

# A Study of Researcher's Learning Experience in Conducting Qualitative Inquiry of Adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorders on Their Social Experience in Mainstream Classroom: Challenges and Opportunities

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## ABSTRACT

Research on inclusive education issues in Malaysian general education is primarily dominated by a focus on teachers' and parents' perspectives. Qualitative approaches in getting to know the social experience of adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) in Malaysian mainstream classroom is sparse. There is a need for more rigorous research to examine the effect of adolescents with learning disabilities' contact with typically developing peers on their social participation in mainstream learning, such as in inclusive classrooms. This paper discusses the many challenges and opportunities faced in designing and undertaking a qualitative research study in two secondary schools in the Klang Valley, Malaysia. This study reflects project experience from the completed Ph.D. study in 2020. By using a qualitative multiple case study approach, the Ph.D. study applies semi-structured interviews as the main approach to examine the social participation of adolescents with ASD in an inclusive environment, bolstered by several features' combination of observation procedure, inside and outside of the classrooms. The larger study aims at exploring the benefit of general education in the lives of adolescents with ASD participating in inclusive environments. A central focus of this paper is to engage with the adolescents with ASD themselves and to understand how they construe their school lives and social experiences. Due to the widened population of learning disabilities in Malaysian education settings, there are various diagnoses and characters of disability to face in the research processes. This paper discusses two issues that are of central concern to the projected challenges in talking, especially with adolescents with ASD, and the appropriateness of the research methods towards students with disabilities. Research epistemology of study concentrated social experience by adolescents with ASD was the contemporary phenomenon and inclusive classrooms in Malaysian secondary schools was the real-life context. Semi-structured interviews with adolescents with ASD were challenging because they were unable to elaborate extensively on their thoughts and required additional support information or from a close person to clarify the information. Data analysis used inductive and deductive thematic processes. Findings of the study demonstrated adolescents with ASD might be vulnerable at most of the unstructured activities and settings, as a consequence both adolescents with ASD showed no real friends in their respective inclusive classrooms. Additionally, interactions with adolescents with ASD and without ASD required careful and sufficient support from the adults. The current research provides a depth insight into the experiences and perceptions of two adolescents with ASD, and which chances to support their meaningful social experiences. In addition, the exploration of the social experience of adolescents with ASD filled the knowledge gaps in inclusive education practice research from developing systems of education, like Malaysia. The researcher needed to take precautions when interpreting this kind of qualitative data and clarify the interview information from other sources, such as multiple perspectives and observations of data. Future research recommended an alternative self-

report data collection method such as to look at photovoice methodology in discussing their experience by explaining the places pictured within the school area.

**Keywords:** Adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder; Challenges, Opportunities, Social Experience, inclusive education; multiple case studies.