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DISSERTAČNÍ PRÁCE

Parents' Voice: Concerns, barriers and benefits of Parental Involvement for children with Autism in Malaysia

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DECLARATION

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ABSTRACT

The involvement of parents at home and in school is a crucial factor in the development of child with autism. This qualitative study explored the similarities and difference between the perceptions of Malaysian parents on parental involvement. The selected participants are parents of children with autism, and are currently enrolled either in a primary government or private school. The present study used semi-structured interviews to examine the participants' views on parental involvement. A thematic analysis was used to interpret the interview findings. The study showed that all the parents have similar definitions of parental involvement. However, it was also revealed that parents engaged in different types of parental involvement such as decision-making, collaboration with the community and learning-at-home. The parents also shared their views on the barriers to parental involvement including: lack of parent resources, financial constraints, poor education system and the lack of skilled special education teachers. The parents also shared their concerns about the children's ability to live independently in the future. However, the research showed that more than the type of school (government or private), the severity of the child's condition influenced the degree of parental involvement. The study also revealed the importance and benefits of parental involvement to a child's progress. Therefore, there is a need to provide opportunities for parents to be actively involved in their child's education at home and in school.

KEYWORDS: parents, autism, parental involvement (PI), qualitative study, semi-structured, perceptions, government school, private school, strengths, barriers, concerns

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ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

AAC	Augmentative and Alternative Communication
ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
EFA	Education for All
GS	Government school
IEP	Individualized Education Programme
MoE	Ministry of Education
MoH	Ministry of Health
NASOM	National Autism Society of Malaysia
NCLB	No Child Left Behind
NGO	Non-governmental organization
PI	Parental Involvement
PIBG	Persatuan Ibu Bapa dan Guru
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
PPD	Pejabat Pendidikan Daerah (State Education Department)
PS	Private school
PSG	Parent-support group
PTA	Parent-Teacher Association
PWD	Persons with disabilities
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SIE	Special and Inclusive Education
UNCRPD	United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities
UNESCO	The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	The United Nations Children's Fund
UPSR	Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah (National Primary School Achievement Test)
WHO	World Health Organization

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter encompasses the background of the study, statement of the problem, objectives, research questions as well as the significance of the study. The researcher also defined various terms that will be used in this paper when explaining relevant literature or findings related to parental involvement.

1.1 Background of the study

School and home are two close knit entities that work hand in glove in shaping a child's future. It is essential that both parents and teachers work together to create a learning environment that will enhance a child's development (Epstein, 2011). According to Van Voorhis (2002), parental involvement has improved a child's academic performance and also increased their level of motivation to learn and be more confident (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001). In the current Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013- 2025, there is minimal emphasis on the importance of parental involvement in their child's education and the partnership of parents with teachers and the school. The current qualitative study comprises of six interviews sessions with Malaysian parents (6 mothers and 2 fathers) with children diagnosed with autism, who attend either government or private primary schools either in Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur or Selangor state in Malaysia (Appendix G).

The study focuses on the levels of parental involvement in their children's education, based on Epstein's (1987) six stages of parental involvement framework namely parenting, learning at home, communication, decision making and collaboration with the school and community. Furthermore, the researcher discusses the challenges in implementing parental involvement as well as the differences in parental involvement in government and private schools in Malaysia.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Previous studies have found that the involvement of parents and teachers have a significant impact on the academic progress of a child's education (Goldsmith, 1988; Van Voorhis, 2002). According to Falbo, Lein and Amador (2001), schools reported an increase in attendance if parents are engaged in their child's education

as well as less behavioural problems in school (Gonzalez, 2002). However, in Malaysia there has been minimal research focusing on the voice of parents in regards to parental involvement. The reason for conducting this research is to focus purely on the perceptions of parents regarding parental involvement, centered on Epstein's (1987) framework of six types of parental involvement and the challenges faced by parents to attain effective involvement.

1.3 Aim of the study

The purpose of this study is to explore the importance of parental involvement in Malaysia and how parents perceive their involvement level in contributing towards their child's learning outcome. It will also investigate the different stages of parental involvement as well as the barriers and concerns hindering parental involvement in Malaysia. The researcher also examines examines if the type of schooling, either government or private play a role in the degree of parental involvement in the child's education. The insights obtained can be used to enhance the level of parental involvement in children with special educational needs, primarily in children with autism.

The research focuses predominantly on parents with a child diagnosed with autism, studying at the primary level either in a government or private school in Kuala Lumpur (the capital city) or Selangor (main state) in Malaysia (Appendix G). The reason these two places were chosen is due to the presence of many established government and private schools with special needs children compared to the other states in Malaysia.

Levy et al. (2006) mentioned that parental involvement is key during stages of early intervention in children with special needs. PI is said to reduce the magnitude of behavioural problems as parents were able to engage directly with their children and take immediate action to curb the behaviour. The earlier the involvement of parents in their child's lives, the higher the chances of cognitive performance (Bandura, 1977).

1.4 Research questions

a) How do parents perceive parental involvement in their child's education at home and in school?

b) What are the types of involvement of Malaysian parents in their child's education?

c) What are the concerns and barriers hindering parental involvement in their child's education?

d) Is there a difference in the level of parental involvement between government and private primary schools in Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur and Selangor?

1.5 Significance of the study

The findings from this study can be used by the school administration as well as the policy makers in the Ministry of Education (MoE) to further facilitate meaningful parent-teacher involvement in urban and rural areas in Malaysia. Effective parental involvement will benefit parents and help them understand on how to be involved in their child's education without being overprotective in order to meet their child's needs. This research will also enlighten the MoE on ways to augment the current education system to suit children of different abilities in government and private schools, thus paving the way towards an inclusive society.

In addition, the research will assist in identifying concerns of parents which impede the growth of parental involvement in Malaysia. This will in turn create a platform for the MoE to prepare the schools and train teachers on ways to view parents as co-partners and include them in the process of decision making and policy planning in the education team, and not view them merely as parents. As parents play a vital role in shaping their child's education, it is necessary for them to voice out their opinions and concerns and work together with the school on ways that will benefit the child.

1.6 Theoretical perspectives

In this study, several theoretical perspectives will be used to explain the need for parental involvement in a child's education. The main framework used in this research is Epstein's (1987) six typologies of parental involvement namely parenting, learning at home, communication, volunteering, decision making and collaboration with the community. Apart from that, the researcher also explains the benefits of parent-teacher collaboration in the child's academic performance using the '*Theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influence*' (Epstein, 1995) and using Vgotsky's (1987) '*zone of proximal development theory*'.

1.7 Definition of terms

The researcher clarifies certain terms and definitions that will be used when in the current study. It enables the reader to gain a deeper understanding of the phrase used.

According to Mariam-Webster dictionary (n.d.), the term **parent** is defined as 'a person who is a father or mother'. In this study, a parent refers to a person who either gave birth to the child or an individual who suffices the term 'in loco parentis', a Latin term used to define a person who is legally responsible for nurturing and taking care of the child such as the relative or grandparents (Cornell University Law School, 1992).

Parental Involvement is defined as the amount of meaningful engagement between a parent and the child involving matters concerning the child's life and education (United States Department of Education, 2014).

According to the Queensland College of Teachers (2005), **teachers** are defined as an individual who delivers an educational programme in a school-based setting or a home-based setting. A teacher's role is to assess the child's participation and provide substantial support and leadership based on the guidelines provided by the Education Ministry.

Government schools are National Schools which are owned and funded by the Ministry of Education in Malaysia. The government takes responsibility to train teachers and provide them with salary, fix the syllabus and the National

Curriculum (MoE, 2016) whereas **private schools** are independently funded schools depending exclusively on the payment of the child and not aided by the government. It offers the Malaysian National Curriculum or a separate curriculum but specifically tailored to suit the child's needs (MoE, 2016).

In Malaysia, a child begins **primary education** at the age of six or seven for a duration of six years before moving into secondary education. Year 1 is known as '*Darjah Satu*' and at Year 6 (*Darjah Enam*), the child sits for the National Primary School Achievement Test known as UPSR (*Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah*). The core syllabus would be Malay, English, Mathematics and Science and it is compulsory for the child to pass all these subjects before progressing to the secondary school level (MoE, 2016).

Bahasa Melayu or **Malay** is the main medium of instruction in government schools in Malaysia followed by English as the second language. However, in some families in Malaysia, English is the language that is spoken predominantly thereby resulting in a communication barrier between teachers and children with Autism in government schools as the child is not able to grasp two differently languages fluently.

No Child Left Behind (NLCB), Act of 2001, is a policy signed by Malaysia to include all children in schools regardless of their race, ethnicity and achievements. It was a mandated bill formed by the United States Department of Education to increase the academic progress of children as well as to revamp the culture of schools in America (United States Department of Education, 2004). **Education for All (EFA)** is an effort made possible by UNESCO aimed at providing education for children, youth and adults according to their respective educational needs.

According to the latest definition of **disability** by WHO (2015), disability encompasses the social model as well which included *'functional limitations'* – walking, running, climbing stairs, talking, hearing or lifting objects. The other element is *'activity limitations'* such as bathing and getting dressed, which affects the individual from performing daily tasks such as heading to work or school Disability is defined differently in each country based on their quality of

life and economic status. To date, there has been no significant or culturally suitable definition for the word disability in Malaysia. Based on previous studies, the updated definition would be from the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2010. "Persons with disabilities (PWD) comprises persons with long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others". Maidin (2012) highlighted that Malaysia has redefined the definition of disability by removing the phrase "on an equal basis with others". Therefore, it shows that equal treatment of a person with a disability is not given much importance.

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) or **autism** is defined as an intellectual and developmental disability which affects areas concerning the developmental process, motor coordination, interaction as well as communication skills (National Autistic Society, n.a.)

In Malaysia, **students with special needs** include students with visual impairment, hearing impairment, speech difficulties, physical disabilities, multiple disabilities and learning disabilities such as autism, Down's syndrome, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and dyslexia.

1.8 Summary

This research paper is divided into five main chapters with each chapter providing a detailed description of different aspects of this study. Chapter 1 entails a brief background of the study, statement of the problem, objectives, research questions, significance of the study, theoretical perspectives as well as the definition of terms used. Chapter 2 presents a review of the literature. Chapter 3 presents the research methodology which includes the process of data collection, data analysis and the ethical principles observed. Chapter 4, discusses the data analysis of the study. Lastly, Chapter 5 provides a conclusion of the entire research by summing up the findings of the research, addressing the strengths and limitations of the study, providing recommendations for practice and future research work and conclusion.

2 REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

"There is no program and no policy that can substitute for a parent who is involved in their child's education from day one." – President Barack Obama

2.1 Introduction

This chapter describes the history of special and inclusive education in Malaysia and the level of involvement of parents in their child's education based on the Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013-2025). The highlight of the chapter is on the types of parental involvement, the benefits as well as the challenges to adopt meaningful parental involvement in a child's education in Malaysia especially for children diagnosed with autism.

2.2 Special and Inclusive Education in Malaysia

Special educational needs (SEN) is defined differently in each country based on the respective legislations. A global consensus was formed to ensure that all children have the right to receive education including those with learning difficulties, either in mainstream or special schools bringing about inclusive education. In Malaysia, the Education Act 1996 and the Education (Special Education) Regulations 2013 cover education for children with special needs and disabilities.

Inclusive education on the other hand was formed based on a moral notion irrespective of policies, to respect and value one's diverse ability and individual differences and enable them to have access to the education system (Booth & Ainscow, 2011). In Malaysia, inclusive education is outlined in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025. Students in the Inclusive Education Programme have the right to learn in a mainstream classroom at pre-school, primary, secondary and post-secondary levels in government and government-aided schools.

However, inclusive education remains elusive to many children who require it and in Malaysia only pupils who are deemed to fall under the educable category are

capable of receiving these services (Jelas & Ali, 2014). The educable category involves those who are able to care for themselves without depending on others and based on a panel comprising medical doctors, Ministry of Education and the Department of Welfare officers to confirm that the child is qualified of undergoing the National Curriculum (MOE, 2015). Jelas and Ali (2014), further reiterate the belief that the child must be 'educable' to be eligible for placement in a mainstream school reflects a rigid and narrow interpretation of the concept of inclusion.

2.3 Definition of Parental Involvement (PI)

Before 1900, parental involvement was limited to volunteering work and assisting in fundraisers in schools. Currently, there has been a responsibility shift in the new legislations giving more responsibility to parents in terms of educating their child (Peters, Seeds, Goldstein & Coleman, 2008). Summers et al. (2005) mentioned that there are two dimensions to parental involvement which includes the relationship between family and professional help as well as child and professional help. These two dimensions are in mutual agreement to ensure that the child's needs are met via good communication, equality, competency, trust and respect.

The National Parent Teacher Association (PTA) (2016), a child advocacy association in the United States defines parental involvement (PI) as the role of parents being occupied in their child's developmental and educational stages from birth right up to adulthood, realizing their roles as primary educators and the impact they have on their child's future. PI is a key aspect in a child's developmental phase as home is where the process of learning was first initiated and the role of parents as primary educators (Epstein, 2001). Parents spend the most amount of time with their child from an early age, exploring their likes and dislikes, establishing a routine and analyzing their behavior as well as attending to all their needs (Lightfoot, 1978).

According to Hornby (2011), PI can be categorized into two sections: home-based and school-based involvement. These two sections are then divided into subsections: formal and informal participation. Home-based involvement involves keeping track of the child's progress by reading the home-school communication book (formal) and helping their child with chores and homework (informal) (Hornby, 2011). School based involvement includes parents attending parent-teacher meetings (formal) or attending school concerts and assisting in school trips (informal).

2.4 Parental Involvement in Malaysia

There has been a lot of research of late recommending the need for active parental involvement in a child's education and the importance of parents working together with teachers, the school as well as the community to create a conducive learning environment for their child (Brooks, 2011). In the Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013-2025), more emphasis is now given to parental involvement in the education system. The Education Blueprint mentions that parents should work as active partners in the child's learning by being an active member of the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) and not merely attending activities such as Report card day and Sports day.

According to the Malaysian Education Minister, Dato' Mahdzir bin Khalid, there has been an increase in parental involvement in six major school events; PTA meetings, Sports Day as well as registration day from 57% in 2013 to 74.6% in 2015 (Rajendram et al., 2016). In 2012, only 7% of Malaysian parents volunteered in school-related activities such as field trips, gardening, school plays and Sports day, and 19% participated via Parent Council. However, the Programme for International Student-Assessment (PISA) survey states that most of the participation was initiated by the teachers themselves and not the parents as they only view their role of involvement by discussing their child's academic performance (Aziz, 2016). Parents need to realize the importance of their role on improving disputes pertaining to education.

The Education Act 1996 affirms that Malaysia was part of the 'Education for All' signing and yet there is still discrimination in terms of who is eligible to receive

special education. Contrary to what is mentioned in the policy, the placement of a child if he/she is educable or in- educable is determined by a doctor. The child is then placed under a three month probation to determine if he or she is eligible to receive the support and provision offered by the government (MOE, 2013). It was further stated by the Ministry of Education (MoE) in 2013, that the determination of the register is final indicating the voice of the parents' is absent in all policy documents. Being a country situated in the Asian region, parental involvement is unavoidable as parents are usually the center of making decisions concerning their children (Gau et al., 2010).

In Malaysia, a number of studies have highlighted the role of parents in educating their children. However, there is none in terms of the policy and practice (Vellymalay, 2012). Parents are usually seen as "fill in roles" and to provide funding for the schools. They have no say in choosing the curriculum and appropriate education system suitable for their child. The Ministry of Education (MoE) sets the curriculum and the educational standards for everyone to follow.

2.5 Theoretical Framework

By using the Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model (Figure 1), the role of parent-teacher communication in a child's education can be further explained. The innermost circle represents the immediate setting involved in the developmental phase of a child known as the *microsystem*. The second circle, which is the *mesosystem* involves the interaction between a child and the surroundings (family, school, friends and teachers). The third circle (*ecosystem*) involves the environment which affects the child's wellbeing without the child being directly involved in it such as the neighborhood, child care services, education system and special need policies. The fourth circle known as the *macrosystem*, is the cultural context which keeps evolving and affects the development of the child in the long-run such as the socio-economic status of the country, ethnicity and values of each family as well as the responsibilities of the parent over time. The final layer which is the *chronosystem* encompasses the whole circle and it changes the child's environment over time such as the death of parents (external variable) or physiological changes in the child's developmental process (internal variable).
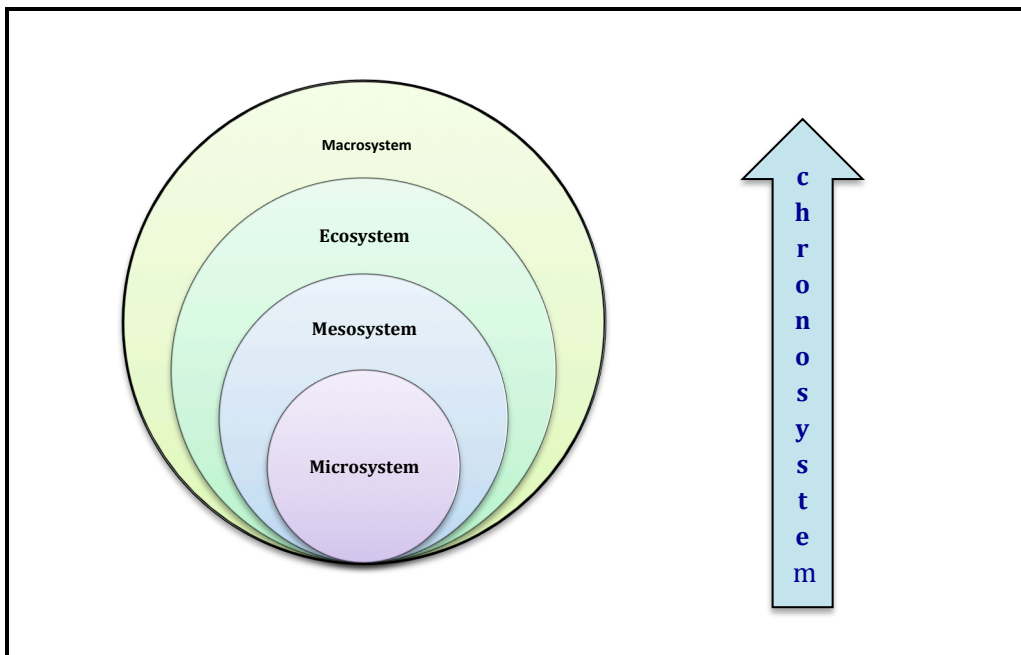
Figure 1: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model of Child Development (1987)

PI can be further explained using Joyce Epstein's (1995), '*Overlapping Spheres of Influence*' theory (Figure 2) involving three intersecting dimensions (family, school and community) needed to create a favourable learning environment for the child. It is said that the effective communication and participation of all three aspects would enable the child to perform better in school as they have a supportive learning system around them (Epstein et al., 2009). If parents instilled the importance of education in their child and showed them support and interest in what they do, the motivation level of the child to perform better would increase (Greenwood & Hickman, 1991).

For a child with autism, it is recommended that the home environment and school environment have a similar simplified instruction method to help the child understand better and be familiar with his or her surroundings (Peterson & Siegel, 1999). Epstein (2011), stated that a family-like school environment would appreciate an individual's originality and ensure that a child feels special and welcomed at the school without being left behind.

Theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influences

School

CHILD

Community   Family

Figure 2: Epstein's Theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influences (1995)
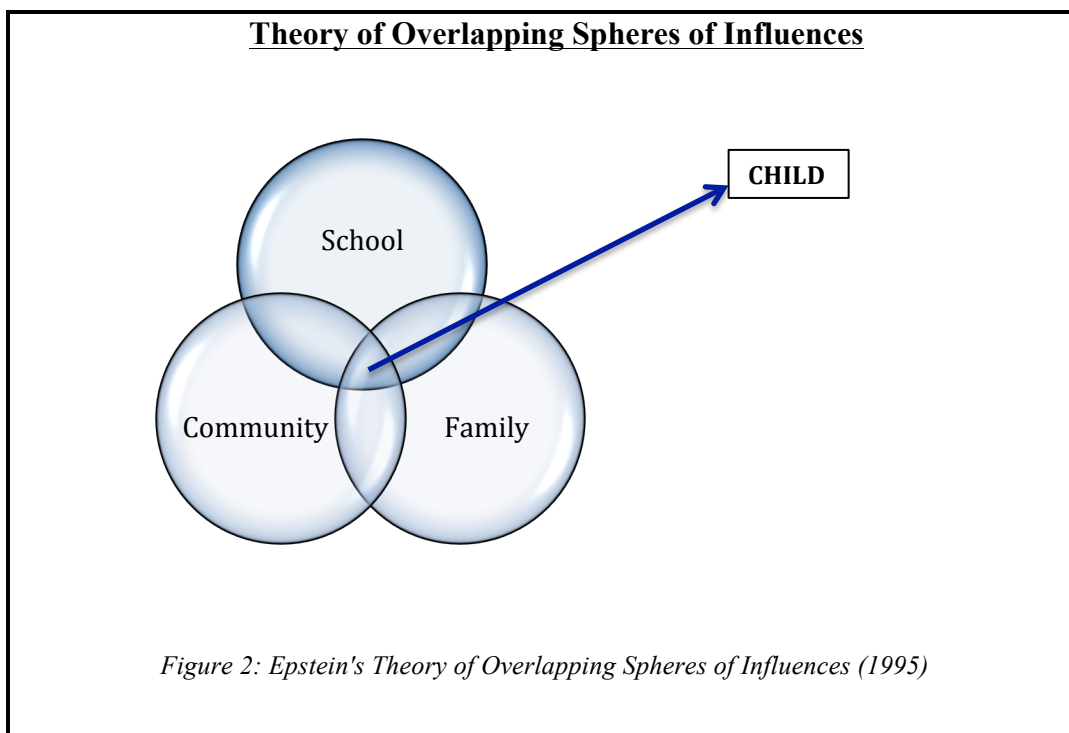
According to Russian psychologist, Vgotsky (Chaiklin, 2003), parents play a major role in supporting a child's development as a child spends most of his or her time with the parents during the early childhood developmental stages. His theory of *'zone of proximal development'*, emphasizes the importance of parental support and guidance in modelling positive behaviour to their child. Figure 3 shows the diagram of the zone of proximal development. The innermost circle represent the child's natural ability when the child is able to perform tasks without the help of others. The second layer (Zone of Proximal Development) is when the child is able to perform his best with the help of others. This reduces the child's stress level and behavioural problem and it helps foster positive relationships between the parent and the child. The outermost layer shows that the child is unable to grasp the skill due to it being overly demanding for the child to cope with. It is out of the child's ability to master that task.

Zone of Proximal Development

Child can perform independently

Zone of Proximal Development

Child unable to master the task(beyond the child's capability)
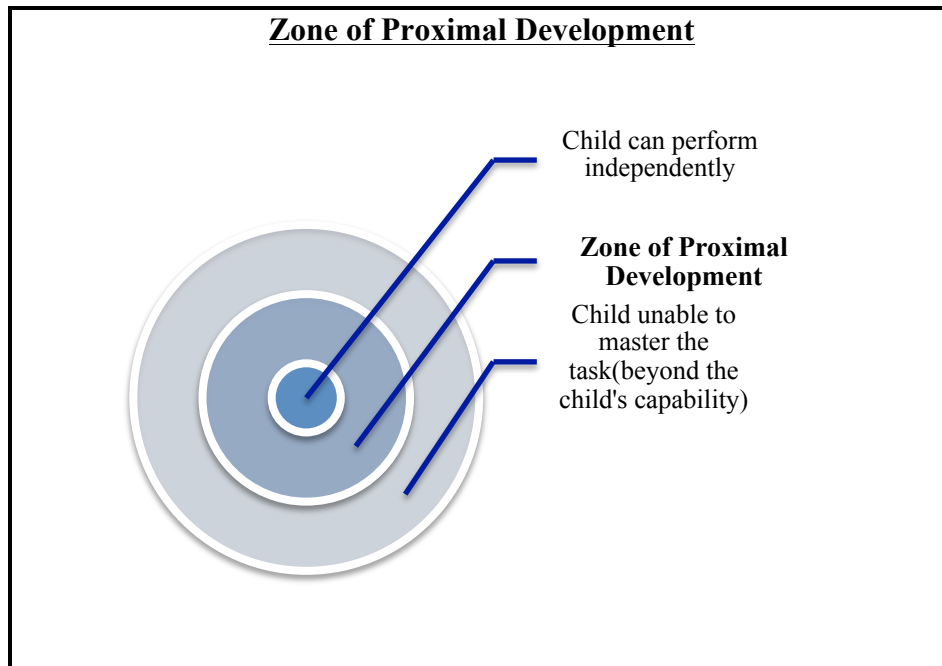
Figure 3: Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development Theory

2.6 Types of Parental Involvement (PI)

Schools should encourage the involvement of parents in a child's education in order to create a healthy school- family partnership which is described by Epstein et al. (2009) as six types of parental involvement. The six types of involvement are parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, and decision making and collaborating with the community. This partnership is essential to form a strong learning support for the child when both parties work together to achieve a similar goal i.e. the wellbeing of the child (Greenwood & Hickman, 1991). Without cooperation from both the parent and educator, this bond is bound to fail and the quality of education received by the child would be below the optimum level.

Based on Epstein's six typologies of parental involvement, the first type (parenting) is about helping families understand their child and help them with essential parenting skills. Besides that, parenting involves creating a learning environment at home to support the child's education as well as training schools to understand the needs of the family. Type 2 (communicating) encompasses home and school initiated communication to discuss matters concerning the

child's academic performance. The next type of involvement is volunteering whereby the parents recruit volunteers to assist during school related or community based activities. The fourth type of parental involvement would be learning at home which is essential in building a healthy parent-child bond. This involves parents engaging with the child by helping him or her out with school work and other interactive activities to build the child's social and verbal skills. Type 5 (decision making) is the participation of the parents and teachers working together to decide on what is best to suit the child's needs. It involves the school viewing parents as co-partners and including them in the process of decision making. The last type is collaboration with the community which emphasizes strengthening a parent-community relationship by creating awareness and joining parent-support groups.

2.7 Strengths of Parental Involvement (PI)

Peters, Seeds, Goldstein and Coleman (2008), mentioned that based on Every Child Matters (2003), participation of parents is an important attribute in a child's academic achievement which in turn contributes to their achievements later on in life. Parents are the paramount educators and mentors of their child as they influence the child's learning process from the initial stages right up to the very end (Jennings and Bosch, 2011). This shows that there is a continuous learning support system resulting in better progress, higher motivation as well as reduced behavioral meltdowns. Furthermore, behavioral challenges can be reduced and tackled at an early stage if a child receives support from both the school and home (Jurbergs et al., 2007).

Parents know their child better than any other health professional and thus working as partners instead of a support-relationship would be more beneficial in yielding higher progress (Epstein, 2009). This eases finding of resources as two parties work together towards a similar objective. Similarly, Everard, Morris and Wilson (2004) stated if parents and educators work together, matters concerning a child's behaviour and school can be dispensed mutually as there is a positive outcome on the child's academic performance when parents are involved.

The core conceptualization of a study by Finley et al. (2008), focuses on the effects of parental engagement and how it increases the levels of satisfaction of a parent-child relationship. In this study, it was proven that parents who engage in their child's development are said to affect the child's perception on parental behavior. Concurrently, Henderson and Mapp (2002), reported that programmes centered on the involvement of parents should focus on the child's learning. It is said that one of the key achievements in parental involvement would be development in terms of communication which is essential to build a healthy bond between parents and educators to discuss the child's progress (Emeagwali, 2008).

A study by researchers, Peters et al. (2008) discovered that parents' perception about ways to communicate with the school changed over time and it is reported to produce positive responses. Parents preferred informal consultations with teachers and found it to be the most effective means of communication. This supports findings proving that schools which have a flexible communicating pattern would achieve greater parental involvement (Harris & Goodall, 2008). Another study by Bittle (1975), found that parents who communicated with their child on a daily basis showed improved performance in spelling.

2.8 Barriers to Parental Involvement (PI)

Parental support is crucial in aiding the child's developmental process. However, it would not produce the desired outcome in a child if the parents are unaware on how to exercise their rights, ways to be involved to support their child as well as the provisions available (Stanley, 2015). According to Chua (2015), most parents with children under the ASD in Singapore are not aware on how to participate actively in their child's learning process due to insufficient training.

Most parents rely on teachers to educate their children without knowing if their child is able to cope with the current syllabus. This issue has become more pressing due to the economic status in Malaysia thus forcing most parents to work around the clock to maintain the welfare of their family (Talib, 2009). Hence, the responsibility to educate the child is left in the hands of teachers as parents do not have time for their child (Brandt, 1989).

In rural areas, the scenario is different whereby there is a lack of awareness in the community on the role of parents as primary educators (Kamaruddin & Jusoh, 2008). Society should accept that each parent is different in their own way and parenting styles differ from one individual to the other depending on their environment, upbringing, values and cultural background (Keshavarz & Baharudin, 2009). Flynn (2007), reported that in some cases, parents avoid engaging with the school due to having a language barrier as well as being intimidated by the current curriculum and teachers. This contributes to their attitudes, literacy level as well as their ability to educate their child (Ascher, 1988; Lindle, 1989).

Furthermore, Davis (1989) stated that, parents who were underachievers and those who suffer from low self-esteem were found lacking the knowledge and confidence to assist their children. Thus, they may view the school negatively and have low parental involvement (Greenwood & Hickman, 1991; Whitaker & Fiore, 2001).

On the other hand, over-involvement of adults namely parents and teachers can cause detrimental repercussions on the child's life in the long term by causing the voices of children to be left unheard (Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001). Parents fear that their child may end up making wrong decisions due to lack of experience and low level of maturity (Gau et al., 2010). There is a disturbing trend in Malaysia where parents accompany their children to job interviews and some even apply for jobs for their children (Mahyuni, 2015). This is in agreement to what Lundy (2007) theorized regarding the concept of *'double denial'* whereby parents fear their child is incompetent of making decisions and thus denying their involvement. Some professionals tend to overlook what children have to say and solely believe the information parents feed them. It is unfortunate that the child has no say about their life and their views are not taken into consideration and they have no freedom to grow at their own pace (Lundy, 2007). Moreover, their child would take this for granted and be dependent on them to complete their tasks from doing simple things such as household chores to homework completion, thus creating a sense of learned helplessness due to low motivation (Koegel & Egel, 1979).

The term *'helicopter parents'* was coined to describe the intensity of PI. Parents fail to realize that hovering around their child can lead to children being depressed and having lower competence (FitzGerald, 2013). In Malaysia, some parents bulldoze their way through their children's lives and take charge by making decisions for them. This eventually leads to most children losing their sense of independence and responsibility. Parents tend to overprotect their child to prevent them from hardships thus causing the child to have low survival skills (Kok & Gan, 2012).

In the case of children with autism, they need to learn how to be independent to ease their transition from school into adulthood (Koegel & Egel, 1979). If parents are highly involved all the time, it can cause them to have low motivation to become competent alongside their peers (Koegel & Egel, 1979). Overshadowing, over-worrying as well as controlling a child's behavior and thought process will result in high levels of anxiety, low set of life skills as well as no coping mechanism (Bayless, 2013). Children with autism may grasp the skill slower than typically developed children (Smith & Seltzer, 2012), but gradually they would be able to master the activity with minimal or no prompting at all if the parents allow the child to learn at his own pace. Parents need to create room for opportunity and mistakes without being overly involved.

 Lueder (2002) succinctly mentioned that there has been a paradigm shift from the traditional way of PI as to how it has evolved now. He used an *'energy-in and energy-out'* model to describe the importance of reaching out to parents in need of support. It is impossible to attain achievement scores if most parents, referred to as '*missing parents'*, ignore their responsibilities to be involved in education at home (Lueder, 2002). Pandit (2008; Herr, 1983) revealed that parents are more involved in activities if they are made aware of their child's disability as it would help them understand the nature and challenges faced by their child.

In another study, Jeynes (2007) investigated the participation of parents on academic progress of secondary school children. Results showed that all parents play a significant role in their child's achievement scores despite having various ethnic backgrounds. Correspondingly, Vellymalay (2012), said that parents

regardless of their ethnicity, want to be part of their child's educational journey and it would be more appealing for parents to join if the school environment is welcoming.

2.9 Summary

Parents play a pivotal role in shaping their child's development, being their pillar of support as well as initiating and encouraging the process of inclusion. They are also seen as an important asset in the education field as well as collaborative partner rather than a parent in schools (Ainscow et. al, 2003, as cited in Wong et. al, 2014).

Due to the alarming increase of children diagnosed with autism in Malaysia, which is 9000 children a year (NASOM, 2016), it is necessary for parents to be involved in their child's education as early as possible to alleviate the symptoms from worsening. Parents with special needs children, specifically children categorized within the autism spectrum disorder (ASD) feel pressured as a child diagnosed with autism shows concerns in areas related to social interaction, communication as well as behavioural problems (Chua, 2015; Tomanik, Harris & Hawkins, 2004).

Parental engagement can be beneficial to children as it builds a healthier relationship with their peers, thus generating interaction between one another (Fitz Gerald, 2013). Therefore, PI is necessary to create a healthy home-school collaboration and meet the needs of their children with autism as well as to build skills and increase the level of motivation of parents (Greenwood & Hickman, 1991). Building parents' competence and increasing their opportunities to be seen as partners would empower them to stand up and make decisions for their child. Chua (2015) also states that a family-centered approach shapes interaction which leads to a healthy developmental process.

In a nutshell, parents need to be aware that their involvement is key in promoting their child's developmental and academic growth, especially in a child diagnosed with autism. PI builds communication between the parents and the child thus allowing the child to express his needs across through his parents. The parents

then become aware of their children's interests, dislikes and effective ways to teach their child in an environment that caters to the child's needs. This would then foster a collaborative link between the family and the school as well as the community as they would be mindful of ways to include the child in a mainstream school setting.

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Overview

This chapter explores the research design used to gather information with regard to the proposed research questions. It investigates the sample of study as well as the materials used for data collection. Other than that, the research looks at the method of analysing and modifying the interview data collected. Several ethical considerations were also discussed.

3.2 Research design

According to Newby (2014), a qualitative approach embraces people's viewpoints rather than classifying people into categories based on numerical data. It uses the process of inductive reasoning and there is no single truth to one particular situation. Inductive reasoning (bottom-up approach) requires the researcher to process information by first building the framework via data gathering. Next, classifying these data and thirdly deriving key themes based on these similarities. Creswell (2009), states that a qualitative study allows the researcher to have direct interaction with the participants for their study. The data is collected by the researchers themselves via observations or through interviews allowing them to capture the essence and situation first hand rather than questionnaires or surveys used in a quantitative approach. Furthermore, a qualitative approach gives emphasis on the methodology and values that are hidden and not measured numerically using frequencies and intensities (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). In addition, Berg (2007) simplifies the meaning of qualitative research as a way of capturing the essence and ambience of the interview session – the what, when, where, who and how of the phenomenon.

This study used a qualitative approach to gain an in-depth understanding on the pivotal factor of parental involvement in their child's educational needs specifically in Malaysia. The aim of this chosen qualitative approach was due to a couple of factors. Firstly, due to the nature of the research question, a qualitative approach would allow for a deeper understanding of parents opinions, beliefs and degree of involvement which differ from each parents point of view. Secondly,

through this approach alone the researcher would be able to explore the concerns and barriers parents face due to their involvement in their child's education. The research questions places an emphasis on the importance of how experience is created and the meaning derived from the description of participants regarding that phenomena. Denzin and Lincoln (2011), state that the value-laden nature of qualitative approach emphasize the relationship and situational factors between the interviewer and interviewee which forms the basis of the analysis.

The type of qualitative approach used in this study is phenomenology (Merriam, 1988; Moustakas, 1994). A phenomenological approach involves the process of analyzing the participants' experiences during that specific occurrence (Smith, 2008). According to Moustakas (1994), this approach embraces the participants' experiences to further understand their experiences which will then be used to form relevant themes. This study adopted Transcendental Phenomenology (TPh) which according to Moustakas (1994) was developed by Husserl (1931) in a philosophical setting to be used in qualitative research to further understand human experiences. TPh studies the phenomenal experiences faced by participants and how they perceive it which is later brought forward and interpreted by the researcher. In simpler words, TPh is the study of lived experience from the first-person's point of view. As stated by Stanford (2003), a phenomenological methodology studies the conscious experiences through an individual's point of view to gain a deeper and richer understanding of the studied phenomena.

As mentioned, to capture the thorough essence of the participants' involvement, data collection is a pivotal factor in gathering significant data which will answer the research questions and hypotheses proposed. Thus, several steps are done during the process of data collection. Firstly, the researcher engaged in bracketing (epoche) to suspend preconceptions or learned feelings about the phenomenon (Burke & Christensen, 2004; Creswell, 1998). In this case, it was the different types of parental involvement as well as the role of a father and a mother respectively in ways they were involved in their child's education. Secondly, the researcher organized transcripts (horizontalization) according to the similarity of the data obtained from the audio recordings of the interview session. Horizontalization is another element under transcendental phenomenology which

takes places during the initial data analysis stage when the researcher places equal weight on all the information collected (Moustakas, 1994). Based on the audio recordings of the interview session, the researcher was able to identify textural data which contributed to the final essence of the phenomenon.

3.3 Participants

Participants comprised six mothers and two fathers whereby six interview sessions were conducted. Three interview sessions were conducted for each category of parents. Those who send their children to a government primary school and those who send their children to a private primary school respectively. A sample of eight were chosen due to data saturation. Hence, there is no point in conducting more interviews to achieve similar findings (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). A smaller sample than eight would reduce researcher bias and issues concerning validity as well as encourage the interviewees to be more open and honest when sharing their experiences (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006).

Prior to the actual interview sessions, a pilot study was conducted. This was to ensure that the questions posed were culturally, contextually and ethically appropriate. In such research studies, pilot studies are a usual protocol for the purpose of ensuring the methodology is of high quality with any flaws being able to be modified or edited before conducting the actual study. Kim (2010) states that a pilot test permits the researcher a chance to test out the study to find out if there are any discrepancies and barriers that will hinder the outcome of the actual study, if there is a need to adjust the interview questions as well as changing the sample size or target audience used. In addition, a pilot test is done to check the feasibility of the research design and if there is a need to change the methodology and instruments used to collect data. The data collected using a pilot test serves as preliminary data (van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001).

Two types of sampling methods were used for parent recruitment namely (a) purposive sampling and (b) snowball sampling. Purposive sampling is a non-random sampling method whereby participants are recruited through criteria linked to the research question. Specifically, this type of sampling method was chosen to obtain a narrower and specific sample that skews towards the nature of

this study. In this case, it is a group of parents who send their child with autism, either to a primary government school or a primary private school in Kuala Lumpur or Selangor in Malaysia. The sample size that was fixed prior to the interview session (data collection) depended on the availability of resources, time frame and the purpose of the study. During the data collection phase, if there were no significant insights that would add to the findings, the researcher viewed this as 'data saturation'.

Snowball sampling or chain referral sampling is simply a non-probability sampling method whereby the researcher recruits more participants using the help of existing participants as it was difficult to access participants who send their children to a government school. Thus, participants were approached through social media: Facebook on an Autism support group called 'The Malaysian Disability Alliance (MYDA)'- https://eo-eo.facebook.com/groups/mydagroup in which the researcher posted the details of the study which encouraged participation. The participants were also not given any form of compensation for their participation in this study.

Parents are chosen based on the following criteria which is having a child diagnosed with autism, who is currently enrolled in a government or private primary school either in Selangor state or Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur (the capital of Malaysia). The age group of the participant's children falls within 6- 12 years of age. However, the age group as well as ethnicity of the parents were not important factors in this study.

3.4 Materials

An open ended semi-structured interview (Appendix E) was conducted to help the researcher answer the research questions posed. The questions created were based on the six domains of Epstein's (2011) parental involvement which are parenting, importance of effective communication; volunteering; home tutoring; making decisions; as well as collaborating with the community. The interview questions were tailored towards the Malaysian cultural context. The nature of this interview helped the interviewer and interviewee look into different aspects pertaining to PI and it gave the interviewer the freedom to discuss some questions in-depth. The

method of probing was used to clarify the participant's response if the answer given was vague. The researcher presented the participant with an information sheet (Appendix B) with the purpose and procedures of the study and an inform consent form (Appendix C). Participants were also asked to sign the member checking form (Appendix D) to cross-check the transcripts and ensure that they were satisfied with the data provided during the interview and it was credible. A voice recorder (iPhone) was used to record the interview session for transcribing purposes.

3.5 Data Collection

The process of data collection commenced as soon as the supervisor approved the proposed research design and topic over a period of one month from August 2016 to September 2016. A pilot test was done using a parent to test if the questions were culturally sensitive and appropriate. Although a pilot interview does not necessarily promise a successful study, it acts as a 'trial-run' or a mini version of the actual study and gives the researcher an overview as to what results the current study may yield. It acts as a basis for the current interview questions that were used for the research. Basically, it improves the validity of the questionnaire and discards any unnecessary questions that would not provide any significant response (van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001)

Prior to the interview, the researcher had an ice-breaking session to build rapport with the participants, smoothen the interview process and clear any doubts. The ice-breaking session allowed the interviewee to ask questions about the current study as well as to make them more comfortable with the interview setting. They were all ensured that their insights would be kept confidential and their identity would not be disclosed during the entire study as mentioned in the informed consent form (Appendix C). Grinyer (2002) states that by keeping the details of the participants confidential, it reduces unnecessary distress, feelings of 'identity loss' and any legal implication as stated in the Data Protection Act (1998). By abiding to the moral principles, the relationship between the researcher and participant is maintained and this creates a stronger motivation for the participant to share their personal experiences with the researcher. It is also an important step

in building rapport with the respondents. Pseudo names were used as shown in the demographics table (Appendix A) to ensure that participants' privacy and anonymity are protected for ethical purposes. Respondents' confidentiality is essential to prevent the public from distinguishing a person's true identity (Crow & Wiles, 2008).

A semi-structured, open-ended interview questionnaire (Appendix D) was used to enable participants to share their respective views and experiences on PI. The interview comprised seven sections adapted from Epstein's six stages of parental involvement, which was tailored to fit the Malaysian context. The purpose of the interviews was skewed towards getting more spontaneous and rich data that is relevant to the study. A good interview is when the researcher is able to interact well with the interviewee enabling him/ her to explain as much as possible with minimal probing. Interviews enable the researcher to gather data of lived experiences of the participants in relation to how they perceive or interpret the actual meaning of the current lived phenomenon. The reason for using semi-structured questions is because it provides the interviewer with a rough guideline on the questions that can be asked in relation to the research without going out of topic (Cohen, 2006). Semi-structured interview questions also allow the researcher to further diverge the interview session by asking open ended questions to gain more data from the participants as they are able to express their views in their own words. In addition, semi- structured interviews prepare the researcher in advance making him/ her look competent in front of the interviewee. It revolves around a series of predetermined questions whereas the others are usually formed spontaneously based from the dialogues in the interview session (Whiting, 2008). Open-ended questions allows the participants to share their experiences more in-depth without being restricted and having implied choices. The researcher occasionally probes the participants to an extent, but they are not bound to a 'Yes' or 'No' answer and this allows them to expound more on their beliefs. More often than not, open-ended questions can be self-disclosing as the participants share their true feelings and emotions allowing the researcher to capture the core phenomenology of the study.

The method of probing was used which allowed the researcher to gain elaborate answers from the participants for certain aspects that required more explanation. Several probing cues were used such as 'silent probe' whereby the researcher remained quiet and just nodded signalling to the participant that his thoughts were being heard and he could continue. The next probing technique that was used was 'echo probe' which is basically echoing the summary of the sentence and then asking them a question to continue the interaction.

Each interview process approximately lasted between 45 minutes and 90 minutes and was audio recorded using an iPhone after permission was given by the participants. The researcher tried to minimize the duration of the interview to avoid participants from feeling tired, losing interest and to avoid data saturation if the insights seemed repetitive. Whenever the interviewee was diverging from the topic, the interviewer would immediately ask another open-ended question to bring the respondent back on track. By doing so, the data collected would be more precise and concise. As most of the participants were working adults and had familial responsibilities to attend to, the researcher had to respect their time schedule.

In this study, four out of six interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis (Face-to-Face) and the other two sessions were via Skype video call due to clashing schedules of both the interviewer and interviewee. Opdenakker (2006) explained that Face-to-Face (FtF) either in person or virtually via computer mediated communication such as Skype and Facetime, enabled the researcher to observe the respondent's intonation, facial expression as well as body language as compared to telephone interviews, emails or surveys. Moreover, synchronous communication allowed the researcher to pair-up the verbal responses with these social cues to get a holistic approach.

Interviewees were given the liberty to select time and venue according to their preferences. The audio recordings from the interview sessions were transcribed and analyzed. The participants were also given the opportunity to read and re-examine the transcripts to ensure that all data provided was accurate and they were satisfied with the content.

The researcher used the member checking strategy and data modification to ensure that the information delivered was valid and reliable. Reliability and validity is defined differently in qualitative research as compared to quantitative research. In qualitative research, reliability is the replication of the procedures and results to produce consistency (Grossoehme, 2014). The reliability of a study is achieved by adhering to a detailed protocol and ensuring that all the procedures are accounted for (Creswell, 2009). The researcher goes through all the transcripts to ensure that all data recorded is correct and there is no drift in definition with the codes deduced. Credibility on the other hand, is determined by how rich and genuine the data is by conducting several steps such as member checking, triangulation, including incongruent data, reviewing the transcripts thoroughly to obtain rich and concise description and clarifying researcher bias. Since there is no concept of generalizability in qualitative research, it is necessary for the researcher to use triangulation, horizontalization and measures of trustworthiness to verify the reliability and validity of the data (Kvala, 2006).

3.6 Data Analysis

Data analysis is a method to process qualitative data in an inductive and systematic manner to explore the meaning of a phenomena (Elo & Kyngas, 2007). Hatch (2002) mentioned that the term 'analysis' means to organize and interrogate data collected enabling the researcher to observe the different patterns, extract meaningful themes, develop explanations and interpret them, as well as form theories and critique the findings. In short, it involves several procedures that require the researcher to synthesize the findings, organize and read through the data, reflect and interpret on the overall meaning, analyze based on a specific theoretical approach, code them into themes, hypothesize and derive meaningful association from the findings.

In this study the interview with the parents regarding their levels of involvement in their child's education was recorded verbatim using an iPhone. Later, it was transcribed into text and checked several times to ensure it matched the audio recording (Braun & Clark, 2009). The data gathered from the transcripts were then analyzed to form a rough structure of the codes that were derived from the

interview session. The codes were then dissected further and categorized into themes based on the participants' experiences and emotions. Glaser et al. (2013; Miles and Huberman, 1994) stated that codes are basically key terms or mnemonics that the researcher uses when there is synonymity and co-occurrence of the information shared by the interviewees. Each code acts as a label that carries a different meaning or description which is used to link the phrases and texts to the expressions and experiences of the interviewee in that particular setting. Another researcher, Charmaz (2006) mentioned that coding is used to gain an abstract understanding of the interview away from general statements. It helps to further understand the experiences of people.

The bracketing phenomenology was used to eliminate researcher bias and ensure that the researcher did not analyze the information based on the researcher's experiences, prior knowledge or views pertaining to PI. Bracketing phenomenology mitigates the chances of preconceptions which may have detrimental effect on the research analysis and findings (Tufford & Newman, 2012).

In the current study, data analysis was a long and meticulous process as it involved a thematic analysis approach. Thematic analysis is often used to analyze the categorization of the themes derived from the data gathered. According to Boyatzis (1998) it helps to further illustrate the data in detail and interpret the findings. He mentioned that it allows the researcher to associate the analysis with the themes derived systematically, further enhancing the accuracy and purpose of the research. Thematic analysis also increases the possibility of linking the pre-conceived perceptions and observations of the researcher with that of the current findings throughout the duration of the research. Namey et. al (2008) defined thematic analysis as a means of identifying and interpreting implicit and explicit data to form codes. These codes are then linked to raw data which can be used for comparative analysis with other themes or similar topics to study the co-occurrence of the findings and its relationship (Namey et. al., 2008). In this study, data is analyzed by selecting an actual statement from the transcribed data. It then undergoes the process of open and axial coding through which the relevant themes are derived that would answer the research questions.

Strauss and Corbin (1990) states that open coding is done by analyzing the textual data and identifying keywords revolving around categories, names or phenomena which can be classified under a bigger umbrella. Axial coding on the other hand refers to linking these categories with the objects by forming codes using inductive and deductive reasoning (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

3.7 Data modification

Three forms of data modification were used to obtain reliable and accurate data from the participants. Firstly, the researcher went through the transcripts with the participants to ensure that the data gathered was suitable for publication and if they would like to make any amendments to the information provided. This method is known as the member checking method. Member checking captures the essence or the experience of the participants as much as possible. The validity shifts from the researcher's to the participant's to establish credible data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Participants were able to reconfirm the data provided during the interview session and credibility of the narrative account.

Next, the triangulation method was used to strengthen the results obtained using books and journals or theories in order to have a deeper understanding of the link between the current study with past studies (Guion, Diehl & McDonald, 2011). Triangulation is a process which is used to ensure that data is interpreted from two or more different viewpoints.

The final method of data modification that was used is by probing the participants to provide a detailed description of their experience and to ensure richness in data. This method is said to provide the readers as well as future researchers who wish to continue this study, a realistic approach that can be used as a base framework for further development of the current study. Probing is necessary to stimulate the participant to share more insights without exerting too much force onto the participant, resulting in the researcher answering the questions on behalf of the respondent (Bernard, 1995).

3.8 Ethical Considerations

There are several fundamental ethical considerations that the researcher adhered to when conducting this study to ensure that it does not jeopardize oneself as well as the participants. Before conducting the actual study, the researcher asked two parents to participate in a pilot interview session to make sure that the questions presented for the interview were appropriate and relevant. Next, the basic ethical principle would be to ensure that all respondents participated in this research voluntarily and they had the right to withdraw at any given time without penalty if they felt a sense of discomfort. Once this had been established, the next step was getting the participants to sign an informed consent form acknowledging that their participation was based on their willingness and they had been made aware by the researcher regarding the purpose and procedures of the study as well as the duration of the interview. The method of data collection and the content of the recording (if requested) were given to the participants. It is important to ensure that their privacy is protected and not accessible by others as per the consent form signed (Appendix C). The researcher did not engage in any form of dishonesty, mislead the participants on the actual objectives of the study or exaggerate the data collected (Bryan & Bell, 2007). All communication between the researcher and the participant was professional and unbiased. The researcher also had to ensure that the participants were not harmed in any way during the process of data collection and that the experiences shared by the respondents were of paramount importance. The participants also confided in the researcher with the understanding that it would not harm them or infringe their personal interest. Thus, it was the duty of the researcher to uphold the trust and rights of the participants by maintaining their anonymity (Trochim, 2006).

Another crucial ethical practice when conducting the interview was to avoid the usage of biased and offensive language as well as profanity. It was obligatory for the researcher to respect the participant and vice versa. Furthermore, it was crucial for the researcher to acknowledge the work of other researchers and authors when citing them in the current study. Referencing these authors was done using the APA 6th Edition referencing guideline.

3.9 Summary

In summary, a qualitative design is used due to its explanatory nature. This is to help qualitative researchers gain a deeper insight on the depth of parental involvement in their child's education based on the interviewees' experiences. In total, eight parents comprising six mothers and two fathers, were recruited via purposive and snowball sampling. The participants were chosen based on the criteria that they were Malaysian parents who had a child diagnosed with autism attending either a private or government school in Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur or Selangor state (Appendix G). The researcher gathered information by conducting an interview using an open ended, semi-structured questionnaire based on Epstein's six stages of parental involvement model. The interview sessions were audio recorded for the purpose of transcribing and data analysis. The data was thematically analyzed, coded and categorized into themes. To ensure reliability and credibility of the findings, data modification was done using three methods namely (a) member checking, (b) triangulation and (c) probing. The researcher adhered to several ethical principles which is providing the participants with an information sheet stating the purpose of the study and how the data would be collected as well as an informed consent to ensure that confidentiality and professionalism were maintained. The researcher asked permission from the participants to audio record the interview session and if at any point the participants felt uncomfortable during the interview session, they were free to withdraw without any penalty.

4 DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Data Analysis

For the purpose of this study, eight samples in total which comprise six mothers and two fathers of children diagnosed with autism. The child of the participant has to be currently enrolled either in a government or private primary school in Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur or Selangor state in Malaysia were involved. The full demographics of the participants are as shown in Appendix A whereas the shortened version is shown below in Table 1.

The subjects' responses were analyzed using thematic analysis. This chapter presents all the findings from the research and categorizes them under respective themes. There are 12 primary themes and 18 sub-themes that were derived from this study (Appendix F). Theme 1 was aimed at answering the first research question which is *'How do parents perceive parental involvement in their child's education at home and in school?'*. Themes 2 to 6 answer the second research question *(What are the types of involvement of Malaysian parents' in a child's education?)*, whereas the 7th theme answers the third research question *(What are the concerns and barriers hindering parental involvement in their child's education?)*. Theme 8 was aimed at answering the fourth research question which is, *'Is there a difference in the level of parental involvement between government and private primary schools in Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur and Selangor?'*. Finally, themes 9-12 were formed based on data gathered from the respondents. Abbreviations such as GS (parents who send their child to government school) and PS (parents who send their child to a private school) will be used when explaining the data in the findings and discussion sections.

Type of School	Pseudonym of parent	Parent
Private School (PS)	Mary	Mother
	Nav	Father
	Mala	Mother
	Evan	Father
	Shan	Mother
Government School (GS)	June	Mothers
	Lin	
	Fad	

Table 1: Demographics of parents

Research Question 1: How do parents perceive parental involvement in their child's education at home and in school?

Theme 1: Perception of ideal parental involvement of parents with children diagnosed with Autism.

Definition of Parental Involvement (PI)

A pseudonym will refer to the participants in this study to maintain their anonymity. When asked to define parental involvement (PI) in their own words, eight of the parents defined it as engaging in every aspect of their child's development in areas concerning: 1) nutrition, 2) health, 3) education, 4) socialization skills and 5) life skills - hygiene and toilet training. Participants Evan and Shan who send their child to a private school (PS) stated that it is "basically a 24 hour job even when they are sleeping…we need to be constantly alert as any complication can happen any time". June on the other hand who sends her child to a government school (GS) explained the importance of PI as a "way to bring our son out of his own world". All parents summarized that PI basically means to see to every need of the child and support him or her in every way possible. One of the parents mentioned that parental involvement is key in a child's education as parents spend more time with their child as compared to teachers:

"The school is only able to do a small part in helping the child (3-6 hours a day), but the balance of the 18 hours the child is with the parents. Parents have to provide the child with the right foundation in order for them to excel in school as the school can only address a certain amount of issues" (Mary,PS)

Research Question 2: What are the types of involvement of Malaysian parents in their child's education?

Theme 2: Importance of parenting

In this section, parents were posed questions regarding activities they partake together (both father and mother) and what specific roles each parent plays (if any) in their child's education.

a) Role of involved and uninvolved parents

The data gathered showed that all six mothers were very much involved in their child's education as compared to the fathers. All three mothers (shown below) who send their children to government school mentioned during the interview that the fathers would normally spend time with their child during weekends when they were free from their office commitments.

- *"..he is a very busy person, so when he has time (usually during weekends), he does outdoor activities with our son…"* (Fad, GS)
- *Father is involved only during weekends (half-day) to role play and teach the child…"* (June, GS)
- *"..dad is seldom involved.."* (Lin, GS)

Fathers with children in private schools explained that they try to spend quality time with their children by assisting with school work and enjoying other outdoor activities. One father stated that working overseas makes spending quality time with his children quite challenging.

"...because I am working in Switzerland, so my involvement is paying the bills and whenever I am back we go to the playground, shopping malls, travelling together or playing games and reading." (Nav, PS)

All mothers would normally help the child with the homework for at least two hours daily as well as motivate and support the child to show him or her that he is capable of doing activities independently. Furthermore, the role of mothers focused more on the child's dietary requirements, health, communicating with school staff and parent-support groups as well as educating themselves on current updates regarding Autism, as well as to understand their child's situation and behavioral problems better.

- *"...got myself trained in ABA and other therapies...ensure that my child was doing it the way it was supposed to be done" (Mary, PS)*
- *"Being involved in building child's life skills; hygiene, toilet training and feeding." (Fad, GS)*

b) Supporting each other

All parents stated the need to work together as a team to attain the best results for their child's wellbeing. However, the parents said that in some cases it is necessary to balance out the list of responsibilities to ensure that all the needs of the child is well taken care of for the day, as time is of essence. It can be demanding if only one parent juggles the responsibilities of the child without the help of the spouse.

- *"When you have got a special child, you have to have a division of labour...it allowed us to really focus and be the best parents that we can be...I (mother) am more involved in their food intake and what therapies and he (father) is involved in making sure they had lots of fun playing and I have my own 'me' time". (Mary, PS)*
- *"It's quite balanced and we support each other in terms of education, cleaning and maintaining the house and our child... it can be very draining, very draining..." (Evan & Shan, PS)*
- *"..take turns to oversee child's homework and send her back and forth to school" (Lin, GS)*

Theme 3: Learning at home

Parents play an important role in their child's education as seen in the sub-themes which are a) assisting child with school work b) creating a conducive learning environment at home c) using professional help as well as encouraging d) educational trips to enhance the child's learning process.

a) Assisting child with school work

Mary (PS) said that she normally follows-up with what has been taught in school for that particular day in a more generalized setting and assists her child in school work if any. Parent, Lin (GS) also said she helps her child with homework for at least an hour a day. By assisting their children with school work, parents are able to gauge their child's progress in school and provide additional support if necessary. This not only motivates the child to learn and contributes to a healthy parent-child relationship.

b) Learning environment

A conducive learning environment is pivotal for a child's growth. A number of participants stated that they were unable to provide specific areas in the house for activities such as play and study. On the other hand, Evan and Shan (PS) said that the child has his own bedroom *"his cave, his empire"* and June (GS) said that her son has his own study room for one-to-one teaching, piano lessons, story time and occupational therapy sessions (gym ball, yoga mat and balancing board).

c) Professional help

This sub-theme was prominent among all participants. All parents sought professional help either by using a tutor, a speech therapist, occupational therapist, paediatrician or an Autism consultant to support the needs of their child. One of the mothers, Mary (PS) pursued ABA therapy, school readiness programme as well as 'shadow services' to ease her child's transition from a special school to a mainstream school setting.

d) Educational trips

Some of the parents were unable to allow their children to go on educational trips due to choices being limited as the child is sensitive to high frequency sounds and it causes the child to be agitated. Parents said they preferred outings to be generalized and meaningful based on the family's current lifestyle. For example, trips planned were more inclined towards visual involvement such as parks, zoos and aquariums rather than cinemas and museums.

Theme 4: Communication

It is necessary for both parents and teachers to communicate regularly. It is crucial for both parties to discuss matters pertaining to the child's development both in school and at home.

a) Home-school communication

Home-school communication is either a parent-initiated or a school-initiated effort to communication with one another to discuss the child's academic performance. Home-school communication not only aids the parents to seek information on the child's progress but also allows the teachers to inform the parents about daily activities conducted with the child as well as timings for Parent-Teacher meetings All three participants in the government school and two in the private school were content with their level of communication with the schools. They mentioned that there is constant informal and verbal communication (face-to-face) interaction between the teachers and the parents. For example when picking the child up from school and during Report Card Day where the academic progress of the child is discussed. June (GS) stated that she receives *"...indirect and informal verbal communication from the Principal not the teachers...there is two-way, open discussion between parents and the school to discuss academic progress and discuss ways to help my child in her education"*. Another parent, Mary (PS) said *"I make it a point to consult therapists, educators and supervisors frequently to monitor child's progress. Every single day there would be written notes in the communication book and progress meetings every 2 weeks/month"*. However, the other two parents, Nav and Mala (PS) expressed their frustration with the level of home-school communication as they have to prompt the teachers all the time to update them on their son's progress at school. *"Only if child does something wrong, then the teachers will update the parents. There is no communication book whatsoever"* said, Nav and Mala (PS).

b) Acknowledging the child's voice

In regards to children communicating with their parents and teachers, all eight parents placed their child's priorities ahead of theirs. However, all parents reported that the teachers irrespective of the type of school whether government or private, the teachers fail to listen and understand the needs of the child. Parents, Evan and Shan (PS) said that the child's voice matters and parents and educators should not force the child into something that does not interest him. Since their child is non-verbal, the father (Evan) said that *"...give him space as education comes from within; if the body is right (health), the brain will be right to accept educational programs and therapies"*. However, this does not mean the teachers should allow the child to gaze and *"wonder into his own world"*.

Four other parents stated that despite their child being verbal, the teachers did not understand and engage with the child nor did they give him or her time to communicate. Moreover, the teachers did not break-down their sentences into simpler forms to minimize the communication gap between the child and the teacher. Nav and Mala (PS) said, *"…his sentence construction would be a little haywire and topsy-turvy…there is a communication breakdown between him and the teachers as they did not understand him and he did not understand the teachers…tell him very long sentences at the age of 8, he will probably understand the first 2 words"*. Similarly, Fad (GS) said that she pulled her child out from the previous school as they were not supportive to the child's needs. *"The teacher said he was not smart enough and left the child to be in his own world and did not entertain him"*. It is important for parents to support their child's interest as said by Lin, mother of a verbal child, *"..Parents should place the child's priority and wishes first as it is their future not ours, and parents must not push the child beyond the child's capabilities"*.

e) Usage of Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC)

The use of AAC technology has shown increasing importance not only to aid and enhance a child's speech and language but is also used to encourage independent learning amongst the parents. Seven out of eight participants use AAC technology such as the iPad to aid the child in his speech and language as well as for the parents' independent learning. However, all parents restrict the usage of iPad to play games and non-functional activities only. Evan and Shan (PS) said that they started using the iPad at a very early age to improve their child's vocabulary, spelling, drawing and allow him to explore things on his own. *"…he listens to questions and answers it by himself…He is very independent and self-taught"*, they said. June (GS), uses the speech applications to help her son grasp information faster as he is a visual learner and also uses the iPad as a teaching aid to learn more on Autism and update herself.

Mary, the mother of two children diagnosed with autism said, *"..I instilled a one hour/week rule on using the iPad or watching TV as it is a very exclusive activity and so compelling that the children have no interest in interacting with people"*. She said by reducing the usage of technology, it has allowed her children to interact with her and her husband more as compared to before.

Theme 5: Decision making

As primary educators, parents have the rights to be involved in choosing the type of school and curriculum appropriate for their child. The school and teachers should work together with parents and view them as co-partners and policy makers.

a) Choice of school

Parents who opted to send their child to a private school said that their children were not accepted by the government schools in Malaysia due to having a language barrier. *"We didn't have a choice actually as there are no other schools that would accept him and the government school couldn't take him in because he did not know the native language (Malay). We knew he would be lost"* (Nav and Mala, PS). Fad, a housewife and mother of four children said that she chose the current government school due to it being convenient (on the way to the siblings' school) and the size of classroom was relatively small for a government school in Malaysia (7-8 students with 3 teachers and 4 assistant teachers per class). She also said that *"..doctor suggested homeschooling but the State Education Department rejected and forced us to enrol our child into a government school"*. Participant, June (GS) specified that she preferred a rural government school rather than the ones in the city as the class size is smaller and they are more accommodating towards children with special educational needs. One of the parents, Mary (PS) chose the school based on suitability and comprehensiveness of the programme for her child as well as the quality, enthusiasm and personality of the therapists engaging with her child. Besides that, according to another participant, Lin (GS), her choice of school was based on the fact that the current mainstream school had a good support system for SEN children. They organized frequent educational trips and teachers were supportive and creative in planning extra- curricular activities for the children. Moreover, the school sourced for their own funding instead of depending on the Ministry of Education.

b) Choice of curriculum

Six parents explained their frustration in not being able to choose a curriculum suitable for their child unless the school offered an Individualized Education Program (IEP). The parents said that without an IEP, special needs students are left behind and unable to cope. Participants Nav and Mala (PS) stated, *"...according to the Ministry of Education, regardless of the child's capability, if you are 8 years old, you must be in grade 2. You can't demote the child to a lower level to help him cope better"*. Similarly, mother, Fad

(GS) said that the syllabus in the government school was not tailored to each child and they were *"very very strict, very rigid and they have their own syllabus"*.

On the contrary, the other two mothers Lin (GS) and Mary (PS) said that they were able to choose the type of programmes and levels suitable for the child due to the school having an IEP. Lin also said that the government school allows her to decide if she would want her child to sit for the National exam, *"...have an option if child does not want to partake in UPSR exams"*.

c) Parent's viewed as co-partners and policy makers

There was a difference in responses based on the type of school and how they worked together with parents. In the private schools, parents were seen as equal partners with the teachers and they were included in making decisions that would affect their child's future. Mary (PS) believed that the parents opinion should be given importance especially in matters concerning their child. Likewise, Evan and Shan (PS) stated, *"Since it is a small private set-up, the teachers are more flexible and try to accommodate parents as much as possible"*.

Opposed to the data gathered in private schools, parents in the government schools said that they had no authority to voice out their thoughts as the school rejects their opinion causing them to be afraid to speak up for themselves. Fad (GS) affirmed, *"...the school has parents for 'formality' sake. Parents have no authority to voice out and collaborate with the school as the National Education Policy itself does not state the need of viewing parents as equal partner"*. Similarly, June (GS) also mentioned that there is no mention on the rights of the parents in the Education Policy. She also mentioned that teachers were quite resistant if parents were too involved in the decision making process. The third parent, Lin (GS) shared similar displeasure in the school not acknowledging her as a co-partner. She said she had to go through an NGO- National Autism Society of Malaysia (NASOM) to learn more about the education system in Malaysia so that she can voice her opinions and know her rights as a parent in a government school.

Theme 6: Collaboration with the school and community

The involvement of parents in the school and community play a vital role in a child's education.

a) Parent-Teacher Association (PTA)

Out of the eight participants, it was mainly the mothers who would attend Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) meetings in schools. PTA meetings were either held twice a month or twice a year depending on the school management itself. One of the parents said that the PTA meeting helps her discuss the progress of her child holistically and not only academically (Lin, GS). However, another parent mentioned that it was easier to voice out her opinions privately to the teacher or person in-charge rather than speaking up in public to address her concerns in matters concerning her child (Fad-GS). Moreover, Fad said the school ignored issues raised at the PTA meetings and did not take any action to prevent the situation from recurring.

b) Parent-Support Group (PSG) & Autism Awareness

In terms of collaboration with the community, most of the mothers were actively involved in Parent-Support groups (PSG) to seek information from other parents or to spread awareness to the community regarding Autism. All six mothers believed that the Parent-Support group (PSG) helped them emotionally knowing that they were not alone and other parents share their struggle. It was comforting to know that there was a platform to seek information, pick and choose programmes suitable for their child, find therapists as well as discuss nutrition plans. One of the mothers, Fad (GS) said that PSG helped her open up and discuss her child's achievements and accept her child's condition. She was initially shy and embarrassed to share with others due to the fear of them judging her child. Lin (GS) uses the PSG to discuss with other parents on ways to get the Ministry of Education involved in the society and improve the quality of living of a child with special educational needs in this country.

Due to the lack of resources in Malaysia and the inability to access them, most people lack awareness on special needs in general. All parents said that most people would be curious as to how their child looks physically normal yet is enrolled in a special class. Parents Nav and Mala (PS) usually explain Autism to their family, friends and the public by stating*, "…Autism is not a disease and it is not something curable. It is basically a child who is special and differently abled than other kids, in their own environment and*

has different ways of comprehending things". Children with autism are innocent, intelligent, extremely sensitive and live in different realms (Evan & Shan, PS). To spread awareness to the community about her child, June (GS) exposes her child to the community by bringing him to the playground, malls and restaurants despite the child having meltdowns (screaming or crying or self-stimulatory behaviour by flapping his arms). She further said that it is important to integrate special children with typical children to facilitate an inclusive environment for all.

Research Question 3: What are the concerns and barriers hindering parental involvement in their child's education?

Theme 7: Concerns and barriers pertaining to PI

During the interview, participants voiced out their concerns and challenges pertaining to parental involvement which may have reduced their level of involvement in their child's education. The researcher identified six sub-themes which is a) lack of resource barrier, b) financial constraints, c) work schedule d) education barrier, e) teachers who are not trained and f) parents in denial.

a) Lack of resources

There is minimal information accessible to parents regarding special educational needs (SEN) and the lists of schools in Malaysia that have a good support system for special needs children. There is no education system catered to children who fall in the grey area. It is either you place them in a special school or a mainstream school. As a result, these kids are the ones who tend to suffer the most (Nav & Mala, PS). Apart from that, most parents endure high levels of stress as they are not made aware of their rights as a parent as well as the lack of resources on ways to manage children with SEN. Lin (GS) states that, *"..all the nitty gritty details of the syllabus and guidelines were found online but it is not provided readily by the school unless you request for it. So my rights on my child's education is not very exposed…there is some kind of secrecy…"*. Another parent mentioned that there are limited resource centres provided by the government for children with special educational needs specifically for speech, motor skills, career guidance and working opportunities, as well as limited facilities in government hospitals (Evan and Shan, PS). The government also did not see the need to have an in-house educational psychologist, a speech therapist or even a teaching assistant in every class to assist children with special educational needs (June, GS)

On the contrary, an abundance of resources can also be a problem according to June (GS). She said that despite the parents being educated, they are often times stressed and confused as there are too many paths and choices available in the market to assist their child, and she is unable to decide what is essential.

> *"...it is becoming a lucrative path as it is relatively new. There is sand therapy, play therapy, art therapy and etc.. Parents don't know which is necessary and which is not to help child." (June, GS)*

b) Financial constraints

The second sub-theme which is a concern for all parents is the issue of funding. All participants said that having a child with special needs costs twice as much than raising a normal child (June, GS). In government schools the funds are not distributed evenly, with majority allocated for regular students and not the Special Education Department (Fad, GS). All the eight parents mentioned their dissatisfaction with the government for not allocating a budget for special needs children in Malaysia. Shan (PS), a mother of a ten-year old child said that she had to quit her job to focus on her child and her husband is the sole breadwinner of the family, causing a loss of one income and resulting in the inability to afford things the child needs:

> *"Everything is so expensive when it comes to special needs in this country, we can't even afford a speech therapist…resources are plenty but it all comes down to the dollars and cents at the end of the day". (Shan, PS)*

c) Work schedule

Interestingly, data gathered showed that two mothers had to quit their jobs to be more involved in their child's life while the father worked to support them financially. June (GS) said, *"...in the Malaysian context, it is difficult if both parents are working and to able to focus and teach a child with special educational needs"*. A full-time working mother, Mary (PS) states that despite her busy work schedule, she makes it a point to get back home at a fixed time everyday. She informs her children about her work schedule so it helps them adjust their expectations and know what time their mother comes home from work as children with Autism cope well with a structured routine. On the contrary, mothers who are housewives, said they are very satisfied with their level of involvement due to not having job commitments (Fad, GS).

d) Education barrier

All eight parents voiced out their concerns pertaining to the education system in Malaysia mainly regarding the absence of an Individual Education Program (IEP) regardless of whether it is a government or private school in Malaysia. The parents said that the Education Ministry is too rigid in their education system that they fail to understand that a child with special needs, especially those diagnosed with Autism require a tailored syllabus to help them cope with their learning difficulties. Nav and Mala (PS) said Autism has a huge spectrum and due to the inflexibility of the syllabus, it may have an adverse effect towards their child and this can cause him to regress in his education. All participants mentioned that it is necessary for the Education Ministry to adjust the curriculum to suit the child's needs, even if it means moving the child to a lower grade than his current age and follow a child's respective pace.

Another concern that was raised by parents who send their children to private schools was that their child was rejected by the government schools due to inability to speak or understand Malay as most of them speak English.

> *"The Ministry of Education (MoE) fails to realize that Autism is a communication disorder; it is good enough if the child can communicate in one language (as most are non-verbal)" (Evan & Shan, PS)*

Furthermore, the mother of an 11-year old verbal daughter, Lin (GS) raised several issues she had regarding the education system in government schools. She said that her child was only allowed to participate in extra-curricular activities that were gender stereotypical. For example, only boys were involved in gardening and girls were meant to be involved in cooking. She mentioned that the timetable and syllabus of the school was not well-balanced and structured. Therefore, it was difficult for children with Autism to cope as there was no repetition of core subjects. For example, core subjects such as Mathematics and Science was only taught twice a week on Monday and Friday, whereas Malay, English and Civics were taught more frequently. Apart from that, she also said that most exam questions in the government syllabus are not tailored to cater to children with special needs. The syllabus requires lateral thinking causing children with Autism to struggle and cope with academically. The Ministry places emphasis on academic skills rather than the child's talent, as stated by Lin (GS):

"…if you want to enter higher education, you have to get certain marks…it's still about the marks at the end of the day, rather than abilities. You need certificates to qualify for a job or extra-ordinary talents to survive in Malaysia, which is impossible for most children with special needs…" (Lin, GS)

e) Untrained Teachers

Data collected showed that all three parents with children in government schools stated similar concerns in terms of educators not trained to handle children with special educational needs. One of the mothers said she lowered her standards to a minimum and did not expect much as it was a government school and the teachers had no proper training on identifying the various types of disabilities. Hence, they lacked teaching skills catered to handle children with different disabilities (June, GS). The other respondent, Fad (GS) revealed that in her situation, teachers in the government school found it hard to handle her son and used to compare her child's academic results with other normal students : *"…not fair for teachers to compare my son with another student of the same age. People with Autism have a different spectrum so each individual is not the same".* Teachers in the government school also had limited authority in terms of decision making as they were unable to decide independently on what would best suit the child's learning best without following the guidelines provided by the Ministry of Education (Lin, GS).

However, the other three parents had dissimilar concerns regarding the teachers in private schools. One of them said that the teachers have a negative perception and did not have enough faith in their own work. The teachers felt that if the child fails academically, it means the child will regress if parents transitioned her into a mainstream school and this demotivated the child and lowered her self-esteem (Mary, PS). Husband and wife, Evan and Shan (PS) explained that most children are denied the opportunity to attend school due to not being toilet trained. This is due to the lack of resources, as caregivers are not provided by the schools.

f) Parents in denial

The sixth sub-theme revolves around parents who are in denial regarding their child's learning difficulty. Most parents stated that they were initially shy and not open to discussing matters concerning their child with other people. However, they soon realized that it helped create positive awareness amongst the community. Fad (GS) said that *"...some parents are reserved and ashamed, maybe they have low self-esteem because they have to send their children with special needs to a government school...parents cannot accept that their child has been downgraded from a mainstream school to a special school".*

Research Question 4: Is there a difference in the level of parental involvement between government and private primary schools in Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur and Selangor?

Theme 8: Difference of PI in private versus government primary schools

The researcher asked the participants if the type of school that is private or government play a significant role in their level of involvement. Six of the parents said that they would be involved regardless of the type of school as long as they have full access to their child. Four parents who send their children to a private school said that they would have enrolled their child in a government school if they were more accommodating towards the child's needs.

> *"It doesn't matter private or government we would still be very much involved. We would have enrolled him in a government school if they had the facilities and support system at that time". The only downfall is that there is no IEP and size of class is too big in government school. (Nav & Mala, PS)*

On the contrary, participant Fad (GS) said that she would be more involved in a private school as the teachers consult parents and they are more accommodating towards the parents' needs as compared to the current government school. June (GS) said that *"...if I send my child to a private school, I would be less involved as I can do my own thing".*

Theme 9: Benefits of Parental Involvement (PI)

By being involved in their child's education, all parents reported positive changes within themselves, the teachers as well as the child's academic progress. Two sub-themes were derived which is learning something new as well as child's progress increases due to the involvement of parents.

a) Learning something new

All parents said that by being involved in their child's education, it has benefitted them tremendously and they view the world from a different perspective now. Parents, Evan and Shan (PS) said that engaging in their child's daily life brought out their potential, their strengths and has enabled them to build a network of connections with so many people in the process of raising their son. Shan said, *" It was a journey of self-discovery"*. The mother of four said that despite raising three children, she assumed that the fourth would be simple but it turns out you learn more each day (Fad, GS). In addition, parents were not the only ones who gained positive experiences by being involved. It was said that PI helped the teachers gain experience on how to handle children with special educational needs. Both parents, June (GS) and Mary (PS) mentioned that the teachers in the private and government school were happy with feedback provided by parents as to how the child behaves at home as it may differ from the way they behave in school. This information helped them understand a child with autism better resulting in increased levels of engagement between the child and the teacher.

b) Child's progress increases

Parental involvement has a huge impact on the child's progress. Based on what the parents shared, it was noted that the child showed an increase in academic performance and social skills. Parents shared that by being involved in their child's education, this boosts the child's motivation to perform 100% as he or she is aware of the support provided by the parents. In addition, parents said that by being involved, the child is more attached to the parents and engages more with family, friends and teachers. In some cases, parents reported that their child's verbal communication increased and less prompting was needed to initiate requesting (June, GS).

Theme 10: Importance of Social and Living Skills versus Academic Skills

An interesting finding was that all eight parents stressed the importance of focusing on their child's social skills rather than the academic skills. They said it was essential to build the child's communication skills so that he or she can engage with the parents, teachers and peers. Another respondent said that it was important for her child to build independence in order to survive. Fad (GS) mentioned, *"Our primary goal is to focus on his life skills to be independent; clean himself and dress himself…we don't think much about education. Focus more on his sensory issues (brushing teeth) and reading and writing later on"*.

Theme 11: Overall level of satisfaction

Out of the eight participants, six of them said they were extremely satisfied with their level of involvement in their child's education. However, the other two parents responded "okay" when asked how satisfied they were with their level of involvement. Both mothers, Fad (GS) and Shan (PS) wished they had more time to study and acquire the necessary skills needed to raise their children.

Theme 12: Suggestions to enhance PI

All eight parents suggested that the schools should have regular Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) meetings every month not only to discuss the child's academic progress but other aspects of the child; the child's behavior as well as his or her likes and dislikes. Parents prefer direct face-to-face communication with the teacher in charge of their child rather than going through a teaching assistant (TA) or third party to find out about their child's progress. Parents suggested an increase in the level of communication via emails or the communication book so that parents are well-informed on the lesson on a day-to-day basis. This would enable parents to assist and ensure that the child is on track with the syllabus on a daily basis. Another suggestion is that teachers should inform the parents about the subjects being taught the following semester so that parents can prepare the child as a refresher during the holidays (Nav and Mala, PS).

Four parents said that the Ministry of Education should set-up proper support systems in mainstream schools and special schools. It should be specifically designed to suit children with various educational needs, and then slowly integrate them into a mainstream setting via inclusion. In order to do so, teachers have to understand the meaning of 'inclusion'. According to Lin (GS), *"…inclusion does not necessarily mean just include them*

academically in a mainstream class. However teachers can include some of the special needs children who are good in sports or arts in regular classes with typical children". She further elaborated that the government should design the education system towards each disability and not just mix all children under one roof blindly in the name of inclusion. The less talented ones are usually left behind because of their different abilities and inability to fit into the 'normal' category. She added, *"...if they could segregate them, it would be better and once you see an improvement, only then proceed to talk about inclusion".* In addition, all parents stressed the importance of training teachers and staff to identify children with special needs and have different education plans structured to their needs. Each school should also have an educational psychologist or a therapist to identify children with SEN and provide them with necessary support. (June, GS)

Other suggestions include providing financial loans to assist parents. For example, tuition fee waivers should be implemented so that the cost of special education is affordable (Evan and Shan, PS). Besides that, Nav and Mala (PS) suggested that the school engages in a 'buddy system' by pairing up the child with a classmate whom he is comfortable with and share similar interests to participate in class activities together. This creates a sense of belonging within the child and does not segregate him from his peers, rather assimilate the child and build their social skills.

4.2 Discussion

The researcher received satisfactory data from this qualitative study which have encapsulated the parents' perceptions, sentiments, concerns and barriers in a rich and descriptive manner. This chapter deciphers the findings of the present research and compares and contrasts it with results from past research. The researcher discusses the primary and sub-themes which were derived based on the participants responses in relation to the research questions formed. These experiences elucidate the researchers questions resulting in the themes shown in Appendix F.

4.2.1 Perception of ideal parental involvement (PI) of parents with children diagnosed with Autism

This theme explicates the participants' perception on how they define parental involvement (PI) based on their own understanding and experience. It was noted that all eight respondents expressed similar views in regards to PI which meant participating in every aspect of the child's life in five major areas namely education, health, dietary requirements, socialization and living skills of the child. As one of the parents (Mary)

stated that the involvement of parents is vital to pave a strong foundation that would boost the child's self-esteem and motivate him or her to succeed. The teachers only play a small role in assisting the child in school for approximately six hours. However, the remaining 18 hours in a day is spent at home with the parents.

The researcher was intrigued by the response provided by Lin (GS) stating, *"…if I didn't have a child with special needs, I don't think I will be this involved and fight for her education rights and try to change the education system…"* It goes to show that if Lin was not blessed with a special child, she would not have been very involved in her child's education and would just leave that responsibility to the school and teachers. However, in this study the majority of parents interviewed engaged in activities involving their child regardless of their age, race, level of education or socioeconomic status.

4.2.2 Importance of Parenting

Both parents play an equal and important role in raising their child. Teamwork and division of labour help in nurturing the child by supporting one another. For a child with Autism, familial ties help motivate and support the child to perform better academically and socially (Topor et al., 2010). It is always better to have both parents by your side than just one who has to constantly juggle the responsibilities all by themselves. Participants (Evan and Shan, private school) mentioned, *"When you have got a special child, you have to have a division of labour…it allowed us to really focus and be the best parents"*. It is important to work together and balance out the responsibilities as it can cause burnout if one parent had to work around the clock taking care of the child while the other only contributes financially. A study conducted by Milgram and Atzil (1998) showed that parents of children with Autism had higher life satisfaction when they shared childcare duties. It was also noticed that husbands who provide support and psychological strength to their partners showed lower levels of stress when raising a child with Autism (Gill and Harris, 1991). Apart from managing areas concerning nutrition and health and social skills of the child, it is necessary for parents with children with autism to equip themselves with specialized skills and knowledge on providing their child with quality education and intervention. Parents need to update themselves with the current special education laws and regulations in Malaysia, their rights as a parent, nature of Autism and the identifiable characteristics and also ways to be more involved in their child's lives. Parent Mary (PS) said that she attended workshops such as ABA therapy in order to understand how to help and teach her child.

Based on the findings of this study, it was found that most of the responsibilities was shouldered by mothers in terms of assisting the child with school work (education), attending Parent-Teacher meetings, researching on ways to update herself in order to assist the child as well as taking care of their dietary requirements. Correspondingly, a study by Bristol, Gallagher and Schopler (1988) reported that the presence of a child with special needs affected parenting roles in a household. The mothers are usually expected to care for the child who is differently abled whereas the fathers display decreased levels of involvement in terms of child care specifically in the child who has special needs in comparison to the siblings due to the severity of the child's "unusual" manner. According to all the six mothers, the role of the father is usually to support the household financially and spend time with the child during weekends at the mall or park. During the interview, one of the fathers (Nav, PS) said, "*…my involvement is paying the bills…*". Factually, the role of a father has evolved through different phases in life from being a strict disciplinarian, to the breadwinner of the family, to the father-figure hero and "friend" and now to a co-parent (Pleck & Pleck, 1997). According to Lamb et al. (1987), these three aspects are necessary when defining the involvement of father which is a) accessibility- being available and present to communicate with the child, b) engagement- meaning interaction and direct contact such as educational trips, reading or playing and c) responsibility - involved in the process of decision making involving matters concerning the child's education, health, childcare and daily living skills (Cabrera et al., 2000).

4.2.3 Learning at home

Research has evidently proven that parents who are involved in their child's education from a very young age improves the child's literacy, mathematical skills as well as strengthens their social-emotional skills. (Voorhis et al., 2013). Thus it is important for parents to focus on learning activities at home by assisting the child with their school work, creating a conducive learning environment, providing professional help (mental health professional or a therapist) as well as engaging in educational trips. The results of the present study indicate that all eight parents are supportive and display positive engagement by teaching the child at home, having a comfortable space for the child to learn, play as well as conduct therapy and also seek advice from health care personnel or therapist to improve the child's quality of life.

Ozonoff and Cathcart (1998) stated that parents who were involved with their autistic child at home improved the child's cognitive and prevocational abilities thus leading to them succeeding academically. Similarly, Voorhis et al. (2013) revealed that by involving

parents in homework, it fostered the child's interest in learning, showed improvements in school (via modeling and reinforcement strategies) as well as promoted parental responsibility. Helping the child with homework not only benefits the child academically in school, but also strengthens the parent-child relationship (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2010). It is said that parental involvement mainly in homework, increases the academic performance and skill generalization in a child diagnosed with Autism (Jurbergs et al., 2007). Similar studies by Cancio et al. (2004) and Axelrod et al. (2009; Trautwein et. al, 2009) afforded parallel outcomes. Children with Autism often face difficulties when completing their homework. Therefore, it is important for parents to motivate and assist the child to understand academic tasks assigned to them (Grauvogel-Macalese & Wallace, 2010).

In addition to assisting the child with homework, it is essential to involve speech and language or an occupational therapist to enhance the child's learning sphere of education (Vitaskova & Rihova, 2014). The combination of teaming professional help with the involvement of parents at home and teachers in school would provide the child with necessary support and helps a child with Autism to develop communication skills. It also provides parents with an effective diagnosis to seek immediate intervention (Vitaskova & Rihova, 2014). Although educational trips such as going to the zoos, museums, parks and science centers are beneficial, not all parents in this study were able to carry out these activities. This was due to the child's low comprehension skills as well as sensory discomfort. A study by Schaaf et al. (2011), coincides with the findings of the present research indicating that due to children with Autism having sensory difficulties, family participation inside and outside of the home is restricted.

4.2.4 Communication

Two-way communication between parents and the school ensures that both parties are involved in a child's education to closely enhance the child's progress. It is said that parents and teachers have different ideologies of the ideal parental involvement. Most parents are focused on a community-based approach to build the child's socialization skills so that he or she can engage in society. On the contrary, teachers are primarily inclined to an education-based approach centered around the academics of the child and the school setting itself (Lawson, 2003). Concurring with a study by Epstein (2003), a healthy parent-teacher communication increases the willingness of parents to participate more in their child's education if the educators respect and value the involvement of parents. Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005) supports this by stating that parents feel secure

and appreciated when teachers communicate with parents in matters concerning their child. This feeling of being appreciated acts as a strong motivator for parents to trust and engage comfortably with the teachers and school staff which strengthens the home-school communication bond (Finders & Lewis, 1994). In the current study, the findings show that in some cases, parents are the ones who initiate communication with the school to find out about their child's progress. Respondents Nav and Mala (PS) stated, *"Only if child does something wrong, then the teachers will update the parents. There is no communication book whatsoever"*. In her study, Epstein et al. (2009) mentions the critical need to provide all families with clear and accessible information about their child at all times. It should not be restricted to discussing matters only during progress report meetings, parental workshops or if the child has behavioural problems or does not perform academically. In order to improve the inter-communication between parents and teachers, the school should consider factors that may affect communication between parents. Some parents may face a language barrier as well as being able to access to emails or *'Whatsapp'*. By teaming up with the school and teacher, parents are likely to be aware of their child's developmental stages. In a way, this also heightens their self-esteem and improves their parenting skills (Epstein, 2001).

Besides home-school communication, another important aspect which enhances a child's progress is by providing the child with the opportunity to express their emotions and needs. For a verbal child, giving them a chance to voice their opinions establishes a sense of importance and boosts confidence. Parents and teachers should view children as 'beings' rather than 'becomings' (Qvortup, 1994). A child should not merely exist without being given the opportunity to make decisions on their own. Adults often perceive that children are young, immature and incompetent of making decisions on their own. However, it is important to take into account their feelings - if they are content with the decisions made by the parents and the educator as it affects their lives. The findings of the present research show positive support from all eight parents indicating that they always place their child's needs and priorities ahead of their wishes. According to mother, Lin (GS), *"..Parents should place the child's priority and wishes first as it is their future not ours, and parents must not push the child beyond the child's capabilities"*. However, all parents reported that all the teachers had a communication barrier with their respective child and failed to understand him or her. Fad (GS) stated, *"...the teacher said he was not smart enough and left the child to be in his own world and did not entertain him"*. Acknowledging a young child's perspective in making decisions can be done by listening to the child's voice, consulting and allowing the child to

participate actively at every stage of development (Coleyshaw et al., 2012). This would facilitate children's development and give them a sense of responsibility on ways to make quality choices concerning their education and lives.

In addition, the usage of Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) is said to improve communication skills for individuals with Autism for both; non-verbal and verbal children. Augmentative communication is when their vocalization skills are minimal and their natural speech is not sufficient to express their thoughts and needs. Alternative communication on the other hand is for those who are non-verbal to compensate for the lack of motor skills using other ways such as the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) (Bondy & Frost, 1994). The usage of AAC benefits children with Autism allowing them to interact and communicate with others, have an access to education as well as reduced behavioral problems as they are able to convey their feelings and personality (Bopp, Brown & Mirenda, 2004). The educational applications on the iPad has enabled the child to engage in eye contact and even enhance their vocabulary and appropriate communication skills such as ability to greet others, decipher emotions as well as narrate stories. Based on the findings gathered in the present study, all parents strictly limit the usage of iPads and other forms of alternative communication solely for academic purposes or to assist their children with school work. Parents Evan and Shan (GS) use AAC to improve their son's vocabulary, spelling and allows him to explore his interests.

4.2.5 Decision making

Decision making plays a major role in parental involvement especially during early childhood education. For example, when making choices centered around choosing the type of school and desired curriculum suitable for their child. The findings of the present study show that parents who send their children to government schools are not viewed as co-partners in the school when it comes to policy making as compared to those who enrolled their children in a private school. Participant, Fad (GS) affirmed that *"...the school has parents for 'formality' sake. Parents have no authority to voice out and collaborate with the school as the National Education Policy itself does not state the need of viewing parents as equal partner"*. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), for the benefit of the child, teachers need to view parents as equal partners and work together progressively within the microsystem to benefit the child (chronosystem) as any conflict can damage the child's overall development.

However it was noted that regardless of the type of school, parents were not given the right to make decisions regarding the type of curriculum unless the child has an Individual Education Program (IEP) which is not offered in most government schools in Malaysia. Parents from both the government and private schools voiced out their concerns by stating that without an IEP, their children are unable to cope and are left behind. Parents Nav and Mala (PS) said, ""*...according to the Ministry of Education, regardless of the child's capability, if you are 8 years old, you must be in grade 2. You can't demote the child to a lower level to help him cope better"*. This affected their decision in not being able to enrol their child in a government school due to the absence of an IEP. When providing education for children with special needs mainly Autism, it is necessary to be aware that individuals with Autism have communication and social interaction difficulties as well as interest in specific activities (Wilczynski et al, 2007). An IEP enables every child regardless of their severity to receive education tailored to their capacity with realistic goals and learning objectives (Wilczynski et al, 2007). A study by Yaacob, Osman and Bachok (2014) emphasized that parents in Malaysia place prime importance in being able to choose the syllabus suitable for their child, followed by the facilities, academic performance and lastly the quality of educators in that school. The findings concur with the views of participant Mary (PS) who said that she chose the present school based on suitability and comprehensiveness of programme for the child's capability, the facilities offered as well as the quality, enthusiasm and personality of the therapists engaging with their child.

Other than facilities, quality of educators and having an IEP, the location between home and school is another factor for choosing the type of school (Goldring & Rowly, 2006). This is to ensure that the location is at a reachable distance and convenient for parents in terms of transportation (sending the child back and forth to school) and being more participative in their child's education.

4.2.6 Collaboration with the school and community

Patrikakou and Weissberg (1999, p.36) stated, "Teachers are really the glue that holds the home/school partnerships together". Thus, it can be understood that collaboration within parents-school is obligatory via Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) meetings held in schools. Findings in this study revealed that PTA meetings are mainly attended by the mother and is given minimal importance due to the fact that no action was taken regarding the concerns raised by parents.

Furthermore, Parental Involvement should not be limited to school collaborations, but should be expanded to participation involving the community as well via Parent-Support Groups (PSG) to spread awareness regarding Autism. Most mothers in the present research were actively involved in parent-support groups as it supported them emotionally and mentally knowing that they were not alone. PSGs enable parents with children with Autism to access information and also embrace their child's achievements and uniqueness and in return educate the community about Autism (Solomon et al, 2001). Based on the results gathered, it showed that all eight participants expressed their concerns that the Malaysian community lacks awareness on special needs as a whole. Autism awareness is crucial to remove misleading stereotypes amongst relatives, friends, colleagues and the society. Participants Nav and Mala (PS) said that most people think Autism is a disease. These stigmas and fallacies need to be removed as it can negatively impact individuals with Autism and limit their abilities in the community.

4.2.7 Concerns and barriers pertaining Parental Involvement (PI)

Over the years there has been a lot of emphasis on the importance of PI. However, there are a number of gaps that need to be addressed by the Ministry of Education, school and teachers to facilitate a stronger Parent-Teacher relationship to improve the child's education. In this study, there are several barriers which hinder PI namely resource barriers, financial barriers, education barriers as well as untrained teachers. In Malaysia, there is a lack of resources made available to parents on ways to support their child. Parents are unaware of their rights, causing them to experience high levels of stress. Parent, Lin (GS) mentioned that, "…*syllabus and guidelines were found online but it is not provided readily by the school unless you request for it. So my rights on my child's education is not very exposed…there is some kind of secrecy…*". Benson et al. (2008; Lecavalier et al., 2006) affirmed this by stating parents who have a child diagnosed with autism face stress which triggers their lack of involvement. In addition, there are limited choices of schools with a good support system for children with special educational needs in Malaysia particularly in government schools.

The next concern for all parents in this study is the lack of funding when raising a child with special needs. According to Shan (GS), she could not afford a speech therapist due to high cost of living in Malaysia as the education funds are not evenly distributed between typical children and those with special needs. She said, "…*resources are plenty but it all comes down to the dollars and cents at the end of the day*".

Besides that, a concern that needs to be tackled immediately would be adopting an Individualized Education Program (IEP) in all schools irrespective of the child's different abilities. The absence of an IEP in Malaysia has negative implications on a child's academic performance as they have trouble coping with the current syllabus. Despite signing the "Education for All and "No Child Left Behind", parents said that the government schools in Malaysia have rejected their child's right to education due to them not being able to speak or understand Malay (national language) as most of the children speak English. Parents, Evan and Shan (PS) reported, *"The Ministry of Education (MoE) fails to realize that Autism is a communication disorder , it is good enough if the child can communicate in one language (as most are non-verbal)".* An IEP is necessary for children with Autism as it helps them cope academically with a structured education plan tailored to their abilities.

Another worrying concern of parents were the quality of special education teachers in Malaysia. Parents revealed that the teachers mostly in government schools, lack training on ways to identify children with special needs and portrayed poor teaching skills when handling children with specific disabilities. On the contrary, parents claimed that teachers in the private sector despite being trained, had negative perceptions on the success of children with special needs. Parent Mary (PS) described that the private school emphasized too much on the academic progress of her children that they were afraid of transitioning the child to a mainstream school fearing they would 'fail'.

4.2.8 Difference of Parental Involvement (PI) in government versus private schools

A number of reasons that persuaded parents to enrol their child in a private school include the teacher-student ratio, smaller size classrooms and the flexibility in choosing the syllabus (Dronkers & Peter, 2003). Relatedly, Malaysian parents who were financially stable were inclined to select a private school due to the distinctive benefits of having a better education system which is independently financed (Yaacob et al., 2014). In this study, it was noted that parents were offered limited choices when selecting the type of schools due to lack of resources, financial constraints as well as the child having a language barrier. Parents Nav and Mala (PS) mentioned, *"It doesn't matter private or government we would still be very much involved. We would have enrolled him in a government school if they had the facilities and support system at that time". The only downfall is that there is no IEP and size of class is too big in government school".* Interestingly, a parent said that she would be more involved in a private school compared to a government school, they are more accommodating towards her needs. Whereas

another parent from the government school said she would have been less involved in a private school as she would have more time on her hands to do her own thing.

5 CONCLUSION

This chapter evaluates the themes obtained from the findings in relation to the research questions proposed and sums up the entire research process by critically evaluating the methodology and the objectives of the study. The researcher also mentions the strengths and limitations of the present study, the challenges to adopt parental involvement in Malaysia and the implications of the findings for practice and future research.

5.1 Evaluation of Findings

The methodology used which is a qualitative approach, enabled the researcher to encapsulate the feelings and experiences of the respondents in regards to how they perceive PI and the different ways of participation. Based on the data gathered, the researcher managed to achieve the objectives of the research which are 'to investigate parental perception on involvement and the barriers hindering their involvement' and answer the four research questions proposed based on the eight themes derived. Apart from than that, the researcher gained four other pertinent themes that were formed based on the respondents' insights during the interview session.

The first theme answers the first research question which is, 'How do parents perceive parental involvement (PI) in their child's education at home and in school?' The researcher found that all eight parents regardless of the type of school, defined PI as being constantly involved in every aspect of the child's development namely education, health, dietary needs, social and living skills. The findings showed that there were no significant difference in the perception of PI across all eight participants regardless of their gender, age, level of education and type of school the child is enrolled in.

The second research question, 'What are the types of involvement of Malaysian parents in their child's education?' was answered based on themes 2 to themes 6 based on Epstein's Framework of Six Types of Involvement (1987) which was modified to fit the Malaysian context as well as the data obtained in this study. The themes encompass the importance of a) parenting b) learning at home c) communication d) decision making and lastly e) collaboration with the school and community. The findings show that it is necessary for parents to be involved not only physically but in aspects concerning the child's homework, engaging in meaningful communication by listening to the child's point of view and making the school atmosphere more welcoming, making decisions concerning the child's education as well as collaborating with the school and community

to further enhance parental participation. All parents mentioned that the most crucial typology of involvement is communication between the parent, teacher and the child. An efficient method of communication between home and school increases the child's academic progress by enabling both parents and teachers to share their responsibilities in terms of homework completion, behavioral issues as well as supporting the child (Jurbergs et al., 2007).

The third research question which is 'What are the concerns and barriers hindering parental involvement?' was answered based on the findings reflected in theme 8. The findings indicated that the concerns of parents in Malaysia with children diagnosed with Autism revolved around financial constraints, lack of resources as well as the poor quality of the education system with the lack of trained teachers and the absence of IEP. This concurs with the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 that while students do have access to different schooling options, the quality of the education provided across all options have several shortcomings. Firstly, there has been a shortage of qualified teachers and professional support such as audiologists and occupational therapists. Secondly, while a tailored curriculum for certain special needs groups have been developed (for example, *Kemahiran Asas Individu Masalah Penglihatan* for blind students, *Bahasa Isyarat Komunikasi* for deaf students), there is less support for students with learning disabilities such as autism). However, the biggest concern for the eight parents were was whether their child would be able to survive independently in Malaysia given the limited resources for children with SEN as well as who would take care of their child once the parents are no longer around.

The fourth research question i.e. 'Is there a difference in the level of parental involvement between government and private primary schools in Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur and Selangor?' was explained using the 9th theme. Overall, there was no difference in the level of involvement of parents. They were involved in their child's lives and education irrespective of the type of school their child was enrolled in. However, the researcher found out that there was a difference in the roles of uninvolved and involved parents seen between the father and the mother.

5.2 Strengths and limitations of the research

The current study afforded several significant and positive outcomes. Firstly, the semi-structured interviews allowed the participants to speak freely about their experiences without being judged. Besides, the researcher was able to probe and obtain more detailed information which would not have been possible if a questionnaire was used. The researcher was also able to gather new insights and themes based on the respondents' insights during the interview session.

The data collected can be used by the policy makers in the Ministry of Education (MoE) in Malaysia on ways to further enhance meaningful involvement between parents and schools in urban and rural areas by incorporating the feedback from the parents. This is congruent with the views espoused in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 whereby parents will be constantly kept in the loop as to how their child is doing at school, both in terms of achievements and areas for development. They will have regular contact with their children's teachers, not just when there is a problem. This collaboration and sense of shared responsibility will allow parents to feel like true partners with schools in facilitating their child's learning.

Besides, the findings from this study could provide the impetus for the MoE to improve the quality of education provided for children with autism as well as be more committed to the introduction of an IEP tailored to each child's particular needs. The data will enable parents to understand which aspects of involvement they need to be more attentive to without being overly involved. Parents would be able to voice out their thoughts and opinions in hopes to create a learning plan tailored to suit the needs of children with autism in both; government and private schools in Malaysia.

This will benefit the child as the parents would know how to attend to their needs better and pave the way for an inclusive setting in a mainstream school.

This study will also provide future researchers information with regard to the barriers hindering successful parental involvement in Malaysia and the changes parents desire to be more involved in decision making, policy planning and

creating a more supportive learning environment for their children. Parents would be able to voice out their thoughts and opinions in hopes to create a learning plan tailored to suit the needs of children with autism in both; government and private schools in Malaysia.

The findings could also be used by the Parent-Teacher Association to encourage teachers, parents and members of the community to voice out their thoughts and opinions about parental involvement without inhibition. This win-win situation would help create a more conducive learning environment for the children with autism in both government and private schools in Malaysia.

The researcher will present the findings in the form of a pamphlet and share them with NASOM (National Austistic Society of Malaysia) so that the information can be disseminated to other relevant organizations and authorities.

Despite having several strengths, the research has some weaknesses. The first being that the research only focuses on the perception of parents' on parental involvement without including the views of teachers and mental health professionals (such as therapists and psychologists) on how they perceive parental involvement. Secondly, the qualitative study focuses on a small sample which is 8 participants, although the proposed number of participants was a total of 12 parents with children diagnosed with Autism. Some of the parents did not want to participate as they were afraid of being judged and were not ready to open up about their child's. Besides that, they felt intimidated due to the language barrier as well as wondered how it would benefit them by being a participant in this research. Hence, the findings of this study were unable to conclusively generalize the level of involvement of parents whose children are enrolled in government and private schools in Malaysia.

Besides that, the research only focuses on primary schools in the main state (Selangor) and the capital city (Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur) of Malaysia. Therefore, the results obtained should not be used to generalize the degree of parental involvement in other Malaysian states as well as the Asian continent as the accessibility to education and socio-economic status may differ. The depth of parental involvement may also differ depending on the child's disability.

Another limitation would be that this study interviews both parents that is the father and the mother. Hence, the data gathered should not be used to analyze the level of involvement of single parents or fathers in general due to the uneven number of 'father- interviewees'. In a qualitative study, a small sample size limits the researcher from making generalizations with real world situations as it does not ensure credibility of the findings (Oppong, 2013). Due to the short time taken in conducting this research which is only four months in total, the results of this study may be value-driven results.

5.3 Implications for practice and future research

5.3.1 Implications for Practice

In relation to parental involvement in Malaysia, there are a few suggested recommendations to conceptualize certain practices into the Malaysian context. Results showed that despite parents being actively involved in their child's lives, there needs to be a two-way effort between the parents and the school to benefit the child's progress. A study by Jennifer and Neo (2001) concluded that parental involvement should not only be focused in terms of home-based learning but it should be extended to learning in schools. It is said that children perform better in school if parents are the central object in the education policy as seen in European countries. The Education Department in each state should work together with the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) in each school to execute a successful partnership plan between the school and the parents to be able to achieve an inclusive education system and generate a productive learning environment for the child.

The present findings concur with Nor (2008) which stated that parents in Malaysia are less likely to be involved in their child's life due to lack of funding from the government, lack of knowledge due to limited resources and negative attitudes from the community. Due to low financial income, parents find it challenging to meet the expenses of the family and their other children especially if it is a single parent household. Children with special needs require different dietary requirements, special equipment, medical equipment, professional support and materials to amuse, pacify or stimulate the child. One of the participants

suggested that the Ministry of Education in Malaysia should provide financial loans for parents with SEN children. In addition, home-school learning ties should be strengthened by providing schools with resources and tools needed to work with parents in more significant techniques as well as discovering different ways to enhance communication skills between one another. Schools should have workshops and training activities to provide parents with support.

Besides that, there is still need to create more awareness about SEN in Malaysia. Therefore, it is important for parents to engage in Parent-support groups and community activities with their child to promote awareness on Autism as it can help eliminate the stigma and pre-conceived notion with regards to disability.

Moreover, not all teachers are trained to identify students with SEN characteristics (Malaysia Education Blueprint, 2013-2025). As a result, these children are left behind in their studies as their needs are not met. Apart from revising the policies and legislations, the government should provide sufficient training for all teachers regardless of whether they are teaching in a special school or not. This would help them identify children with SEN at an early stage and gear the classroom towards an inclusive study environment.

Even teachers sometimes are seen to exclude these students from classroom activities as they feel this will disrupt their lesson when the child has a meltdown. Negative attitudes from educators will hinder the partnership between schools and parents to work together as partners to meet the child's needs. Teacher training programmes should incorporate modules such as parental involvement as part of their syllabus to inculcate a positive relationship between the school and parents so that they can work together as partners. In Asia parents and educators generally set high expectations for their child resulting in their child feeling pressured, losing interest and causing burnout. The teachers need to understand the child better, educate themselves on what Autism is all about and celebrate every milestone of the child's progress irrespective of the degree of achievement.

Another suggestion is that children with multiple difficulties should be included under the SEN definition so that they are entitled to education. Provisions for children with SEN should cater to those with mono and dual disabilities as well.

Apart from revising the policies and legislations, the government should provide sufficient training for all teachers regardless of whether they are teaching in a special school or not. This would help them identify children with SEN at an early stage and gear the classroom towards an inclusive study environment.

Moreover, school administrators should focus not only on building healthy parent-teacher relationships but student-teacher relationships as it is beneficial to the child's academic progress. Schools and policymakers need to find solutions to nurture parent's positivity and increase their self-esteem to continue being involved and supportive of their child's education.

5.3.2 Implications for Future Research

The researcher's review of literature on parental involvement for children with autism indicated that there is lack of research conducted in this area of study in Malaysia.

One recommendation for future research is that a comparative study should be carried out to investigate the collaborative level of involvement between parents, teachers and society and how it affects the child's academic progress. Other than that, future research should focus on the respective parental roles that is maternal and paternal on the degree of involvement in their child's education.

Another implication for other researchers would be to take into account the ability of the child in terms of cognitive and language impairment, the different spectrums and severity of Autism, the family background of the child as well as the parenting style used to raise the child. Another interesting area of research would be to investigate if the number of siblings or having an only child, has an effect on the intensity of parental involvement. As Malaysia is a multi-cultural society, research could also be conducted to find out the degree of parental involvement among the different races.

As the present study only focuses on parental involvement in the urban areas, future researchers could conduct comparative studies to investigate whether there is any significant difference in parental involvement between the urban and rural areas.

5.4 Conclusion

Although teachers are seen as primary successor to a student's educational achievement, parents are said to be the child's first cradle of education and the most unrelenting educator (Maloney et al., 2015)**.** Parental involvement is a crucial aspect to ensure the child's educational progress and wellbeing. The right amount of parental participation alongside professional help is necessary to discuss suitable provisions for the child to yield a positive response. According to Entwisle & Hayduk (1988; Pedersen et al., 1978), parents need to be involved during the child's early years of education itself as it stabilizes the child's academic progress later as they proceed into secondary education. Bandura (1977) mentioned that the child's cognitive competence is subjected to factors such as parental support, social and emotional regulation, verbalization skills and the ability to complete tasks.

The government needs to ensure that existing policies are put into practice before creating new ones. It is time to empower the needs for SEN in Malaysia so that their potential can be fully tapped. Special education needs to be approached from a micro-level and not just from a macro-level using the Russian doll approach (Brofenbrenner, 1992). At the same time, negative attitudes should be replaced so that misconceptions regarding individuals with special needs are abolished (Jelas & Ali, 2014).

Furthermore, there needs to be a systematic approach in the education system in Malaysia by making it more flexible for all children as well as implementing an IEP tailored exclusively to each child regardless of their different abilities. In order to achieve successful and meaningful parental involvement, there needs to be awareness of SEN. Thus the Ministry of Education should develop a sense of urgency by developing a proper education system catered to all children as each of them is unique in his or her own way and only then focus on building infrastructure to finally move towards developing an inclusive society.

According to Smith (2000), a school is defined by the functionality of it which is having facilities to support learning, a conducive classroom as well as a balanced student-teacher ratio. Six out of eight participants in this study said that their level

of involvement is not affected by the type of school their child is enrolled in. They would be involved in their child's education as long as the school has amenities and trained teachers to support their child's development.

In conclusion, effective parental involvement is not defined by the types of activities parents partake in but it is dependent on the attitude parents have towards meeting the goal; providing their child with quality education and supporting their needs as well as the successful parent-teacher collaboration. The adage "I can do things you cannot, you can do things I cannot; together we can do great things" by Mother Theresa attests to the benefits of being partners in education.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

7.1.1 Appendix A 1: Demographics of Parents

Type of School	Pseudonym of parent	Parent	Age (yrs)	Occupation	No. of working hours/day
Private School (PS)	Mary	Mother	43	Director	6-7
	Nav	Father	45	Engineer	14-16
	Mala	Mother	42	Dentist	8
	Evan	Father	57	Editor	8
	Shan	Mother	47	Freelancer	8
Government School (GS)	June	Mothers	38	Housewife	_
	Lin		40	Doctor	10-12
	Fad		38	Housewife	_

Table 2: Demographics of parents

7.1.2 Appendix A 2: Demographics of child

No.	Age	Gender	Type of School	Communication skills	No. of years attending this school
1	10	M	P	Non-verbal	9 months
2	12	M	P	Verbal	1 year
3	9	F	P	Verbal	2 years
4	8	M	G	Verbal	16 months
5	8	M	G	Non- verbal	1 year
6	11	F	G	Verbal	2 years

Table 3: Demographics of child

Key: F: female, M: male, P: private, G: government

Appendix B: Information Sheet

You are being invited to participate in a research study conducted by Gayathri Devi R. Muralidharan from the Department of Education of Charles University, Prague. The results of this study will contribute to my master dissertation on the Erasmus Mundus Special and Inclusive Education programme.

Student: Gayathri Devi R. Muralidharan
Supervisor: Dr. Pavlina Sumnikova

(pavlina.sumnikova@pedf.cuni.cz)

Introduction

I am a postgraduate student at Charles University (Prague, Czech Republic), and I am pursuing an Erasmus Mundus Ma/Mgr. in Special and Inclusive Education. I am currently in the process of conducting a study for my dissertation as partial fulfillment of the degree's requirements. More information about the study is provided in the following sections. Further clarifications about the research can be provided upon request from participants.

Title of the study
Parents' Voice: Concerns, barriers and benefits of Parental Involvement for children with Autism in Malaysia

Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study is to explore the degree of involvement of Malaysian parents' with children diagnosed with autism, in their child's education (at home/ in school/ community) particularly in Selangor and Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur.

Criteria of participants

Parents of children diagnosed with autism between the ages of 6 and 12, currently enrolled in a private or government school either in Selangor or Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur.

Procedure of the study

The research will employ in-depth interviews to investigate the experiences and identity narratives of the participants. One-to-one interview will be conducted with participants (both parents), lasting up to one hour, and shall take place in the environment selected by the participants. The interview will be audio-recorded for the purpose of later transcription and data analysis. After the completion of the dissertation, these recordings will be eliminated. If necessary, I may contact you for clarification of ideas after the interview.

Participant right and data confidentiality

Your participation in this research study is completely voluntary. You may change your mind at any time and withdraw without any consequences. You may choose not

to answer specific questions. You may choose to exercise option to remove your data from the study. All the data in the interview is subject to total confidentiality and anonymity and it will only be used for the dissertation. You have the right and access to review the transcript of the interview if you wish.

If you have any concerns or questions about this study, please feel free to contact me, (Gayathri Devi R. Muralidharan) at **gayathri.murali29@gmail.com**

If you would like to participate in this study, please sign the attached form and return it to the researcher.

Thank you very much for your assistance!

Appendix C: Informed Consent

> **Parents' Voice: Concerns, barriers and benefits of Parental Involvement for children with Autism in Malaysia**

Participant

I have been invited to participate in the above-mentioned study on the ***"Parents' Voice: Concerns, barriers and benefits of Parental Involvement for children with Autism in Malaysia"***. I have read and understood the foregoing information provided. I have had the opportunity to ask questions, and all my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I voluntarily take part in this study. I authorize the recording of the interviews, and I give my permission to use the information collected during the interview for the purposes of the research.

Participant 1

Contact details of Participant 1:

Email address: _____

Phone number: _____

Signature of Participant 1: _____

Date: _____

Participant 2

Contact details of Participant 2:

Email address: _____

Phone number: _____

Signature of Participant 2: _____

Date: _____

Thank you for your assistance!

* Please return this consent form as requested in the information letter. Please keep the information sheet for your own record in case you need to contact me. The results of this study can be emailed to you upon request. Thank you!

Appendix D: Member Checking Form

Parents' Voice: Concerns, barriers and benefits of Parental Involvement for children with Autism in Malaysia.

Dear participant,

Thank you for your insightful interview. Attached is a draft of the transcripts for your review. Please check for accuracy and that you responses are being reported correctly. In addition, please look out for any personal identifiers that believe still exist in the transcripts. For any inquires please contact me at +60124004227 or email me at gayathri.murali29@gmail.com.

In the event that I do not hear from you within five working days, I will assume that you are in agreement with the transcripts.

Thank you.

Best Regards,

Gayathri Muralidharan

Appendix E: Interview Questions

A. <u>Parenting</u>

1) In your own words, how would you define parental involvement?

2) Can you walk me through a day in your family/household?

3) As a father, in what ways have you been involved in your child's education? Please elaborate(activities)

4) As a mother, in what ways have you been involved in your child's education? Please elaborate

3) What activities do BOTH of you partake with your child? (i.e; school projects, making things, sports, reading)

4) How satisfied are you with your level of involvement and participation?

B. <u>Learning at home</u>

1) Do you help your child with school work if any? How many hours a day and in what ?

2) Do you practise what has been taught in school with your child? Give an example(s).

3) As a parent, what do you do to prepare your child to progress in school? (i.e; occupational tx, speech tx, etc)

4) Do you bring your child for educational trips (library, museums, etc.)? If yes, where and how often? If no, state why?

5) Is there a designated space for your child to play or do activities at home?

6) How do you and your child benefit from you being involved in your child's education?

C. <u>Communication between home and school</u>

1) Does the school provide you with information about your child's progress regularly?

2) How do you normally communicate with the school about your child? (face-to-face/ email/ SMS/ phone calls/ communication book)

3) How often does the school communicate with you about your child? Are you satisfied with this? If no, please state why.

4) Are you satisfied with the way the school staff communicate with you about your child? If no, please state the reason(s).

5) Is language a barrier when you communicate with the school staff?

6) Do you use alternative technology or learning tools to enhance your child's communication skills? If yes, please elaborate.

D. Decision making

1) What made you decide, to send your child to the current school? (convenience, financial aspect, facilities, etc.)

2) As a parent, do you have a say in choosing a curriculum suitable for your child? If yes, please elaborate. If no, do you see this as a problem?

3) How far do your opinions matter when it comes to policy making in the school?

4) Does the school view you as an equal partner when it comes to decision making involving matters concerning your child?

E. Collaboration with the school

1) Have you had opportunities to collaborate with the school about your child's learning?

2) What school projects/ activities have you been involved in? (Eg: Family day, volunteering on school excursions, etc.)

3) Do both of you normally attend Parent Teacher Association (PTA) meetings?

4) Do you voice out your opinions during these meetings? If yes, what issues have you raised and has the school taken any action pertaining to this?

5) What could the school do to help you, get more involved in your child's education?

6) How does the school benefit from you being involved in your child's education?

F. Collaboration with the community

1) Are you a member of any parent support group related to autism? If yes, how has it helped you in being more involved in your child's education?

2) How would you explain autism to others?

3) What steps have you taken to increase awareness amongst the general public about autism?

4) How do you involve your child in community programmes? Provide examples.

G. Concerns and barriers pertaining parental involvement

1) What challenges do you face as a parent of a child with special needs in the current school?

2) Do you require more help and access to information to assist your child? If so, please state what assistance is required.

3) What concerns do you have for your child's future?

4) Based on your opinion/ experience, do you think that the type of school (government/ private) plays a significant role in your level of involvement?

5) Has your work schedule made it difficult to manage the time spent with your child on a daily basis?

6) What causes you not to be involved in your child's education?

7) What has been the worst experience with the school and your child

8) What has been the best experience with the school and your child?

Appendix F: Primary themes and sub-themes of Parental Involvement

Table 3 : Primary themes and subthemes based on data collected in this study.

| No.	Primary themes	Subthemes related to primary themes
1.	Perception of ideal parental involvement (PI) of parents with children diagnosed with Autism	• Definition of PI
2.	Importance of Parenting	• Role of involved and uninvolved parents • Supporting each other
3.	Learning at home	• Assisting child with school work • Learning environment • Professional help • Educational trips
4.	Communication	• Home-school communication • Acknowledging child's voice • Usage of Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC)
5.	Decision making	• Choice of school • Choice of curriculum • Parents viewed as co-partners and policy makers
6.	Collaboration with the school and community	• Parent Teacher Association (PTA) • Parent support groups (PSG) and Autism Awareness
7.	Concerns and barriers pertaining PI	• Resource barrier • Financial constraints • Work schedule • Education barrier • Untrained teachers • Parents in denial
8.	Difference of PI in government versus private primary schools	_
9.	Benefits of Parental Involvement	• Learning something new • Child's progress increases
10.	Importance of social and living skills versus academic skills	_
11.	Overall level of satisfaction	_
12.	Suggestion to enhance the level of PI	_

Appendix G: Map of Malaysia
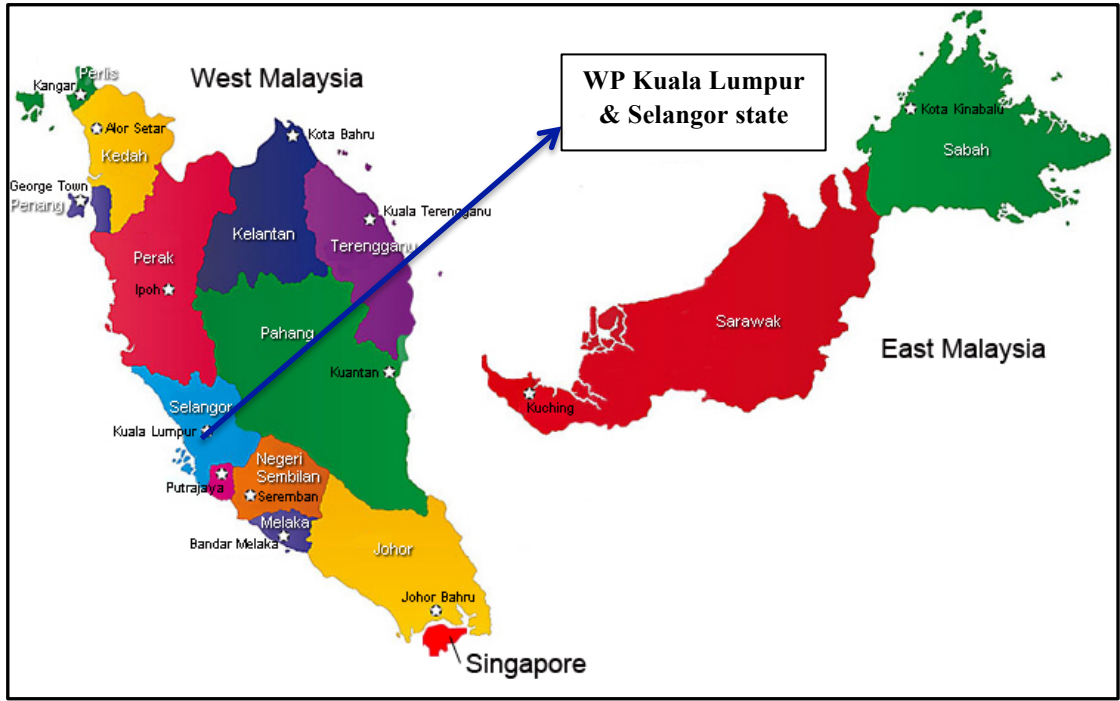
Figure 4: Map of Malaysia indicating the area of selection of participants.