

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Parent's Experience on Employment Issues Faced by Young Adult With Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Young Adults (YAs) with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) have high unemployment rates even in the developed countries. In Malaysia, the rate is assumed to be even higher. Presently, there is no statistical data on the employment rates of individuals with ASD in Malaysia due to the absence of ASD subcategories in the National Registry of Persons with Disabilities (PWDs). Nevertheless, parents of this sub-category have been facing financial struggles and emotional challenges due to their children's employability issues. However, to date, their concerns have not been made known and unconvincing. This paper aimed to gain a better understanding of the employment issues that YAs with ASD face from their parents' perspectives and experiences. **Methods:** A qualitative phenomenological design was employed via semi-structured interview where 8 respondents were recruited through purposive sampling. Each interview lasted between 30 minutes to an hour where their opinions were digitally recorded and then transcribed verbatim. **Results:** Data were analyzed using the Thematic Analysis and three themes emerged from the findings; i) ASD Symptomatology ii) Contextual Challenges iii) Parenting Behaviour. **Conclusion:** Therefore, this study suggests that employment requirements should take the YAs with ASD abilities, life and employable skills, parents' expectations, employers' awareness and acceptance, and the socioecological into account as this can be a significance of an inclusive policy and practice. Further research is needed to identify strategies for improving employment outcomes as these YAs transition into adulthood.

Keywords: Autism spectrum disorder (ASD), Young adult, Employment, Parent's experiences

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INTRODUCTION

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a complex neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by persistent deficits in social interaction, communication, and restricted pattern of behaviours across various contexts (8). In 2020, about 1 in 54 children has been diagnosed with ASD according to estimates from Center of Disease Control & Prevention (CDC), the United States (1). The majority of the support available for people with ASD is geared toward children, and it gradually diminishes as they get older. While many cases go unidentified and underrepresented since there is no prevalent incidence of autism reported locally, it is widely assumed that the number of children with ASD is increasing in Malaysia (21). There is a need to provide employment for this segment of the population as the number of children with ASD increases into YAs. Previous study indicated, there is a huge gap between the needs and the availability of autism-related jobs in this country (32). There were

3782 Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) employed in the public sector. In comparison, out of the 13.74 million workers in the private sectors, only 14,252 PWDs were employed from 1990 to 2018 (19). However, the official number of people with ASD who are hired in both the public and private sectors remains unknown. Previous researches reported that YAs with ASD had the lowest rate of participation in employment than PWDs of other categories (3,5,11, 13.). Likewise, it is expected that low employment rate to be even more pronounced for YAs with ASD in Malaysia.

The Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (WFCDM) is responsible for administering and enforcing the PWD Act 2008, enacted through the National Council for Persons with Disabilities ' Employment Committee. Since 2008, the Malaysian government has continuously carried out many programmes and initiatives for the wellbeing of PWDs in the country (12). Despite a lot of initiatives made by the government, individuals with ASD continue to face difficulties in protecting or realizing their rights for access to education and employment opportunities. This is mainly due to the absence of mandatory employment legislation and policies for YAs with ASD and their

families to participate in the workforce (6,17,18,31). Furthermore, there is no provision of anti-discrimination law that provides PWDs with remedies or other measures to protect their rights in the event of discrimination against them.

Employment is especially challenging for YAs with ASD, yet little is known about employment barriers and issues for this group. While it is important to prepare individuals with ASD for employment, it is equally important to address this issue from parents' perspectives and experiences. Considerably, parents are identified as a major influence on their children's employment status and outcome (16, 30). The family environment and positive parenting has been shown to influence developmental trajectories through adolescence and into adulthood in studies of individuals with ASD (14). Therefore, parent's feedback gathered at this point would likely be valuable to understanding issues and potential factors that impact employment success for YAs with ASD. At present, the outcome presented in the previous research is mostly analyzed quantitatively (5,11,13) which may well not accurately portray the unique experiences of YAs with ASD and their parents. Hence, it is unclear how existing outcome measures and conceptions are aligned with the parental perspectives and priorities.

Frustrated with the lack of employment opportunity for YAs with ASD, quite a number of non-government agencies, private sector, and nonprofit organizations now stood up to prepare them for supported employment (20). Surprisingly, most of this effort initiated by the parents and these ongoing conversations are often motivated by the hopes and desires of the ASD family which has been brought up through this channel (24). Generally, the current phenomenon suggests that there have been ongoing ideas about the importance of parental support and how it may influence the current policies and practices. According to the previous study, parents identified lack of employment option and opportunities, were major barriers to finding and maintaining employment for their YAs with ASD (30). As for the service provision, evidence showed that occupational therapists (OTs) can play a significant role in enhancing service quality to improve job delivery and quality outcomes of an individual with ASD (11). Nevertheless, OT facilities and services in Malaysia appear to be underrated in the planning and transitioning from school to adulthood which therefore resulted in the lack of knowledge among parents about the services. Thus, understanding the complaints of parents who are currently experiencing these challenges may help OTs to better address the needs of the YAs with ASD and guide family decisions to facilitate successful employment for them.

Therefore, the study aimed to:

1. To explore employment issues faced by YAs with ASD from the parent's viewpoint.

2. To investigate parent's attitude and expectation towards the employment prospects of their YAs with ASD.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The researcher applied a descriptive phenomenological design through semi-structured in-depth interviews. The selection of respondents was made through the purposeful sampling method. Respondents are chosen on the basis that they possess awareness and experience of the phenomenon of interest (23). This method was chosen as the selection of the participants is based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria. The researcher referred to the list of parents of YAs with ASD who had completed vocational training in public community colleges, National Youth Institutes, and Job Coach Service Programme under the Social Welfare Department for the last five years. The researcher has to work hand in hand with the programme coordinator to confirm the list of Autism students eligible for the study. Their parents were then contacted for the screening process through phone calls.

Their son or daughter must comply with the following criteria i.e. (i) been diagnosed with mild ASD by the registered medical practitioner (ii) had received and completed special education services from the public or private school recognized by the Ministry of Education (MOE) (iii) had completed vocational training and job training programme and (iv) was currently unemployed for more than one year after finishing the programme. Parents of YAs with ASD who were interested to participate in the study and also met the inclusion criteria were then recruited for an interview session. The researcher also used snowball sampling to recruit more respondents. The data collection ceased at eight respondents when saturation is achieved, the point where no new data arise, and when there is enough information.

Procedure

A semi-structured in-depth interview was employed in this study. The researcher asked the parents a series of eight open-ended questions with subsequent probing questions to get the respondents to further elaborate their answers and to freely share their experiences. The main areas of inquiry discussed include (a) employment issues faced by YAs with ASD (b) their working abilities (c) parents' attitudes and expectations towards their children's employment. The instrument consists of two parts which are the demographic information questionnaire and interview guide. There are 13 items in the questionnaire and it took approximately 5-10 minutes to be completed. The face validity was carried out by having the interview questions reviewed by two panel experts in the field (25). The researcher also had request feedback from the colleagues about the interview protocol and appropriateness of the questions

drafted. This process took place before conducting the pilot interview. A pilot interview was conducted with three parents to test the questions to be asked during the interview. This gave some experiences to the researcher to conduct the real interview. This is also to ensure that the interview questions are clear, concise, and well-developed. Some adjustments were made after the pilot interview mainly in regards to language and sentence structure used in this interview guide, question's order, and the addition of probes.

Interview process

The interview took place at a place and time which was convenient to the respondents. All interviews were digitally recorded, field notes were collected and transcribed verbatim. The interview session was conducted both in Malay either English languages based on the respondents' preferences. The eight interviews took approximately 30 minutes to one hour.

Data Analysis

The interview transcripts were analyzed using the six steps of the Thematic Analysis (TA) based on descriptive phenomenological. The analysis begins with the data familiarization, followed by meaning and themes searching, and concludes with organizing these into patterns and writing the results (2). Peer review was conducted by having input and requesting reviews and

comments from the colleagues on the protocol and interview guide and also to code portions of the transcript. The codes were then reviewed by the independent reviewer outside the field to eliminate possible biases. After developing initial codes and categories, member checking was conducted by contacting three out of eight parents for a second meeting to look at the interpretations to ensure trustworthiness. No disagreement on the interpretation data was found, however much depth and detail information were obtained. Therefore, the researcher used that information as effectively as possible when formulated the final conclusion of the findings. The researcher has taken the audit trail step from the beginning of a research study to the establishment and documentation of findings. This has been done by declaring the textual sources and data analysis.

RESULTS

A total of eight respondents agreed to be part of this study. Respondents' characteristics are summarized in Table I All of the respondents resided in an urban area. From the interviews and analysis, employment issues from the parents' perspectives were identified, as shown in Table II. The findings in this study revealed three themes i) ASD Symptomatology ii) Contextual Challenges iii) Parenting Behaviour and eight sub-themes which were i) Executive Function (EF) Deficit

Table 1: Demographic profile of the respondents and their YAs with ASD

Participants	P1 (Annie)	P2 (Mary)	P3 (Saudah)	P4 (Karen)	P5 (Lim)	P6 (Rina)	P7 (Rachel)	P8 (Linda)
Relationship with child	Mother	Mother	Mother	Mother	Father	Mother	Mother	Mother
Age	56	44	55	59	65	49	56	45
Race	Malay	Malay	Malay	Chinese	Chinese	Malay	Indian	Malay
Parent's educational background	PhD	Degree	STPM	Degree	SPM	Diploma	Degree	Degree
Employment Status	employed	not employed	employed	self-employed	self-employed	employed	not employed	employed
Spouse Employment Status	employed	employed	deceased	deceased	retired	employed	employed	employed
No of Children	6	3	3	2	3	3	2	4
Marriage Status	Married	Married	Widow	Divorced	Married	Married	Married	Married
Child's age	29	23	22	24	28	25	22	24
Child's gender	Male	Male	Female	Female	Male	Male	Male	Male
Child's level of Autism	Moderate ASD	Mild ASD	Mild ASD	Mild ASD	Moderate	HFA	Mild ASD	Mild ASD
Child's education level	High School	College Certificate	College Certificate	College Certificate	High School	College Certificate	High School	College Certificate.

Table II: Themes and Subthemes of the Findings

	Theme 1	Theme 2	Theme 3
Themes	ASD Symptomatology	Contextual Challenges	Parenting Behaviour
Sub-themes	<p>Executive Function (EF) Deficit</p> <p>Social Communication Difficulties</p> <p>Restricted and Rigidity Behaviour</p>	<p>Poor Transition Planning and Career Guidance</p> <p>Lack of Inclusivity and Accessibility</p> <p>Social Stigma</p>	<p>Persistent Fear and Worry</p> <p>Parent's Low Aspiration</p>

ii) Social Communication Difficulties iii) Restricted and Rigidity Behaviour iv) Poor Transition Planning and Career Guidance v) Lack of Inclusivity and Accessibility vi) Social Stigma vii) Persistent Fear and Worry viii) Hope and Expectation. What makes each emerging theme unique is that it reflects the attitudes and beliefs of parents, which implicitly answers the second research question.

ASD Symptomatology

The main theme identified in this study is ASD characteristics and severity of the symptoms. These include executive function deficits, social communication difficulties, and behavioral issues.

Executive Function Deficits

The majority of parents in this study reported that their children presented with some deficits in executive function that led to difficulties in managing time, accomplishing tasks, and performing a complex task. Besides, other problem-solving difficulties, lack of cognitive flexibility, and rigidity, often lead to challenges in functional ability in striving for independence.

"During her internship, she was supposed to bake bread and cakes but because it is too complex the bakery owner assigned her to do simple things like wiping the dishes and arranging the bread" (P3)

As reported by other parents, YAs with ASD in this study have difficulty understanding and judging their self- conceptualization ability. One parent noted that his child has concrete thinking and has great difficulty in assessing the cause and effect of his thoughts and actions.

"My son is a single-minded person. He wants to be a singer and work in a TV station. But we all know that it's not going to work." (P2)

Response inhibition is the capacity to suppress irrelevant or interfering information and impulses, which is an essential domain of EF (33). Poor inhibition is one of the main issues of YAs with ASD as reported by the majority of parents in this study. For instance, when they are at work, they may not be able to control themselves from constantly checking on the phone and looking at

the clock to check for the time. Many parents desire their children to gain independence and adopt adult responsibilities before work. However, they are aware that the social and functional challenges that their children had may hamper the process. Research suggests that there is a correlation between the executive and adaptive functioning which includes the ability to adapt to the environment (9,10). The parents in this study are concerned about their children's ability to navigate his/her surroundings such as managing lunchtime and public transportation.

"When his access card's balance ran out, he didn't know what to do. He just stood there, uncertain of how to get assistance. This happened a lot of times." (P2)

Social communication difficulties

All parents in this study considered their children's inability to engage in social interaction as a major problem. They admitted that their children exhibit social deficits that impaired successful interaction. This includes difficulty in expressing own thoughts and feelings, disorganized speech, difficulty following social rules, social immaturity, inability to understand the social context, isolated and withdrawn, and poor emotional regulation. Some of the comments made by the parents were;

"One thing is that he often speaks unnecessarily and engages in unnecessary discussion, which may annoy people." (P6)

"My son can speak but his expression is very limited. He mainly speaks in short phrases" (P1)

The researcher also noted that decreased executive function in YAs with ASD as described in previous subthemes can affect their social behaviors.

Some parents indicated that their children are unable to respond in a timely and appropriate way to the demands of others, or to organize the information and socially respond to others. For example, most of them are unable to cope with rhetorical questions such as why and how. While another parent expressed that instead of remaining quiet and not responding to the demands, her child got angry as he can't cope with the customer's questions. The majority of the YAs with ASD in this study exhibited some degree of social and emotional immaturity that affects their ability to interact with others. Parents indicated that their YAs with ASD sometimes exhibit self-stimulatory behaviour such as verbal stimming.

Restrictive and rigid behaviour

Behavioural challenges include non-compliance, self-stimulatory and compulsive behaviour, aggression, rigidity, adherence to routine or tantrum can create barriers to employment. Majority of parents in this study revealed that their children struggle with cooperative behaviours and their behaviours are unpredictable at times. While others described that their son or daughter's excessive adherence to sameness and routine might lead to anxiety.

"She must have things done her way; everything must be proper. She is so rigid you know. She also has a bit of anxiety. Certain things like...she wants to get it done fast, must get it done there and then." (P4)

Contextual Challenges

The contextual challenges were identified as poor transition planning and career guidance, limited provision of services for YAs with ASD, lack of individual needs assessment, lack of adaptation and inclusivity at the workplace, and lack of understanding by others that led to social stigma and discrimination.

Poor transition planning and career guidance

Findings revealed that poor employment outcomes among YAs with ASD resulted from poor transition planning and preparation. Majority of the respondents commented that there is no continuity of services for YAs with ASD after school. Although these YAs with ASD did manage to pursue their post-secondary education and get into college, there is no preparation for job seeking and career guidance at the college and school level.

"He can do animation and graphic design on his computer but as for me finding the place for him to work is the most challenging. After he finished his college, it all goes back to the parents" (P6)

Notably, one parent shared her experience as a mother that relies on one's value and belief due to lack of support system while another parent commented that her daughter was assessed by her working ability over her interest and preference. She expressed that her daughter does not show interest and has lack of motivation to work after she finished college.

Lack of Inclusivity and Accessibility

Parents indicated that there's a lack of inclusion and diversity that can properly address and integrate YAs with ASD at the workplace. In the majority of the cases, the parents reported challenges in finding and maintaining employment for their YAs with ASD due to poor job fit.

"I'm so disappointed because she was trained in the area of IT but then she was placed in front to sell the clothes. After six months they told me her services are not needed" (P4)

Most parents raised concerns that there is very limited support available to learners with ASD and the curriculum designed was less individualized. They also mentioned that constant support and supervision at the employment site is necessary to facilitate success for people with ASD at the workplace. One mother reported some places they go failed to provide her son with the necessary skills and support he needed during his employment training.

"During the period he attended the vocational sheltered workshop. He did not get the support, the understanding, and also the time he needs to adapt." (P1)

Social Stigma

Lack of information about ASD led to social

discrimination at the workplace. This includes mistreatment at the workplace despite being PWD. Few mothers expressed their disappointment regarding social stigma and discrimination where people with ASD were often undervalued for their talent. Common view amongst respondents was employers' readiness and willingness to hire people with ASD.

Parenting Behaviour

Parenting behaviour is one of the main themes found in this study. Sub-themes in this area include parents' persistent fear and worry about the well-being of their son and daughter with ASD and lower aspiration for their future.

Parent's persistent fear and worry

Most of the parents in the study admitted that they hold a fear that their children were unable to cope with new working experiences and the environment.

"Many parents fear that their special needs child might be abused when under the care of others, so do I. Therefore, we have no better option than to take care of our child for as long as possible." (P5)

The first instance revealed that the parent rather takes care of his ASD child and keeps him at home and does not want to risk the possibility of a child being abused at the workplace. In the second case, the fear is due to the child being bullied at work. Interestingly, for the majority of the parents in the study (75%), fear is not learned through personal experience but by observing other parent's experiences. Unfortunately, those experiences were not good ones. While another mother expressed concerns about sexuality and vulnerability for being female.

"I'm worried and I don't dare to let her go to work by herself. Being a girl with special needs, I'm afraid people will take advantage of her." (P4)

Subsequent to the rampant statements of worry and fear by parents, the researcher hypothesized that this recurrent theme may alter parents' expectations and predict employment outcomes of YAs with ASD. In view of that, the researcher addressed one recurrent and possibly related theme across the data set which is parents' hopes and expectations. This research finding is influenced by the researcher's reflexivity.

Parent's lower aspiration

Most of the parents in this study have a strong desire and hope that their children can be independent and fend for themselves, however, they don't have high expectations for this to happen. Moreover, parents often qualified their desire with an expression of apprehension, confusion, realistic expectation, and the perceived lack of support.

"I would like him to be employed but I don't have high expectations on that, maybe he will be doing some kind of self-employment that we have created for him. However, looking at him now, I still do not have the confidence that he can stand on his own." (P1)

Too many challenges the parents encountered in raising YAs with ASD can be said to have contributed to a

lower aspiration of their child's employment prospects. It was found during the interview that parents often underestimate their child's employability, have no goal for the future, and focuses on the weakness instead of looking at their potential. Some parents described frustration and fatigue in their role of supporting and advocating for their adult children. One father expressed that he no longer able to cope with the intensity needed to ensure that his son is working;

"At the end, I realized that sometimes you need to let go of certain thing because everything is spent on him and it's not fair for other children" (P5).

DISCUSSION

The primary objective of this study is to explore the employment issues of YAs with ASD from parent's perspectives. The specific objective is to investigate parent's attitudes and expectations towards their child's employment prospects. The employment issues for what make YAs with ASD in this study remained unemployed is multi-dimensional and comprised of three themes: (a) ASD Symptomatology, (b) Contextual Challenges, and (c) Parenting Behaviour. Some factors relate primarily to the individual (person), some to the extrinsic factors such as workplace and also lack of support system, and some are a combination of the relationship of both. All of these factors lead to an environment in which YAs with ASD can be challenged and develop. While their demographic profile, socioeconomic status, and experiences may include variation for each individual, each of the three major themes was prominent issues and challenges highlighted by the parents of YAs with ASD in this study, throughout their journey of finding employment for their son or daughter. These themes have a dynamic interaction to them and what makes each emerging theme unique is that it reflects the attitudes and beliefs of parents, which implicitly answers the second research question.

One of the key themes found in the course of analysis is ASD Symptomatology. Parents considered that their child's ASD symptoms to be challenging and frustrating. A variety of cognitive models have been suggested to describe the problems seen in people with ASD across their lifespan (7). The executive dysfunction hypothesis was one such model that aimed to clarify the atypical executive function (EF) processes in ASD regardless of the level of functioning. This model developed following observation of problems in context shifting (ability to shift mind to new ideas), response inhibition (ability to suppress a dominant response), and working memory (preserving and updating information in short-term memory) (7). It has been found that in line with researcher expectation, when considering the ASD population, EF contributes to the prediction of successful employment for this group.

Since parents coincide in ASD symptoms such as social

communication difficulties and social behaviour when reporting work performance, these findings are in line with a previous study by Harmuth et al. (2018) (11). It must be stressed that since YAs with ASD rely on their parents for most of their needs and activities, their parents expressed fear that their children are incapable to survive at the workplace without adequate support. When talked about supported employment services for individuals with ASD at the workplace, parents expressed that Malaysia would have a long way to go in regards to autism awareness compared to other countries (2). Therefore, this was found to lead to parents' preference, that employment should take place in the children's familiar environment as they perceive that employers are either unwilling or unable to provide inclusive workplace modifications or adaptations for YAs with ASD. Parents also expressed the desire to create employment opportunities through self-employment models and entrepreneurship to address the contextual isolation experienced by the YAs with ASD. Recently there was a great interest among parents in creating social enterprises that are dedicated to help YAs with ASD to gain employment experiences especially in the food and beverages sector (4,20,27). However, having this kind of preference can limit employment options, in which the preferences and interests of YA with ASD might be denied by parents.

Due to the ASD Symptomatology, most parents are looking into individualized programmes that tailor to the needs of this group. Given that adult services for autism in Malaysia are in its infancy and employment preparation programs for YAs with ASD are extremely limited, all of the YAs in this study remained unemployed and some of them already stayed idle at home for a few years. Indeed, this lack of employment support puts an enormous burden on parents to double their effort to seek the place where their YAs with ASD can go after completing school (29,30). Many parents of youths with LD including those with ASD reported that after leaving secondary school their children are homebound due to a lack of transition services in Malaysia (6). The parents also expressed a desire to maintain a long-term relationship with the educational system to ensure that their child's education continues after they have finished school (6,30). YAs with ASD in this study are often subjected to their parents' lower expectations, particularly on employment prospects and independent living skills (22). This attitude is influenced by their experiences of social stigma and skepticism around services (26). Therefore, it is unsurprising that parents view this experience more negatively, which was found to be impacting their decision-making about their son/daughter's future (16).

Given the alarming figures and huge increase of ASD in Malaysia, there is still a lack of awareness among people including their families about the condition (15). It is hypothesized that parents have developed a stereotype

perception that their YAs with ASD are by nature disabled and dependent. It is also noted that the concepts of ASD as a disability and a deficit dominates the autism discourse (35). In fact, in this study parents generally used the word 'autism' as a name for explaining the disorder of their children. Knowledge and awareness of autism should be conveyed to the public so that they too can access the correct information (26,31). However, the utilization of different social media channels has become a trend in making connections and creating awareness about autism in Malaysia and thus creates more opportunity for greater access to the services among parents.

Previous study reported that parents often take on the role of advocating for their son/daughter's post-secondary education and career opportunities during the transition to adulthood (29). In the absence of school support, parents are largely responsible for identifying, coordinating, and managing resources and educational/employment opportunities for their YAs with ASD (16,29). However, while a parent should be concerned about her or his son or daughter's employment and future, they are not actively sought for support and assistance. Many of them talked about the additional challenges they faced during the process of vocational placement and the transition of YAs with ASD into adulthood, which may lead to a sense of helplessness and a refusal to acknowledge that their YAs with ASD may need additional support. Thus, it makes sense that parents who believe that their son or daughter will have a harder time finding work as an adult will invest more time and energy in different activities to improve adaptive skills rather than looking forward to employability or financial independence (14,30).

Interestingly, parents conceptualize that successful employment is associated with the ability to support oneself and live independently from their parents. Most parents are not considering employment until their children are equipped with all of the adaptive skills needed to better function at work. Until then, parents will shoulder the responsibility of supporting their YAs with ASD far into adulthood. They were afraid not only of what the future holds for them but also of who would eventually look after their YAs with ASD. Parents also talked about how this thought contributed to the emotional impact had on them as the parents and also for the families. Therefore, parents mentioned the need for supported living facilities for their YAs with ASD. Parental experience and their thought which are embedded in their culture and society are among those unknown things that deserve to be understood so that culturally competent and sensitive practices can be achieved (15,24). Also, parents' grievances could have significant implications in policy and practice on YAs with ASD employability. Effective collaboration strategies between parents, OTs, job coaches, social workers, and special needs educators are proposed to be

one of the crucial strategies in transitioning into inclusive work settings for youth with disabilities, including ASD in Malaysia. (11,18,28,34).

Limitations of the Study

Limitation of this study can be observed as the finding of the study was focused solely on parental perspectives and experiences to explore employment issues of YAs with ASD. Therefore, there might be misinterpretation in parents' view of the real employment issues faced by YAs with ASD. A different result may be obtained if it is also learned from the viewpoint of YA of ASD themselves. Previous study reported that YAs with both ASD and comorbid intellectual disability (ID) display more symptoms and display higher levels of maladaptive behaviour which negatively impact the level of functioning (3). In this study, the researcher didn't screen the presence of ID and rely primarily on parent's report for a level of adaptive functioning which could create a potential bias of under or overreporting. Future research should identify ID comorbidity in ASD. Another limitation is lack of diversity in geographical background and demographic profile of the respondents. Though, all of them were diagnosed by a certified and registered medical practitioner based on DSM-IV criteria. There is no solid confirmation on the current level of severity of these YAs with ASD.

CONCLUSION

In summary, this study increased our understanding of employment issues of YAs with ASD in Malaysia; the facilitators, and factors associated with unemployment. This paper does explicate the voices of Malaysian parents of YAs with ASD on their child's employment scenario; which is a gap in the literature. It clearly demonstrates that the existing employment support services and practice need to be further improved. The attitude and expectations of parents about their children's job prospects are discovered. It is indicated that the majority of the parents sharing similar attitudes and expectations about their child's future and employment prospects despite various socioeconomic backgrounds. As a whole, employability can be more fruitful if the strategies consider the YAs with ASD in a holistic way. It should take into account their ASD traits, contextual barriers, parenting behaviour, and the interaction between these components.

Recommendations for Future Research

Further research should aim at exploring the experiences and perspectives of the YAs with ASD themselves and not confined to third parties like parents and employers. Since this study, could not offer solid confirmation on the current level of severity of the YAs with ASD as the symptoms may change over time (becoming more or less severe) therefore, future research should outline the level of severity of ASD and comorbid mental health difficulties as these two variables may suggest different

findings. Furthermore, future research should make greater efforts to involve a wide range of demographic profiles of the participants. There should also be future research to discover the strategies and also suggestions to overcome the barriers and challenges identified in this study.

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