student behaviours were classified as either positive (e.g., attentive listening, task completion) or disruptive (e.g., fiddling with pencils, scribbling).

Second self-administered interviews, conducted with one parent and three mainstream teachers. The interviews focused on perceptions of shadow aides' effectiveness in providing one-on-

one support, creating a positive learning environment, facilitating social inclusion, and managing behavioural and emotional regulation (Aristya et al., 2024). Interviews were conducted using open-ended questions to allow participants to express their views freely. Responses were collected in written form, ensuring that participants had time to reflect and articulate their perspectives (Goh et al., 2024). Interview data were analyzed thematically. Responses were coded to identify recurring themes, including one-on-one support, positive learning environment, social support, and behavioural and emotional regulation. These themes were compared with observation findings to triangulate the data and strengthen validity (Guo & Wang, 2025; Hodges et al., 2019).

3. Results

This study explored the impact of shadow aides on the behaviour management of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in inclusive classrooms. The findings are based on classroom observations of two students one accompanied by a shadow aide and interviews with one parent and three mainstream teachers.

Classroom observation

The classroom observations spanned five consecutive weeks, with two sessions per week, focusing on two students diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). One student was supported by a shadow aide, while the other was not. The observations were video recorded and analyzed to identify behavioural patterns, intervention techniques, and classroom engagement.

• Positive Reinforcement Techniques

The shadow aide consistently used positive reinforcement to encourage desired behaviours. These included:

Figure 2: Provides the student sugar-free jelly beans



Tangible Rewards: Sugar-free jelly beans (Figure 2) were offered as incentives for task completion and appropriate behaviour. This strategy was effective in motivating the student to remain seated and complete assigned tasks.

Figure 3: High fives



Figure 4: Words of Encouragement



Social Rewards: High fives and verbal praise such as “Good job!” (Figure 3 & 4) were used to reinforce participation and compliance.

Figure 5: Provides sticker



Symbolic Rewards: Stickers were (Figure 5) given to acknowledge effort and cooperation, which visibly boosted the student's morale. These reinforcement strategies align with Sabatin (2020), who emphasized the role of shadow aides in promoting behavioural compliance through individualized rewards. Moreover, reinforcement not only supported Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) children's engagement but also reflected the broader principle that individualized interventions are more effective in addressing diverse developmental needs. Handling children with ASD requires not only patience but also specialized techniques; strategies such as positive reinforcement can enhance their developmental progress by fostering motivation, consistency, and positive behavioral outcomes.

• **Modelling and Demonstration**

The shadow aide employed modelling techniques to guide the student's behaviour. Physical Modelling: Demonstrating hand placement, clapping, and quiet sitting helped the student mirror appropriate classroom conduct (Figures 6).

Figures 6: Placement of hands, Clapping, Keeping quiet**Figures 7: Demonstration, Raising hands, Participation**

Behavioural Cues: The aide raised hands (Figures 7) to signal participation and

demonstrated how to respond to teacher prompts

Figures 8: Guided Writing

Academic Modelling: Guided writing and positioning during tasks (Figures 8)

enabled the student to follow instructions more effectively.

Figures 9: Positioning**Figures 10: Hand placement**

Redirection: Physical redirection methods of seating position (Figure 9) and placement of hands (Figure 10) enabled better focus and minimized distraction.

These practices reflect Bandura's Social Learning Theory, where learning occurs through observation and imitation (Hodges et al., 2019). Thus, observing the shadow aide's demonstrations and imitating the modeled actions, the student was able to internalize

appropriate classroom behaviours, reinforcing the effectiveness of modelling as a pedagogical strategy for children with ASD.

- **Participation and Engagement**

The presence of the shadow aide significantly increased the student's classroom engagement. Collaborative Activities: The student participated in pair work and group tasks, (Figures 11) demonstrating improved social interaction.

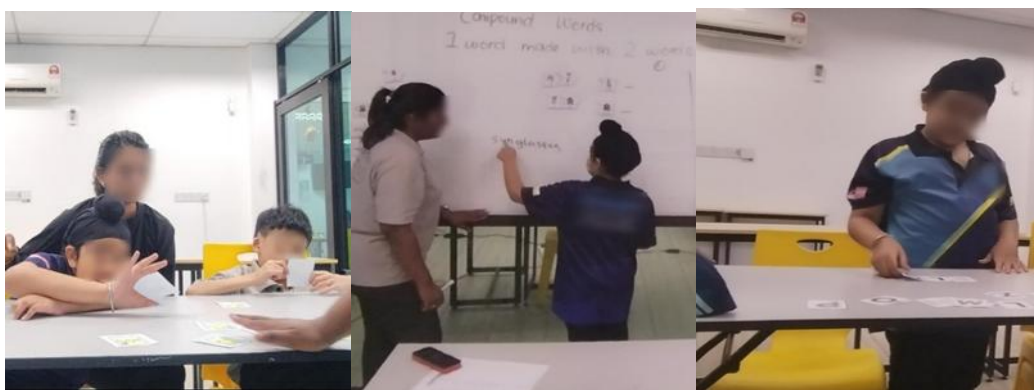
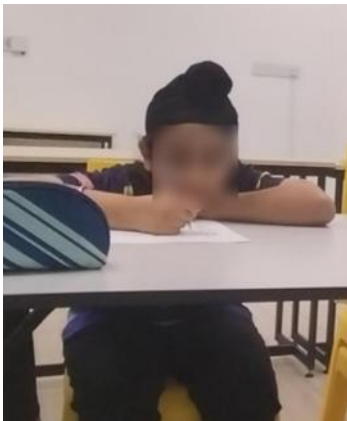
Figures 11: Pairwork, Classroom participation, Group work

Figure 12: Task completion

Task Completion: With the aide's support, (Figure 12) the student completed assignments and maintained focus during lessons.

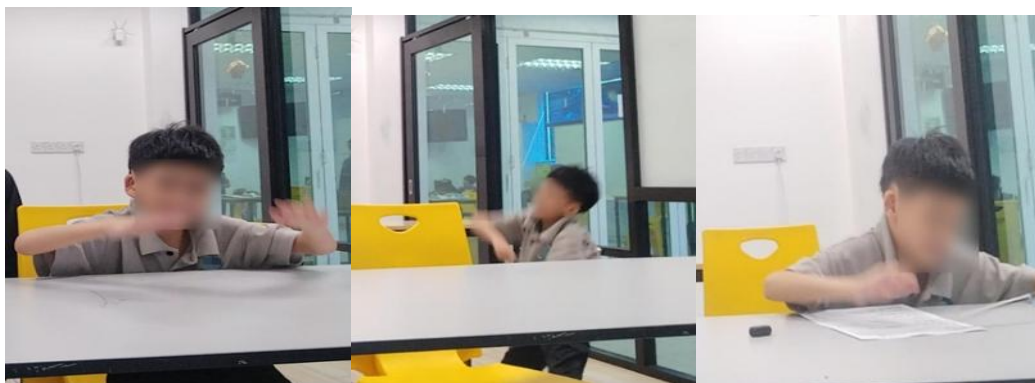
Figure 13: Attentive Listening

Attentive Listening: The student showed increased attentiveness, responding (Figure 13) to teacher instructions and peer interactions. These outcomes support Guo & Wang (2025), who noted that shadow aides facilitate inclusion by scaffolding participation. The presence of the shadow aide significantly increased the student's classroom engagement especially in collaborative activities, such as pair work and group tasks. Therefore, scaffolding participation by the shadow aide not only promoted inclusion but also created opportunities for the student to adopt social and academic behaviors within a supportive environment.

• Behavioural Challenges and Redirection

Despite improvements, several behavioural challenges were observed. Disruptive Behaviours: The student occasionally hit the table, threw paper, fiddled with pencils, scribbled on surfaces, and left their seat. Figure 14 showed student's disruptive behaviours. In reflect the shadow aide used redirection strategies. The shadow aide responded with calm verbal cues, repositioning, and gentle prompts to redirect attention and restore order. These interventions reduced the frequency and intensity of disruptive behaviours over time.

Figures 14: Hitting Table, Throwing Paper, fiddling with pencil, Scribbling, Messing up table, out of seat





Findings from Interview

Interviews were conducted with one parent and three mainstream teachers to explore perceptions of shadow aides in inclusive classrooms. The responses provided rich insights into the role of shadow aides in supporting ASD students. Four major themes emerged: one-on-one support, positive learning environment, social support, and behavioural and emotional regulation.

One-on-One Support

Respondents emphasized the importance of individualized assistance provided by shadow aides. Teachers noted that shadow aides ensured ASD students remained engaged and focused during lessons.

Teacher A explained: “Without the shadow aide, the student often drifts away from the lesson. With the aide’s constant guidance, he is able to stay on task and complete his work.”

Parent A added: “I feel reassured knowing that my child has someone dedicated to helping him cope with the demands of the classroom.”

These responses highlight the critical role of shadow aides in bridging gaps within mainstream classrooms, where teachers may struggle to provide individualized attention. In addition to sustaining engagement, shadow aides contribute to emotional regulation, facilitate peer interaction, and scaffold the development of independence skills. Their presence also supports teachers by alleviating the challenge of balancing whole-class instruction with individualized needs. This was supported Goh et al. (2024), the critical role of shadow aides in bridging gaps in

mainstream classrooms where teachers may struggle to provide individualized attention.

Positive Learning Environment

Teachers and the parent agreed that the presence of shadow aides created a supportive and structured atmosphere.

Teacher B stated: “The classroom feels calmer when the shadow aide is present. The student is less anxious and more willing to participate.”

Teacher C noted: “The aide’s encouragement helps the student feel included, which makes the whole class environment more positive.”

These discussion highlights how shadow aides not only reduce anxiety but also foster a sense of belonging, which crucial for inclusive education. On top of that, it’s not only individual benefits, however, the presence of shadow aides contributed to a more harmonious classroom climate. Added to that, parents also reported feeling reassured, noting that the supportive environment extended beyond academics to emotional well-being. This aligns with Sulaiman et al. (2019), who emphasized that inclusive education requires supportive environments to foster engagement and reduce anxiety.

Social Support

Respondents highlighted the role of shadow aides in facilitating peer interaction and inclusion.

Teacher A observed: “The shadow aide encourages the student to join group activities. Without that support, he would often isolate himself.”

Parent A shared: “My child is now able to play and learn with his classmates. The aide helps him understand social cues and interact better.”

These findings support Aristya et al. (2024), who noted that shadow aides promote social integration by scaffolding peer relationships.

Behavioural and Emotional Regulation

Teachers and the parent emphasized that shadow aides helped ASD students manage emotional responses and behavioural challenges.

Teacher B explained: “When the student gets frustrated, the shadow aide calms him down and redirects his attention. This prevents escalation.”

Parent A added: “My child used to have frequent meltdowns, but with the aide’s support, he is learning to control his emotions better.”

These perspectives reinforce Guo & Wang (2025), who highlighted the role of shadow aides in supporting behavioural and emotional regulation. The interviews revealed that shadow aides provide essential support in inclusive classrooms. Respondents consistently emphasized their role in maintaining focus, creating positive environments, fostering social inclusion, and regulating behaviour. These findings complement the classroom observations, demonstrating that shadow aides are indispensable in enhancing the educational experiences of ASD students.

4. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that shadow aides significantly enhance behaviour management and inclusive education for ASD students. Their interventions rooted in Bandura’s Social Learning Theory enable students to learn through observation, imitation, and reinforcement (Hodges et al., 2019). The aide’s modelling and redirection strategies helped the student internalize classroom norms and reduce disruptive behaviours.

These results are particularly relevant in Malaysia, where inclusive education policies face challenges due to limited teacher training and specialist support (Sulaiman et al., 2019; Goh et al., 2024).

Shadow aides offer a practical solution by bridging the gap between policy and practice. Their role complements mainstream teachers, especially in classrooms where differentiated instruction is not yet standard.

International comparisons further highlight the need for formal integration of shadow aides. In countries like the United Kingdom and Australia, teaching assistants are trained and embedded within inclusive education systems (Goh et al., 2024). Malaysia’s reliance on informal or parent-hired aides underscores the urgency of policy reform.

This study also contributes to the broader discourse on inclusive education. According to Permendiknas No.70 of 2009, inclusive education must provide equal access for all learners regardless of ability (Aristya et al., 2024). Shadow aides help realize this vision by tailoring support to individual needs. As Singh et al. (2018) noted, inclusion is not about forcing students to meet mainstream standards, but transforming systems to accommodate diverse learners.

Implications

This study reinforces Bandura’s Social Learning Theory (SLT) through the demonstration of meaning-making through social interactions, which has been an important factor in evaluating behavioural change and support. According to Firmansyah & Saepuloh (2022), the SLT theory states that learning happens through observation, imitation, modelling and is impacted by factors such as attention, motivation, attitudes and emotions. This research has shown that social interaction is a key theoretical construct that may have more influence on the learning process of students with ASD, compared to early literacy developed. This research identified that the social interaction students with ASD encounter in an inclusive classroom along with a shadow aide has helped in the enhancement of behaviour skills along with other skills such as academic, social and emotional regulation. Shadow aides were found to have a positive impact on the ASD students’ attention, motivation, attitude and emotions through the implementation of positive

reinforcements, modelling and redirection methods. These methods allow students with ASD to observe, imitate and model or apply these behaviours in their day-to-day practices. In an inclusive classroom, students with ASD are given the opportunity to observe, imitate and model the behaviours shown by their peers but due to their own challenges, such as lack of eye contact, sound sensitivity, inadequate social skills and more, they are unable to do so without the help of a professional. This research extends the SLT theory by suggesting the incorporation of a shadow aide that bridges the gap between the ASD students and the environment by providing the necessary support required by the student in order to learn appropriate behaviours that help in behaviour modification which later enhances learning and other aspects of life. This research has proven that shadow aides have a significant impact on the behaviour management of students with ASD and suggest the use of this theoretical framework along with the framework developed to enhance learning in an inclusive classroom. The qualitative classroom observation and self-administered interview approaches used in this research provided an in-depth understanding on the impacts of a shadow aide on the behaviour management of students with ASD and also the perceptions of parents and teachers on the effectiveness of a shadow aide in an inclusive classroom respectively. The use of classroom observation in this research provided the opportunity for the researcher to obtain real life experience of how students with ASD behave and learn in an inclusive classroom and acknowledge the support required by these students and the challenges faced by both students and teachers. The research further highlights the importance of a shadow aide in other aspects of learning which was highlighted through the self-administered interview. Parents and mainstream teachers shared many insightful information regarding the support provided by shadow aides and how these supports created optimal learning environments and improved student behaviour, engagement and academic performances. Future research carried out in a similar setting may adopt this method to gain

insights into the effectiveness of shadow aides and the learning of ASD students in inclusive classrooms. The findings of this research suggest that policymakers should acknowledge the work done by shadow aides, impacts that shadow aides make on the behaviour management of students with ASD and the effectiveness of these shadow aides that create a positive and enhanced learning environment which ensures that learning is maximized for students with ASD in an inclusive classroom. Based on the observations carried out, a one size fits all approach may limit the capabilities of students with ASD due to their behavioural challenges therefore shadow aides should receive recognition for the support provided in differentiated learning and possibly incorporated in more inclusive classrooms.

Recommendations

In the light of the limitations encountered in this research, there are several recommendations proposed for future research. Given that this research was carried out in a restricted time frame, it is recommended that future research adopt a longitudinal design that would allow for deeper data collection and more longitudinal real time data collection. Similarly, the small sample size used in this research suggests that future researchers incorporate larger and more diverse participant groups to improve the generalizability of the findings. Moreover, future research should include a broader range of variables, such as the impacts of shadow aide on the behaviour management of students with other learning disabilities in a variety of settings. For example, research could be carried out in a large number of schools in Malaysia to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the impacts of shadow aide on the behaviour management of students with other disabilities in inclusive classrooms. Researches could extend surveys or questionnaires to schools all over Malaysia to understand the practices and techniques implemented in inclusive classrooms by shadow aides in teaching students with disabilities and further identify the number of shadow aides currently present in Malaysia. Besides, the topic of shadow aide remains relatively understudied in

Malaysia therefore further research is encouraged in order to contribute to the growing body of literature in this area of study.

5. Conclusion

To summarize, the purpose of this research was to examine the impact of shadow aides on the behaviour management of students with ASD and the perceptions of mainstream teachers and parents on the effectiveness of shadow aides in inclusive classrooms. The impact of shadow aides on the behavior management of students with ASD was identified through the classroom observation where the shadow aide utilized a variety of teaching techniques such as positive reinforcements, modelling and redirections to manage the behaviour of students with ASD. The perceptions of mainstream teachers and parents on the effectiveness of shadow aides was later identified through the self-administered interview where it was found that shadow aides provided one-on-one support, created positive learning environments, social support, enhanced behavioural and emotional regulation. These findings supported Bandura's Social Learning Theory by emphasizing on the importance of social interactions on the behaviour of students with ASD. This research further contributes to the field of special education by providing practical insights on the effectiveness of shadow

aides in inclusive classrooms that accommodate the learning needs of students with ASD. Although this research had its limitations, it is believed that these limitations set the groundwork for future research into long term effects and wider implementations. As a whole, this research highlights the impacts of shadow aides in supporting behaviour management for students with autism spectrum disorder in inclusive classrooms.

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7. Author Declaration

- **Originality:** The authors declare that this manuscript is original, has not been published previously, and is not under consideration for publication elsewhere, in whole or in part.
- **Conflict of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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