

# *Transition to School Program and School Placement of Children with Autism*

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**Abstract**—Preparing children with autism to enter inclusive classes is an important goal in early intervention. As the Centre of Excellence in Early Intervention for children with autism, Genius Kurnia has developed a comprehensive school transition program. This program, which aims to ensure a successful transition to schools, provides supports to students, parents, and teachers before and after the students enter mainstream schools. Thus, the purpose of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of this transition program by employing a mixed method research approach using school placement data and a parent survey. Data of 36 students who passed the inclusive placement evaluation were reviewed and an online survey was also carried out to seek parents' views of the transition program. Findings reveal that the transition program has tremendously helped the students to thrive in school. Data show that the number of children from Genius Kurnia in inclusive setting remains the same from January to April 2019, indicating that the children have successfully maintained their placement in inclusive classes. While parents reported that they received helpful information and support which helped them to prepare their children to go to school. This study shares a model of transition program for children with autism followed with discussion on what works which can be either replicated or adapted in other schools. Understanding school transition issues and process is pertinent for teachers, as it will help them to set up a good system to assist students with autism in their schools.

**Keywords**—*transition program; autism; inclusion*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Autism is a neurological disorder which negatively impacts children's development of social interaction and communication skills (DSM-5). When faced with difficulties in interacting and communicating with people around them, children with autism will not be able to function well in classrooms. Children with autism are less school ready emotionally than their peers and are reported to have more externalizing behaviors and self-regulation difficulties that affect their school engagement and their relationships with their teachers [1].

Change is particularly difficult for children with autism. Stepping into a new unknown room may cause them to be nervous and trigger negative behaviors, what more to enter a new school which demands certain level of conformity and performance. However, transition to primary school marks a major milestone in a child's life and his success at this level

will set a firm foundation for his future education. A such, a successful transition to school have been posited as key indicators for future academic achievement.

Among the indicators of a successful transition are a child feeling secure and comfortable in the new school environment, increased academic and social skills, increased independence, engagement and motivation to participate in class and school activities [2, 3, 4]. These elements will lead to academic progress, positive relationships with peers and teachers, positive attitudes and feelings about school and learning, and a sense of wellbeing, belongingness and inclusion.

There have been a rich body of literature on interventions to improve cognitive, language and daily living skills, however, there is a lack of research looking at the effectiveness of interventions which target on school readiness, especially on socialization and peer inclusion [5].

The purpose of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of the transition program implemented by Genius Kurnia. With the great amount of effort, time and energy spent on the transition to school program, it is timely that a study is carried out to investigate the level of effectiveness of this program by tracing the number of children who are successful in retaining their placement in inclusive settings. This study also aims to investigate how helpful the parents found this program is in supporting their efforts to ensure their children's success in inclusive classes.

## II. TRANSITION TO SCHOOL PROGRAM

Transition to school in Genius Kurnia started since 2017, upon the graduation of its first cohort at the end of 2016. Efforts to prepare the students to transit to school began by mid of 2016. A team was set up to plan, implement, strategize and evaluate activities. Since then, the transition to school program has been improved annually based on the feedbacks from parents and teachers. Some practices have been enhanced, while others have been modified. After 3 years, below are the practices maintained within the program:

Social and communication skills. These skills have been a focus the moment a student enrolls at Genius Kurnia. Social skills training begins with playing with adults, then playing

with a peer, finally they learn to play with a group of children. As for the communication skills, a student is initially taught to request, then comment, answer questions and finally have two-way communications.

**Behaviors.** Similarly, a student’s behavior is shaped right from the beginning of enrolment. Positive behaviors such as compliance, sharing and group work are trained, while negative behaviors such as tantrum, non-compliance, destructive and aggressive behaviors are modified.

**School Readiness.** Due to the nature of Malaysian schools being exam oriented, the transition to school program pays a lot of attention to 3Rs (reading, writing and arithmetic). Students are also trained to be able to work independently and to carry out group activities.

**School Simulation.** At the central section of the Genius Kurnia compound, students are taught how to purchase food and drinks during recess hour. They are also trained on how to have their meals and clean up after each meal. Students are toilet trained from the early intervention classes, but for the transition to school program, they are trained to use toilets that are located outside the classroom. Parents are also reminded to introduce their children to use the Asian type toilet. By April, the center begins to hold school assembly once a week to familiarize the students to this school routine.

**School orientation.** Students are taken to visit schools thrice before they enroll in schools. On the first visit, the students get to experience school assembly routine in the morning. On the second visit, the duration is increased to half of the school time and they get to experience classroom lesson and recess hour. On the final visit, the students get to experience full school session.

**Playgroups.** Students at Genius Kurnia are given the opportunity to apply the play skills that they learn at the center with typical school children. Playgroups program tests their play skills and they are also able to learn from their peers. The program starts from playing with a partner, then playing with a group of children. It is not only beneficial for Genius Kurnia students, but also typical children get to learn about autism.

**Be My Friend Campaign.** This program is carried out to increase awareness among school community. A team from Genius Kurnia together with the mascot will visit schools and carry out some activities and share information about autism during the school assembly.

**Shadow Aides.** Based on the assessment result carried out by the joint evaluation team, some of the students were accompanied by a shadow aide when they started school. The shadow aides are trained by Genius Kurnia so that they could carry out their tasks to support the students in school for three months. These shadow aides act as a communication bridge between parents and schools.

**School visit & consultation.** After the students enroll at school, Genius Kurnia team continues to monitor their progress by visiting the schools and providing consultation to

the teachers. These visits focus on the support system to help the students survive at schools.

**Parents Training and Sharing.** Parents are also trained so that they are more prepared to support their children in school. The trainings include support for school registration, experience sharing by parents of previous cohorts and briefings on strategies to prepare the students to school. Parents are also given teaching materials such as social stories, visual supports and academic tools.

**III. METHODOLOGY**

A mixed method research approach was employed using school placement data and a parent survey. Students’ placement in inclusive classes in January and April 2019 was compared to find the success rate in maintaining their placements. Online surveys were also carried out to seek parents' views of the helpfulness of the transition program. The online survey consists of questions about the strengths and the shortcomings of the transition program and also suggestions for improvement. It was distributed to 36 parents of students who have been assessed by medical and educational specialists, and found to be suitable for inclusive class placement. The survey was carried out using Google document form and responses came in within a week.

**IV. FINDINGS**

**A. School Placement**

The effectiveness of Genius Kurnia transition to school program is partly measured by looking at the success rate of students retaining their placement in inclusive classes without having to move to special education classes. The number of students with autism from Genius Kurnia who were placed in inclusive classes in January 2019 was 36. In April 2019, all 36 students were successful in retaining their placement in inclusive classes.

TABLE I. CHILDREN WITH AUTISM IN INCLUSIVE SCHOOL PLACEMENT

Month	January 2019		April 2019	
	N	%	n	%
<b>Year 1</b>	35	97.2	35	97.2
<b>Homeschool</b>	1	2.8	1	2.8

**B. Survey Findings**

All 36 parents participated in the survey. Based on the survey outcome, the students were placed in two different settings. 35 students (97.2%) were placed in government primary schools and one student (2.8%) enrolled in a home-schooling program.

All 36 parents (100%) responded that the transition to school program run by Genius Kurnia helped their children to be successful in their inclusive classes. 28 parents (77%)

specifically mentioned that the program helped their children's school readiness especially in academic, social, communication and self-care domains. Six parents (16.6%) further mentioned that the program helped their children to fit in the school environment and two parents (55%) think that it helped boost their children's self-initiative.

Pertaining to the strengths of the program, 16 parents (44.4%) claimed that Genius Kurnia has formulated a good program and module to prepare their children to go to school. 15 parents (41.6%) praised that the program's strength was based on the human resource, that is the teachers and staff at Genius Kurnia. Another five parents (13.8%) added that the involvement of parents in the program made it successful.

When asked about the shortcomings of the program, 12 parents (33.3%) admitted that there were no weaknesses at all. Five parents (13.8%) asserted that the syllabus used at Genius Kurnia were different from the one used in the primary school. While one parent (2.7%) claimed that the orientation to primary school was limited, two parents (5.5%) suggested that the program needed to include self-initiative skills and two parents (5.5%) recommended that the program needed to have more two-way communication with parents and teachers.

The survey also captured a few suggestions for improvement that can be done by Genius Kurnia. Three parents (8.3%) suggested that modules used in Genius Kurnia to be adapted with the curriculum used in primary schools. While two parents (5.5%) proposed improvement on the Islamic Education module, six parents (16.6%) advised to have more orientation to school activities and two parents (5.5%) suggested that preschool classes in Genius Kurnia to have more students so that the children were familiar to a bigger class. Other than that, nine parents (25%) recommended the program to have activities to boost children's self-initiative skills in classrooms.

#### V. DISCUSSION

Children with autism face more challenges transitioning to school, particularly with social aspects of schooling (Quientera 2010). This study contributes to the literature on transitions to primary school for children with autism by examining the process from the parents' points of view. This is important as acknowledging and understanding parents' perspectives may help professionals in making the transition process more positive for parents and may assist in ensuring smoother transitions for children with autism [6, 7].

Although the scope of this study is small, involving only 36 children and their parents, the findings are encouraging because of the rate of success of children with autism in retaining their placements in inclusive classes. Feedback from parents were also positive with further suggestions to enhance the transition to school program.

This study supports the findings from previous research on transition to school for these children as the elements for successful transition to school are fairly consistent across these studies. These elements are children's preparation in social, communication, self-help and academic domains; placement identification; peer preparation; school simulation and orientation, parent training and support; and visit support [8, 9, 10].

However, further investigations need to be carried out with a bigger sample of children who have gone through the program in Genius Kurnia, that is to include all cohorts of students who have completed their early childhood special education in Genius Kurnia. Another potential study is to carry out a survey among primary school teachers who receive these students in primary school to gauge their input regarding the effectiveness of the program. Input from these future studies could be used to further refine the program in order to assist children with autism to maximize their success in starting school. Having said that, the current program is sound enough for replication and adaptation through the country.

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