



Advancing Outcomes for Children with Autism through Educator Training

IDEAS 
INSTITUTE FOR DEMOCRACY AND ECONOMIC AFFAIRS





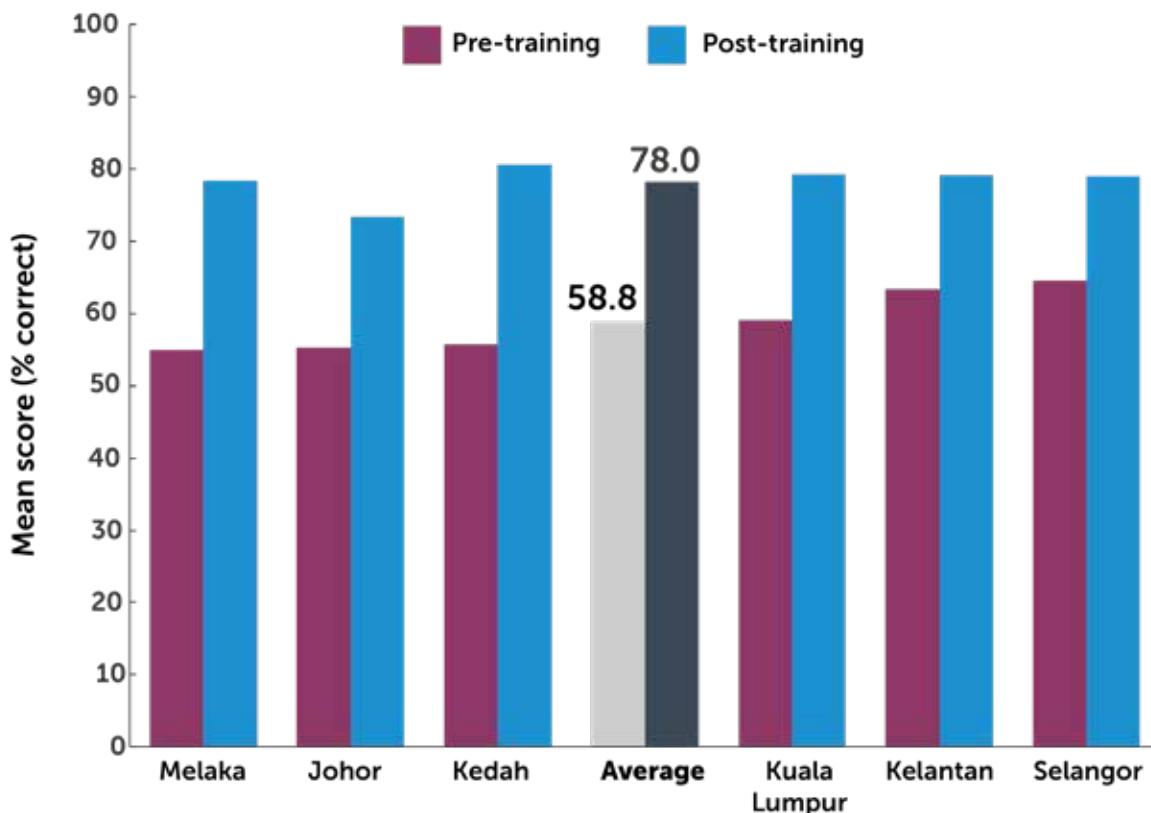
Key points

- Project Sinar supports a better education experience for children with autism, equipping more than 400 teachers across six states and territories with specialist knowledge and skills.
- Training participants demonstrate increased knowledge and report the application of practical skills in classroom settings. Training also supports convergence in teacher familiarity with autism education needs across Malaysian states and territories.
- Feedback from trainees and wider system stakeholders has identified areas for training refinement and growth, including to better reflect different classrooms (more students and fewer resources), to increase individual tailoring and follow up, and to incorporate teacher resilience training.
- There is significant demand to extend the reach of training. These include taking the course to Borneo, training education assistants and administrators, teaching parents and children, and extending training to general stream schools.
- Greater investment in research and advocacy, alongside teaching and training, would help identify further opportunities to advance autism education.



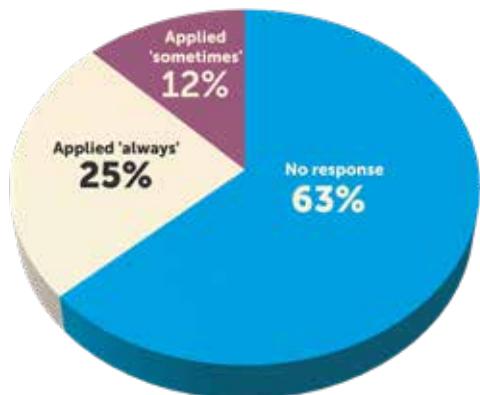
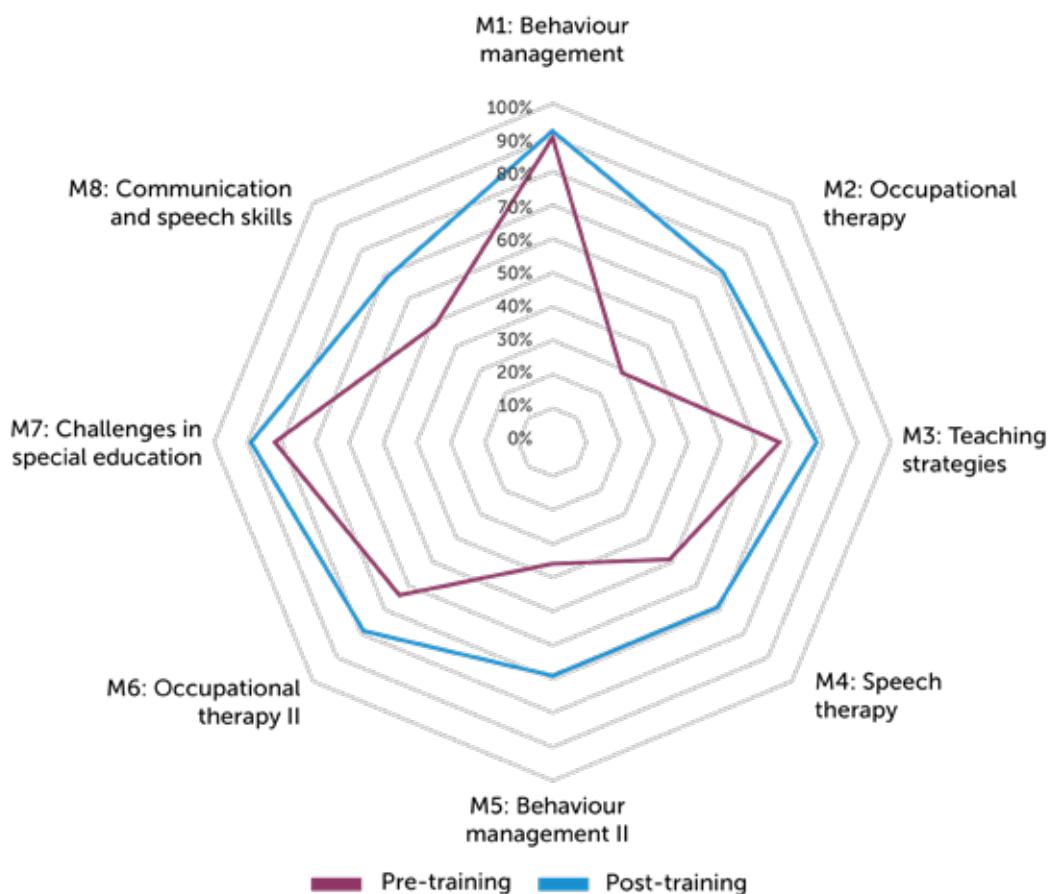
Project Sinar graduates demonstrate increased awareness

Testing of teacher knowledge before and after participating in IAC's training program shows considerable improvement. Test scores experienced statistically significant increases across all states and territories and for all modules with room to demonstrate improvement.



Participant test scores by state increased by between 14.5 and 24.9 percentage points (Selangor and Kedah respectively), suggesting potential gains are possible anywhere in Malaysia. Convergence in post-training relative to pre-training scores suggests training promotes both knowledge gains and equalisation across states. Despite across-the-board improvements, there remains space to further uplift knowledge through follow-up training.

Modules 2 and 5 on occupational therapy and behaviour management show the greatest improvement in post-training scores. Modules 4, 8, 3 and 6 on speech skills, teaching strategies and a second module on occupational therapy also return robust knowledge gains. Modules 1 and 7 require further evaluation as the questions were not sufficiently difficult to measure changes over time.



Follow-up surveys a month after the training found about two-thirds and one-third of respondents respectively 'always' and 'sometimes' applied their new knowledge in the classroom. While the respondents represent a potentially biased 'opt in' sample, it is encouraging that over 160 participants report knowledge utilisation in real world settings.

It is important to acknowledge that the knowledge testing and feedback surveys were not developed or deployed with full experimental controls. Testing also focused on knowledge gains rather than the application of practical skills in a classroom setting due to funding and practicality considerations. Conducting a purposeful evaluation alongside the rollout of future cohorts would support further refinement of training modules and delivery, opening up greater deployment opportunities.



Autism educators and stakeholders report improved classroom experiences

Teachers overwhelmingly express appreciation for training that equips them to support their students. Particularly well received is the hands-on practical training that demonstrates readily transferable skills. Examples of techniques that have worked well include the use of social stories, positive reinforcement, and visual communication. Behaviour management training is the most commonly identified module as having supported teachers.

Project Sinar also develops connections between stakeholders, supporting holistic education and collective resilience. Teachers welcome the opportunity to discuss classroom challenges with other teachers and with IAC's trainers, both during and after the program. Parents, other educators, and health specialists all argue for continued and expanded efforts to support connectivity and to uplift the specialist knowledge and skills of everyone involved in educating children with autism.

As one teacher testimonial highlights: *"The training course on behaviour management, has greatly improved my classroom practice. It deepened my understanding of the needs of students with autism and helped me use more effective behaviour management strategies such as visual supports, positive reinforcement, and de-escalation techniques. I also learned structured teaching methods that make lessons clearer and more manageable. The course helped me create a calmer, more supportive classroom environment and strengthened my collaboration with parents and colleagues. Overall, it increased my confidence in handling behavioural challenges and supporting diverse learners more effectively."*

And from another teacher: *"Thank you IAC for providing examples such as strategies, steps to deal with student behaviour, and activities to attract students' interest systematically."*





Box 1: Project Sinar — Uplifting Autism Education through Teacher Training

To improve the education experience for children with autism, the IDEAS Autism Centre (IAC) is training teachers and district officers to equip them with specialised knowledge and practical skills. Sponsored by Yayasan Sime Darby and supported by the Ministry of Education, Project Sinar has already trained 438 teachers across six states and territories since March 2025. In addition to upskilling educators, IAC has recorded training modules for wider distribution.

The training combines both theory and practice to support and reinforce learning. It raises educators' understanding of how to create a classroom environment and education program to suit the (individual) needs of children with autism. It also provides simulated experiences to practice techniques and test sample materials that are readily transferable to the classroom.

The project has deployed eight learning modules covering five key areas of autism education. It captures: (1) foundational concepts and knowledge; (2) behaviour management strategies; (3) teaching approaches, including classrooms and structure, tailored to learners with autism; (4) occupational therapy to support physical and emotional development; and (5) communication and speech therapy. Delivery has been in person, in major cities within the Klang Valley, Melaka, Kedah, Kelantan and Johor, provided to teachers from special education schools, and delivered in Malay.

IAC sees Project Sinar as a vitally beneficial investment in consolidating, sharing and systematising hands-on learnings from its experiences teaching children with autism. It seeks to institutionalise and popularise training to support teachers and students on a shared journey to improve education and life outcomes. Results to date have been overwhelming positive, as this brief provides early evidence of.

IAC with the support of IDEAS Research Policy Berhad (IDEAS) is committed to the continuous evaluation of the training program to maximise its tangible benefits. There are opportunities to increase the scale, breadth and inclusiveness of training outreach with continued support.

Feedback identifies opportunities to refine and grow the training

Feedback from post-training evaluation, focus group discussions engaging teachers and wider stakeholders supporting children with autism, and a short survey highlight both enthusiasm and opportunities to build on the nascent training program. The first year of training rollout has included opportunities to learn through doing, to try content modifications, and to learn how Project Sinar complements and can learn from parallel teacher training.

Areas where modest changes could make a big difference include tailoring the training to larger class sizes, how to teach children with autism alongside other special needs children, less compressed delivery, helping teachers develop individual classroom strategies, providing low cost practical materials, developing more advanced modules, and further emphasising the networking aspects of participation. More time for trainers to deliver the course and for teachers to digest and practice the learnings is particularly important. Additional extensions or modifications that would also be beneficial but engage resourcing considerations include incorporating follow-up classroom visits, professional resilience or stress management training (a psychologist supported delivery in two states only), development of additional audiovisual materials or more expensive aids that teachers can keep, and new modules (such as literacy and maths, or if extended to mainstream schools, how to identify signs of autism).



As one teacher noted: (paraphrased for concision): “positive reinforcement such as providing stickers to place in reward books for good behaviour works. ... having simple tools like this [shows an app] helps me to support children with autism in a class with 15 to 20 children with special needs, but it would help if these tools support children with other needs too.”

Stakeholders highlight many areas for potential expansion

Calls for training to reach more teachers and other stakeholders supporting children with autism are loud, as the need is great. There are many potential expansion opportunities for Project Sinar that could be pursued with additional resources and a triaged growth strategy.

Opportunities include taking the existing training to additional places, particularly Sabah and Sarawak. Another need is to train teachers outside of the special needs system (PPKI). This was a focal point of discussions featuring diverse stakeholder representatives, especially to avoid higher-functioning children with autism bouncing between schools or being excluded from the general stream. Several other stakeholders could benefit from this training, including parents, other children, teacher assistants, and school administrators. Engaging parents in the training and education journey would be especially impactful, so parents can understand and reinforce teachings. Training could also be extended into schools that do not teach in Malay or English. And there is significant demand for training that caters to educating older persons with autism, noting that Project Sinar is tailored to children between 3 and 14 reflecting IAC’s practical experience.

As another teacher noted: (paraphrased for concision): “it would help if [special school] administrators were also trained. We try to adapt our teaching in response to the training but cannot because administrators are inflexible with rules. For example, we set up a cafe to teach children how to buy and sell food, but it was closed because it is against the rules.”

IDEAS Policy Berhad (IDEAS) and IAC could do more with your support

Despite the goodwill and dedicated efforts of many, there is much more that can be done to improve education outcomes for Malaysian children with autism. A foundational challenge is that the number of children with autism remains unknown, with social stigmas and a lack of awareness contributing to underdiagnosis. Close to 60,000 children were registered with the Welfare Department by the end of 2024, but best estimates in Malaysia suggest around 84,000 and the true number could be between 71,000 and 290,000 based on global prevalence estimates. Malaysia’s public school system alone has over 10,000 schools and more than 400,000 teachers, so Project Sinar’s training footprint represents a drop in the ocean.

In addition to expanding and more rigorously evaluating teacher training, there are opportunities for research to support related system uplift. Beyond better understanding autism prevalence, research into how parents can support holistic and combined education journeys alongside teachers and health professionals was an area raised in stakeholder discussions. Exploring the education experiences and pathways for higher-functioning children was also identified as a clear need, with teachers, parents and health professionals all expressing frustration at both student exclusion from general streams and the risks of bullying when poorly integrated. Shortages of skilled professionals, including speech and occupational therapists, also require investigation. Another area where IDEAS’ public finance expertise could be leveraged is to investigate and promote transparency in the allocation and spending of funding for autism education.

Research, advocacy, teaching and training to advance education for children and persons with autism is part of IDEAS’ and IAC’s core strengths and mission. There is passion and energy to invest further with the support and collaboration of partners that share our vision.



Acknowledgements and about IAC and IDEAS

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IDEAS Autism Centre (IAC) was established in 2012 in Rawang, Selangor to provide care for those in need and to research and develop a replicable and sustainable non-profitable model to educate underprivileged children with autism. Through the support of main partner, Yayasan Sime Darby (YSD), and 30 other organisations, IAC has expanded to have additional centres in Nilai (2022) and Port Dickson (2025). In its short history, IAC has taught almost 200 children and provided specialist training to over 600 teachers and parents. Over 95% of children aged 7 to 9 are later successfully enrolled in public schools. IAC believes good quality care should be accessible to everyone and provides early intervention programs that seek to positively change the trajectory of every child's development. The hope is that children graduate with a greater chance of major long-term positive effects on symptoms, helping them assimilate into mainstream primary schools and gaining a greater chance of living independently and participating in society later in life.

For more information on IDEAS Autism Centre, visit ideasautismcentre.com

The Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs (IDEAS) is a nonprofit think tank, dedicated to promoting solutions to public policy challenges, focussing on three overarching missions – advancing a competitive economy, ensuring trust in institutions and promoting an inclusive Malaysia. IDEAS is Malaysia's first independent think tank, free of personal interests and partisan influences. It previously contributed to autism research in 2015, releasing policy papers on 'Living with Autism' and 'Autism — Life After Early Intervention'.

For more information on IDEAS, visit ideas.org.my



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