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Risk Assessment and Management in Malaysian Teacher Training Programmes

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Abstract

Critical review of literature revealed that, risk assessment and management in educational field is commonly discussed in the literature of outdoor education. This is because being surrounded with higher risks is one of the natures of its implementation and features that distinguished outdoor education from indoor learning. Nonetheless, safety issues during the learning process, particularly, in other subjects have received relatively less attention. This paper aims to examine other learning conditions that may involve risks or safety issues that is relevant in the teaching and learning of all subjects regardless whether the learning takes place outdoor or indoor. In this paper, we suggest that risk may occur everywhere, indoor and outdoor, and risk assessment and management should be carried out by all educators regardless the approach and the venue of learning. Following this suggestion, further implication of this paper is a suggestion to develop new curriculum on risk assessment and management for all fields in teacher training programmes.

Keywords: Risk Assessment and Management, Teacher Training, Curriculum Development

Introduction

Risk is different from hazard. According to Beames, Higgins and Nicol (2012 p. 78), risks refers to “the likelihood and severity of being harmed by a hazard,” while hazard is “anything with the potential to cause harm”.

For Gill (2010), Greenfield (2004), Tranter (2005) and Little and Wyver (2008), they perceive risk as a positive attribute in learning. According to them, risk provides opportunities for

students to develop themselves to the highest possibility, beyond the limit that they and other people have preconceptualised. In his own words, Gill (2010 p.1) explained,

A mindset that is solely focused on safety does children and young people no favours. Far from keeping them safe from harm, it can deny them the very experiences that help them to learn how to handle the challenges that life may throw at them.

Despite that, the term 'risk' is more often associated with negative connotations. This is because risk is commonly associated with danger, which subsequently will evoke fear and spontaneous response to protect (Niehues, et al. 2013) or avoid. According to Collins and Collins (2013), the degree of risk could be characterised by its requirement of specific technical skills. Without the skills, people may be exposed to a higher degree of risks.

In educational research, less attention has been given to the issues of safety and risks in learning. These issues usually only emphasized in the study of outdoor education and science education, especially in regard to safety in laboratories. For example, Little and Wyver (2008), discuss how the benefits of outdoor learning may be affected when the risks in the learning are minimized; Balta (2015) includes safety as one of the concerns for designing an environment for learning science in laboratory.

Therefore, this paper aims to examine other learning conditions that may involve risks or safety issues. Further, this paper aims to study the need for educating teacher trainers from all areas of specialization about risk assessment and management. It is hoped that this study will be one of the early impetus to the development of a more specific curriculum to train pre-service as well as in-service teachers about safety and risks in learning.

Safety Issues in Education

In education, the acceptable levels of risk and danger to which children could be exposed is irresolute (Martínková and Parry 2017). Thus, in Malaysia, there are criticisms from the public regarding safety in education. The criticisms are even stronger on the educational activities that are related to outdoor and/or co-curricular activities. The criticisms rose due to the increase in the number of accidents including fatal accidents involving students as victims during the outdoor learning activities. Among them are the death of five students and a teacher during the dragon boat racing training in Penang in January 2010, the fatal accident of scout players who crushed their head with pulley at a different campground in January 2011, and a number of students drowned while crossing the suspension bridge at the Kuala Dipang campground in Kampar, Perak in October 2009 (Utusan Malaysia 2011).

Such accidents are also common in other countries. For example, a student was reported dead while caving on a school trip in North Yorkshire (Wainwright 2005a), a teenager drowned in a freezing and treacherous river on a school trip in the Italian Alps while trying to take a shortcut back to the group's mountain refuge (Wainwright 2005b), and a 10-year-old boy was

killed and three of his classmates injured after they were crushed by a falling tree branch during a school trip to a National Trust estate in Norfolk (Glendinning 2007).

As a result, there is an emerging consensus in the demand to reduce or eliminate risks in learning (Gill 2010). However, in Malaysia, the responses to the incidents were more extreme. Many parents have become very skeptical about outdoor activities to the extent they do not allow their children to participate in any of the activities especially that take place out of school (Harun and Salamuddin 2014). Hence, Malaysia education system is overly focused on academic and marginalizing outdoor and co-curricular activities to satisfy protective parents' demand for a safe learning environment for their children. On a side note, this situation indicates people's belief that only students who are often engaged in highly physical activities are at high-risk of experiencing substantial injury in comparison to their peers who are involved in structured learning activities in the classroom and closely supervised by the teacher.

It is important to note that risks during learning, however, may not only appear outdoor or in laboratories, but it can happen anywhere. This argument is based on the idea that all activities may have certain degree of risk (Martínková and Parry 2017). For example, slips or trips, defective equipment and furniture such as a faulty desk or chair, and electric shock. This claim is evident in previous research on student injuries, which the research revealed that classroom is one of the most frequent locations of injury other than playground, athletic field and gymnasium (Lenaway, Ambler and Beaudoin 1992; Yang, Yen, Cheng and Lin 1998; Kramer et al. 2003).

Dealing with Risks

To reduce or eliminate risks in learning, risk needs to be assessed and managed. Risk assessment and management refers to the act where risks that may be present in particular locations or activities are formally identified in order to plan how the risks may be reduced (Beames et al. 2012) or eradicated.

The conduct of risk assessment and management could be guided by the three general types of assessment that Beames et al. (2012) listed: generic, specific and dynamic. Beames et al. (2012) define the three types of risk assessments within the context of outdoor education. Influenced by their definition, in this paper we define generic risk assessment as the assessment that takes into account the hazards that can be expected in most learning activities. Specific risk assessment is often conducted in addition to generic risk assessment when the learning activity has features that make it different or distinguishable from other activities. Dynamic risk assessment requires on-going cautiousness throughout learning activities. In other words, dynamic risk assessment may be performed spontaneously.

In Malaysia, for the purpose of assessing and managing risk, a number of documents have been provided by the Office of the General Director of Education Malaysia to serve the guidelines for teachers about the measures of risk assessment and management. For example, the Circular Notice No. 9/2000 dated March 30, 2000 is a serial government document issued to remind head of schools and teachers about possible undesirable events. The document also outlines some of the emergency measures for the attention of particular teachers, namely, co-curricular advisors

and physical education teachers. The most updated version of the serial document is the Circular Notice No. 5/2016 dated August, 24 2016, which provides more detailed guidelines for precautionary measures on security and risk issues. The guidelines, however, appeared to be sketchy. The call for all teachers to take into account the risks in learning spaces apart from during co-curricular activities and physical education is left out.

Training on Risk Assessment and Management

Apart from the circular documents, developing risk assessment and management knowledge and skills among student teachers could be important before they officially enter work. Based on our earlier argument that students may be exposed to risks anywhere, all teachers need the knowledge and ability to assess potential risk. The training should include the skills on how to manage risk within and outside the school environment. This pertinent issue has been highlighted in European Agency for Safety and Health at Work's (EU-OSHA) (2004) report on the urgency of providing training to teachers on how to assess, manage and embed risk education into their classroom teaching. Furthermore, they also suggest a variety of cases and practical ways of how to train both in-service teachers and future teachers.

While this is a challenging area, it is also one which is promising. This means by educating teachers across all levels of education, on risk assessment and management principles, we can potentially improve the working conditions and learning environment inside and outside of schools. Ideally, risk assessment and management skills should become part of the teacher training programme as EU-OSHA (2004) argues; with risk training in teaching and learning, teachers will be more confident to conduct learning activities.

Current Curriculum of Risk Assessment and Management

Despite being aware of the importance of equipping teachers with certain risk assessment and management skills, to date, there is limited knowledge on how risk assessment and management skills are being taught in the teacher training programme across Malaysia. The knowledge and skills to assess and manage risk are either taught to certain group of student teachers only, or the content of the training is superficial.

With regards to the former, our observation on the current curriculum of teacher training in Malaysia suggests that it is more common for the training to be integrated in the curricular that are related to outdoor education, for example sports, physical education and recreational programme. Perhaps the reason is because of their nature of implementation that has higher risk in comparison to learning indoor.

From a different perspective, the training on risk assessment and management among the outdoor educators may be seen as their unwillingness to give up on the learning potentials offered by outdoor education. Many outdoor educators indicate their strong belief that outdoor learning has the potential in providing supplementary knowledge and skills required for personal and social development (Amos and Reiss 2012; Christie, Higgins and McLaughlin 2014; Cooley, Burns and Cumming 2016; Ho 2014; Kendall and Rodger 2015; Scrutton 2015). Though risk has been perceived as a central concern in outdoor education, risk is also celebrated.

In addition, it is presumable that the celebration of risk in the field of outdoor education was for the purpose to overcome the statements such as pointed out by Beames et al. (2012) in their book on learning outside the classroom. According to them, the situation in which all of the risks in outdoor learning are removed is comparable to learning with blank walls and without any other objects. In other words, the outdoor learning would be meaningless. This concurs with Gill (2010), Greenfield (2004), Tranter (2005) and Little and Wyver (2008) stance that we presented at the beginning of this paper. Therefore, the course on knowledge and skills on risk assessment and management are usually emphasised in the training programme of outdoor education.

On the other hand, there is no specific course to train student teachers of the other fields on risk assessment and management. Based on our analysis, there are teaching training institutions that integrate this content in other subject – e.g. co-curricular management. However, is knowledge about risk assessment and management related to safety issues worth to be trained through integrated approach? Is the issue of security not as important as the issue of student academic achievement?

Conclusion

Having presented the literature on the concept of risk assessment and management, issues in education that are related to the concept, and the overview of teacher training curriculum, we conclude this paper by outlining a number of recommendations.

Firstly, we call all educators to perceive risk in learning in a greater context of education. Risk may occur at any place and in any situation, not only during outdoor and co-curricular activities. Secondly, risk in learning should not refrain or restrict the students from exploring learning within and beyond the classroom. Thus, teachers should assess the potential risk and create a safe learning environment for the students and themselves without jeopardising the opportunities for learning. Therefore, third, while safety issues including risk assessment and management have been a concern among outdoor educators, we are suggesting that it should be an emphasis in the teacher trainings of any field. Fourth, the current curriculum on risk assessment and management need to be revised. Otherwise, new curriculum might be needed for emphasising the risk assessment and management issues in a greater depth. The new curriculum is especially important for the fields of teaching, apart from outdoor education. This is especially because we believe that just the government circular notices are insufficient to warrant teachers to ensure the safety of students during their indoor and outdoor teaching. Developing relevant partnerships and commitment from all key stakeholders is crucial in the development of the curriculum.

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