

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF ART THERAPY MODULE ON THE WELL-BEING OF SINGLE MOTHERS

Zakaria Mohamad*, Zuhda Husain, Jasmi Abu Talib, Raba' Aton Adawiah Mohd Yusof, Fazliyaton Ramley, Mazidah Mohd Dagang, Nurul Atiqah Ab Raji, Marhaini Mohd Noor
School of Social and Economic Development, Universiti Malaysia Terengganu, 21030 Terengganu, Malaysia.
*zek@umt.edu.my

Article History: Received on 18th February 2019, Revised on 17th April 2019, Published on 02nd August 2019

Abstract

Purpose: The aim of this study is to see the effectiveness of the use of Art Therapy Module (ATM) on the well-being of single mothers.

Methodology: Experimental quasi methods involving pre-test and post-test were used. A total of 40 respondents were involved in this study and divided into four groups consisting of ten respondents. This ATM was conducted through a five-week counseling session. Collection of study data was done by using Single Mothers Welfare Instrument to measure stress, resilience, mobility and well-being before and after therapy.

Main Finding: The findings depicted a decrease in stress levels, increased resilience, coping and well-being. Hypothesis testing showed that there was a significant difference between pre-test and post-test on the well-being of single mothers in terms of stress, resilience and coping.

Application: The findings showed that ATM is effective in helping single mothers to respond to stress, enhance resilience and coping skills to improve their well-being and quality of life.

Novelty/Originality: ATM module also contributes to the development of knowledge in the field of counseling, particularly in treatment options offered by counselors for clients such as single mothers.

Keywords: Art Therapy Module, well-being, stress, resilience, coping, single mother, experimental quasi method

INTRODUCTION

Single mother's life is not as easy as a woman with a husband. They have to face various unforeseen challenges in order to survive (Faizah Abd Ghani and Hazirah Hashim, 2013). Taking up the additional role of being the head of the family is one of the challenges that must be endured by single mothers. They are forced to raise their children and work hard to generate family economics (Zulu, 2017). To address these predicaments well, the well-being of single mothers is very important. Among the aspects of well-being is psychological well-being (Umami Munirah Syahada Mohamad Zan, Mansor Mohd Noor, Wan Shazlinda Shah Wan Shahar, Wan Suraya Wan Hasin, 2016). Psychological well-being is when individuals who have positive qualities in themselves and others can make decisions and regulate their behavior, fulfill their needs, have a purpose of life, make their lives more meaningful and able to develop their potential (Ryff and Keyes, 1995).

A study by Nurul Aida (2013) found that single mothers have far less psychological well-being than those with a spouse. Ananglangka Mad Kassim. (2011). in his study found that most single mothers experience a high level of stress. This is due to challenges they have to go through which cause emotional and psychological conflicts. Stress refers to how one reacts to high demands of life with limited self-esteem (Lazarus, Richard and Folkman, 1984). This stressful situation may have both physical and psychological effects (Shueh and Cai, 2014)

The strategy of coping and resilience is important for the well-being of single mothers. Coping strategy is a way of thinking and behavior used in confronting situations that suppress a person (Lazarus et al., 1984). When individuals are capable of implicating coping strategy in their lives, stressful feelings can be reduced, self-efficacy control in handling disappointment may be enhanced and finally self and responsibilities management can be organised well (Dharatun Nissa Puad Mohd Kari, 2017). In addition to that, resilience refers to how a person builds self-esteem in continuing a challenging and stressful life (Tugade and Fredrickson, 2004). Those with high resilience will be able to handle problems more easily than those with low resilience (Nabila Farhana Mohamed Nidzam and Fadzli Adam, 2015).

Recognizing the fact that stress, coping skills, resilience, and well-being are issues in the life of single mothers, a study needs to be done to understand the problems of this group. The eleventh Malaysia Plan (2016-2020) through the Single Mother Empowerment Action Plan 2015-2020 puts three key strategic thrusts. Among these strategic thrusts are research and coordination. From the aspect of research, the recommended strategy is to conduct a study on the well-being of single mothers, from the physical, emotional and psychological aspects as well as coping abilities. To meet this need, studies on stress, coping skills, resilience and well-being have been carried out using art therapy methods.

According to the American Art Therapy Association (AATA), art therapy is a contemporary method that uses creative processes to enhance the individual's physical, mental, and emotional well-being of all ages. A study by [Rosliza Abd Aziz and Zakaria Mohamad \(2015\)](#) found that single mothers experience difficulty in expressing their concerns about family hardships and problems. Therefore, this method is very suitable to be used as it provides a creative exploration space for them to express the hidden feeling as emphasized by ([Sh Marzety Adibah Al Sayed Mohamad, Zakaria Mohamad, Baharuddin Ismail and Raba'aton Adawiah @ Robiah Mohd Yusof, 2013](#)).

PROBLEM STATEMENT

A new alternative is to be implemented to help single mothers continue the challenge of post-divorce life. Thus, this study has formed a special module for the group as a platform for them to continue their survival in accordance with the new status. This Art Therapy Module (ATM) module is aimed at exploring stress, coping, resilience and well-being of single mothers. This study is expected to help single mothers in adapting a new transition in their lives through the ATM module to achieve the well-being of life. The objective of this study was to examine the effectiveness of the ATM module on the well-being of single mothers in Kuala Nerus, Terengganu.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Single mothers have to accept the unanticipated fact of being left behind by their husbands and then to continue living with dual responsibilities as a mother and breadwinner of the family as stated by [Dunn \(2015\)](#). Among the tasks shouldered by single mothers are managing financial resources for family support, administering, monitoring the children's growth, education and movement ([Dharatun Nissa and Puad Mohd Kari, 2017](#)).

This self-fulfilling responsibility has led to emotional conflict and stress to single mothers. A study conducted by [Chanda and Pujar \(2018\)](#) found that single mothers are more susceptible to chronic stress and depression compared to mothers which spouses due to being affected by this burden of self-responsibility. Previous studies by [Cairney, Boyle, Offord and Racine \(2003\)](#) found that single mothers are more likely to develop physical and mental ailments and experience higher levels of stress than other groups. In fact, stressful conditions can build inner resiliency, such conditions may also be debilitating if handled in a maladaptive manner ([Henry, 2003](#)). Moreover, [Murry, Bynum, Brody, Willert, and Stephens \(2001\)](#) stated that the challenges they face often negatively impact the parenting process because of the limited available time to monitor family dynamics and to develop and nurture relationships with family, teachers, and other parents. Canadian studies have reported that single mothers are more likely to experience depressive episodes, higher levels of anxiety, and increased levels of substance abuse than married mothers ([Cairney et al., 2003](#)). Therefore, in order to assist single mothers to take on these responsibilities, their well-being of life is something that needs to be addressed.

In the context of single mothers in the state of Terengganu, most relief initiatives to single mothers are largely focused on the construction of material aspects. For example, the Single Mother Culinary Program in Terengganu provides financial assistance to single mothers. There are also entrepreneurship programs such as sewing and cooking skills workshops ([Rosalinda Md Said, 2018](#)). In addition, assistance in terms of consultation and construction of modules mostly are supplied before these women become single mothers, such as the process of reconciling disputes, family counseling modules and avoiding divorce ([Yusmini Md Yusof, 2003; Raihanah Azahari, 2004; Abdullah Fahmy Mat Nor. \(2010\).; Dini Farhana Baharudin, Marina Munira Abdul Mutalib, Mohd Zaliridzal Zakaria, Suhailiza Md. Hamdani, Melati Sumari and Zuria Mahmud, 2018](#)). However, there is no specific initiative towards single mothers after a complete divorce process such as follow-up sessions and special modules to assist in the process of adapting changes that linked with conjugal grief in their lives. This is reflected in the Divorce Process Flow Chart at the Syariah Court issued by the Malaysian Syariah Judicial Department which ends when a divorce certificate is issued ([Malaysian Syariah Judiciary Department, 2016](#)).

Single Mother

A phenomenological study to explore the experience of single mothers raising children in Chibolya, Zambia was conducted by [Zulu \(2017\)](#). A study using this sampling method was conducted through a thorough interview with 16 single mothers who had children living in Chibolya, Zambia. The findings show that there are some challenges in raising children namely poverty, low levels of education, difficulty in getting work and less social support.

[Zakaria Mohamad, Sh Marzety Adibah Al Sayed Mohamad, Jasmi Abu Talib, Juhaida Ibrahim \(2017\)](#) also conducted studies on emotional cognitive regulation among single mothers. This quasi-experimental study was conducted on 32 single mothers living in Kuala Terengganu and Marang, Terengganu. To explore emotional cognitive regulation and Cognitive Emotion Regression Questionnaire (CERQ) and Symptoms Checklist 90 (SCL-90) questionnaires are answered before and after treatment. The results showed that the level of emotional cognitive regulation increased while the level of concern decreased after they underwent treatment using the Art Therapy Module.

Stress

As a single mother, in order to face many challenges and responsibilities, one needs to be self-reliant, such as financial management, the rising cost of living, and the discipline of children. The uncertain economic situation has also forced a single mother to work for the children. A study by [Cathy Suhaila Abdullah dan Hamdan Abd Kadir \(2015\)](#) on single

working mothers states that the single mother's condition that performs various tasks at one time faces stress and is prone to behavioral disorders and depression.

Single mothers will feel more stressed about their role in managing the home economy as opposed to thinking about their personal relationships. This was stated in a study by Intan Hashimah Mohd Hashim, Azman Azwan Azmawati dan Noraida Endut (2015) where they conducted interviews with 300 single mothers throughout Malaysia. The study which examined the role and responsibilities of single mothers in Malaysia found that there was a positive relationship between stress and life satisfaction and also between coping and life satisfaction. Meanwhile, the relationship between stress and life satisfaction is negative.

Resilience

When a divorce occurs, women are obliged to assume responsibility as a single-family leader. They should not only accept the abandonment of their husbands but face the issues raised by the community (Kartika, 2012). Therefore, they need to have self-esteem to regain life. The construct of resilience is emphasized in the literature as the ability to positively respond to challenges and successfully emerge strengthened, confident, and empowered, able to utilize available resources effectively (Simon, Murphy, & Smith, 2005). Kartika (2012) conducted an interview study on two divorced women aged 34 and 43 and divorced for seven and 34 years respectively. The findings show that the number and age of children, religion, socioeconomic status and period of divorce affect resilience.

Therefore, to ensure the well-being of single mothers, inner strength and resilience are essential. Taylor and Conger (2017) held a 10-week program for single mothers. The results of the study found that single mothers with high internal strength and durability were able to manage their children better than single mothers who had low resistance.

Coping

Broussard, Joseph, and Thompson (2012) conducted a study to examine the causes of stress and the strategies of actions taken by poor single mothers. A total of 12 single mothers aged 18 to 70 years old were selected through purposeful sampling. Semi-structured interviews found that most single mothers viewed family and friends support, religious, pet, exercise, art therapy, volunteer work as strategies. However, there were also single mothers who did not know the strategies needed in order to continue living in poverty.

To improve the strategy of enforcement, social support plays an important role. A survey was conducted by Williams (2016) on 75 single mothers and 98 mothers aged between 20 and 55 years old. The findings showed that there is no difference between the two. Among the aspects that influence these decisions are the consistency of social support gained.

Well-being of life

Well-being of life is when individuals have good mental health, high self-esteem, good relationships with others, and are not involved with delinquency. Studies by Nurliza Ahmad, Khadijah Alavi, Arena Che Kasim, and Chong Sheau Tsuey (2015) have found that there is no significant difference in the level of psychological well-being for single mothers in the city and beyond. Of the 80 single mothers, 40 of them had high levels of psychological well-being, 24 low and 16 moderate. Among the things that affected their psychological well-being is the amount of monthly income. A single mother's emotional well-being is essential when facing numerous current issues and challenges. Task-overload, work-related stress, poor social life, and arguments with ex-spouses are examples of problems faced by lone parents or single mothers (Kelly & Voydanoff, 1985; Richards, Leslie, Schmiede, Cynthia, 1993).

Next, Faizah Abd Ghani, Farah Adibah Ibrahim, Azian Abd Aziz, dan Mastura Mahfar (2015) examined the relationship between single parent emotional and emotional well-being system. A total of 58 single mothers were involved in this study aged between 21 and 51 years old. A study using quantitative method used two instruments that are related to emotional and emotional well-being systems. The results of this study found that there was a significant relationship between the emotional and emotional system ($r = 0.665$, $p = 0.000$).

Art Therapy

Some studies have been conducted regarding the effectiveness of art therapy to individuals. Among these studies were conducted by Sh Marzety Adibah Al-Sayed Mohamad and Zakaria Mohamad (2015) where they conducted a study entitled the effectiveness of art therapy on carts in the counseling process. This phenomenological study used a qualitative method involving seven teenage girls involved in delinquency. As a result of the implementation of art therapy, it reduced the level of stress, stabilize emotions and reduce emotional disturbances.

In addition, studies on art therapy are also conducted on one and two-stage cancer patients. Studies by Puig, Lee, Goodwin, and Sherrard (2006) aimed at studying the effectiveness of this art therapy involving 39 women who had cancer. This study applied an experimental design which involved pre and post-test to control and treatment groups. The aspects that are seen are the emotional uptake psychological well-being. The findings show that there is no difference in emotional and spiritual emotional aspects but there is an improvement in psychological well-being. The hypothesis of this study is to examine whether there is a significant difference between stress, resilient, coping and wellness before and after treatment.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted using a quasi-experimental design without a control group (Cook and Campbell, 1979; Creswell, 2012). A total of 40 respondents were selected using a purposive sampling method and were divided into four groups. These respondents aged between 20 and 60 years old, have children in custody, can read and write and have not joined any art therapy programs before. This study was conducted in the district of Kuala Nerus, Terengganu. Pre-test and post tests were conducted to see the effectiveness of ATM that had been formed by using descriptive analysis to see the mean and percentage of demographic data and the findings of Wilcoxon-t analysis for before and after the execution of ATM.

The built-in ATM module emphasizes on the implementation of art therapy to help single mothers identify four elements which are stress, resilience, coping skills and well-being. This module has been tested and obtained the validity and reliability of previous researchers. Among the art therapies used in this module are colouring, painting, music and collages. This study was conducted for four weeks covering eight sub modules. Before applying ATM, respondents were required to answer pre-test questionnaires and later at the end of module implementation, respondents answered the same questionnaire once again for the post-test. The questionnaire consisted of 40 items that cater to the problems of stress, resilience, coping skills and well-being of single mothers. The constructs for this questionnaire are in line with the established sub-modules.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Stress Levels

| | | Pre-test | | Post-test | |
|-------|----------|---------------|----------------|---------------|----------------|
| | | Frequency (N) | Percentage (%) | Frequency (N) | Percentage (%) |
| Valid | Low | 36 | 90.0 | 38 | 95.0 |
| | Moderate | 3 | 7.5 | 2 | 5.0 |
| | High | 1 | 2.5 | 0 | 0 |
| | Total | 40 | 100.0 | 40 | 100.0 |

Pre-test for stress showed that 36 respondents (90%) had low stress levels. While one (2.5%) had a high level of stress and three (7.5%) had moderate stress. Unlike post-test, no one had a high level of stress and only one (5%) had moderate stress while 38 people (95%) had low stress.

Resilience Levels

| | | Pre-Test | | Post-Test | |
|-------|----------|--------------|----------------|---------------|----------------|
| | | Frequency(N) | Percentage (%) | Frequency (N) | Percentage (%) |
| Valid | Low | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | Moderate | 8 | 20.0 | 1 | 2.5 |
| | High | 32 | 80.0 | 39 | 97.5 |
| | Total | 40 | 100.0 | 40 | 100.0 |

The majority of respondents had a high degree of resilience in the pre-test of 32 people (80%). There were also respondents with a moderate level of resilience which are eight (20%). No respondent had a low resilience level. After taking art therapy, there is a difference in the level of resilience. A total of 39 respondents (97.5%) had a high degree of resilience. Only one (2.5%) had a moderate resilience.

Coping

| | | Pre-Test | | Post-Test | |
|-------|----------|---------------|----------------|---------------|----------------|
| | | Frequency (N) | Percentage (%) | Frequency (N) | Percentage (%) |
| Valid | Low | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | Moderate | 12 | 30.0 | 8 | 20.0 |
| | High | 28 | 70.0 | 32 | 80.0 |
| | Total | 40 | 100.0 | 40 | 100.0 |

In the pre-test, 28 respondents (70%) had high level of coping skills whereas 12 respondents (30%) had a moderate degree of it. For the post-test, there was a decline in moderate level to eight people (20%). Whilst the number of respondents with high levels increased to 32 people (80%).

Well-being

Table 4: Frequency and percentage of Well-being Level of Pre and Post-test.

| | | Pre-Test | | Post-Test | |
|-------|----------|---------------|----------------|---------------|----------------|
| | | Frequency (N) | Percentage (%) | Frequency (N) | Percentage (%) |
| Valid | Low | 1 | 2.5 | 0 | 0 |
| | Moderate | 4 | 10.0 | 0 | 0 |
| | High | 35 | 87.5 | 40 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 40 | 100.0 | 40 | 100 |

In the pre-test, there was one respondent (2.5%) who had a low level of well-being. Four respondents (4%) had a moderate level of well-being. In the meantime, 35 people (87.5%) had a high level of well-being. Respondents' well-being level increased in post-test where all respondents, 40 (100%) had a high level of well-being.

In conclusion, there are differences in the level of self-concept, stress, resistance, coping and well-being of respondents in pre and post-test. In post-test, there was a reduction in stress levels, while improvements in the level of self-concept, resilience, coping, and well-being of single mothers.

The Effectiveness of Art Therapy on Stress, Resilience, Coping and Well-being of Single Mothers

To see the effectiveness of art therapy on stress, resilience, coping and well-being of single mothers, Wilcoxon-t-test analysis was conducted by comparing the mean of pre-test and post-test. Table 5 shows the results of the Wilcoxon-t-test.

Table 5: Difference of Mean in Pre-Post MTS Single Mothers by Construct

| | Pre-Post (Self Concept) | Pre-Post (Stress) | Pre-Post (Resilience) | Pre-Post (Coping) | Pre-Post (Well-being) |
|------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|
| Z | -2.032 ^b | -2.899 ^c | -3.335 ^b | -2.372 ^b | -2.948 ^b |
| Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed) | .042 | .004 | .001 | .018 | .003 |

Table 6: Mean Score on Pre and post-test on stress, resilience, coping and well-being of single mothers

| | N | Pre | Post |
|------------|----|--------|--------|
| Stress | 40 | 2.0525 | 1.8425 |
| Resilience | 40 | 3.9575 | 4.2400 |
| Coping | 40 | 3.8400 | 4.0500 |
| Well-being | 40 | 4.1500 | 4.4525 |

Based on the following Table 6, the mean value of single mother stress was 2.052 while the post-test is 1.842. The mean value difference for pre and post-test was significant ($z = -2.899$, $p < 0.05$). For resilience, the mean values for the pre-test was 3.957 while for post-test was 4.24 ($z = -3.335$, $p > 0.05$). The mean of coping for the pre-test was 3.84 and the post-test was 4.05 ($z = -2.372$, $p < 0.05$). Finally, the mean of well-being for pre-test was 4.15 while for post-test was 4.452 ($z = -2.948$, $p < 0.05$). In conclusion, there is a significant difference between the mean values of the pre and post-test for stress, resilience, coping behavior, and the well-being of single mothers.

This section also depicts the overall findings of the mean difference for pre and post-test of the ATM Single Mothers. The findings are as follows:

Table 7: Mean Difference in Total Pre-Post ATM Single Mothers

| | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Minimum | Maximum |
|------------------------|----|--------|----------------|---------------------|---------|
| Pre-test | 40 | 3.5676 | .24976 | 2.57 | 3.98 |
| Post-test | 40 | 3.7284 | .22434 | 3.31 | 4.18 |
| Z | | | | -3.069 ^b | |
| Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed) | | | | .002 | |

Wilcoxon-t-test findings which compared the mean value of pre-test and post-test found that there is a significant difference ($z = -3.06$, $p < 0.05$). The mean value of the pre-test was 3.56 while the mean value of post-test was 3.72 with Z value was .002. Overall, the findings show that the use of ATM treatment has a positive effect on self-concept, stress, resilience, coping, and well-being of single mothers in order to continue their survival.

DISCUSSION

ATM is one of the alternatives in helping single mothers to survive after their divorce. Studies show that single mothers who succeed in adapting to problems are individuals with high emotional well-being. The subjects in this study are single mothers who have never joined any form of art therapy. In fact, they have never been exposed to this approach before. However, through ATM, various methods and art materials such as music, collage, colouring, drawing and gameplay were used to provide new opportunities for subjects to express their latent emotions. According to Joiner and Landreth (2005), paintings and art activities are the main focus of art therapy in which artworks can reveal the single mothers' deepest and suppressed world and help them to execute self-awareness and relinquish emotional and pent-up psychological needs.

Becoming a single mother is traumatic as these mothers have a high responsibility towards their children and thus with the level of stress they experience, it affects their psychosocial and physical health, quality of life and economic standing (Hanson, Kaakinen, & Gedaly-Duff, 2005). According to Nor Diyana Mustapaa, Nor Zarifah Malikia, Aswati Hamzah (2018), this may cause volatile changes in emotional well-being, which will have a major impact on families, particularly in terms of emotional and mental well-being. In fact, Noraida Endut, Azman Azwan Azmawati and Intan Hashimah Mohd Hashim (2015), in their research founded that single mothers face problems getting involved in activities due to issues such as childcare and work hours. But, previous research has found that family and social supports can reduce and buffer stress in situations of adversity and can strengthen parental functioning by improving both child and parent well-being (Thompson & Ontai, 2000; Yanicki, 2005). In line with the findings of this study, ATM has assisted single mothers to face the issues. The findings show an increase in scores for self-concept constructs, resilience, coping and well-being and decreased stress levels among single mothers. It is evident that the ATM module was successfully applied to single mothers in the district of Kuala Nerus.

This statement has proven that the formation of ATM can help single mothers in problem sharing through slots that have been set up based on certain themes. During the execution of ATM, single mothers are given the opportunity to fully explore whatever is stored or concealed inside of a person after divorce which affects their belief system. The findings of the previous study show that the belief system may also act as an effective coping system for single mothers, which is perceived to vary according to skills and willingness to face new challenges, taking advantage of available social networking or support system (Siti Rafiah Abd Hamid and Sakinah Salleh, 2013). Thus, through ATM, these women are helped to eliminate any irrational beliefs that negatively affect life and believing in their own abilities. This study is seen parallel with previous studies conducted by Peterson, Hamme, and Speer (2002), where self-esteem has a significant influence in the pursuit of success of an individual or community. Additionally, single mothers must have such belief in them so they can solve their problem cycle.

Faizah Abd Ghani, Farah Adibah Ibrahim, Azian Abd Aziz and Mastura Mahfar (2015) believed that the importance of self-belief which underpins inherent strength is the most importance as it influences any effort undertaken in enhancing the single mother's quality of life as a whole. This is because the expectations of mothers, particularly those of single mothers', vary according to age and personality especially after reaching midlife. Past studies have linked single mothers' personality traits with their social role, which plays an important role in shaping their self-esteem as single mothers.

Besides that, Faizah Abd Ghani, et al., (2015) stated that social and psychological well-being seemed to influence the older Malay single mothers' life satisfaction and happiness. Most of them agreed that they need to interact with others by actively participating in social functions organized by the community. Good relationship is one of the most important aspects of life satisfaction, and this will enhance an individual's well-being.

Riley (2014) stated that art therapy is an effective modality for helping people to cope with symptoms of a wide array of mental and emotional disorders commonly caused by exposure to, and victimization from, domestic violence. In the cases of survivors of domestic violence and/or abuse, art therapy techniques can be utilized to enable the expression of their emotions through the use of visual arts (and a variety of other multi-modal artistic approaches), as well as to develop beneficial coping and self-soothing skills, both consciously and unconsciously, through the intrinsic sensory benefits of engaging in the creative process. She also added that this approach is an effective modality for helping people to cope with symptoms of a wide array of mental and emotional disorders, enable the expression of their emotions through the use of visual arts (and a variety of other multi-modal artistic approaches), as well as to develop beneficial coping and self-soothing skills, both consciously and unconsciously, through the intrinsic sensory benefits of engaging in the creative process. This is what happen in ATM where the single mothers are given plenty of time to explore their problems and needs which allows people to feel inherently peaceful and free as well as artistically accomplished so that they can change their life.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study found that ATM is effective in helping single mothers in managing stress, enhancing resilience and coping to improve the well-being of single mothers who became the sample of this study. The results of this study can be implemented to other single mothers groups to gain greater and comprehensive findings.

LIMITATIONS

The study only involved 40 single mothers in the Kuala Nerus district, Terengganu. The larger sample size may yield more accurate findings. The study also did not use control groups in order to make comparisons. Unauthorized control group is important to compare findings.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This paper was produced based on recent research conducted with the financial support from University Malaysia Terengganu research scheme. Authors stated in the paper are those who involved directly and have contributed time and energy besides their expertise in regards to the success of this project.

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