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Challenges in Preparing Teachers for Inclusive Education and Its Impact to Students with Learning Disabilities

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Abstract

This article addresses the inclusion mandate of students with disabilities through a case study. It begins with a review of debates concerning inclusive education and this current qualitative research aims to observe the extend of implementing inclusive education among students with mild learning disabilities in integration programs also known as the Special Education Integration Program for Students with Learning Disabilities. To address the issue, four Special Education teachers were selected as participants in this single site single case study. Data was collected through classroom observations, interviews and document analysis to investigate (1) the pedagogical aspects involve in implementing inclusive education among students with mild learning disabilities and (2) the adaptation made by the teacher in the curriculum prior implementing inclusive education. Result demonstrated that students were involved in both full and partial inclusion. Students with mild learning disabilities were not accompanied by special education teachers and they were fully taught by mainstream teachers who has never undergone any training on special education. The study recommends that students with learning disabilities who attend inclusive program should be accompanied by special education teachers or student management assistant/teacher assistant. It is also suggested that the mainstream teachers should be given appropriate training so that they too have knowledge to assist students to a better and meaningful life.

Keywords: *Learning Disabilities, Inclusive Education*

Introduction

Inclusive classrooms where students with disability are provided the opportunity to study in the same setting as their peers without disability have been increasing in number during the past decade (Adibsereshki & Salehpour, 2014). The education of pupils with special educational needs has generally been influenced by national and international inclusion policy and legislation so that the majority of these children now take their place alongside peers in mainstream classrooms (Keating & O'Connor, 2012). The individual educational leader in schools should have significant possibilities to organise and form (special) educational activities within the concept of inclusion (Lindqvist & Nilholm, 2013). Thus, knowledge and understanding on practices about inclusive education is vital in order for it to be implemented successfully. The multi-faceted role of educationists in special education field include their role as resource teachers, consultants, special education teachers, diagnostic teachers and administrators. They have to collaborate with psychologists, occupational therapists, nurses and many others in order to administer a program well. The collaboration will enable students with learning disabilities (SLD) to acquire proper education in non-obstacle environment.

Successful inclusive education creates a learning environment that supports not only the cognitive abilities of all children but also their social and emotional development (Schwab, Gebhardt, Krammer & Klicpera, 2015). Inclusion has been discussed as the major topics in education for the last two decades. Inclusion according to Cook (2001) is an organised placement of student disabilities in mainstream classrooms and it has been well-documented. Inclusion in a mainstream setting had been facilitate by teachers' positive attitudes towards inclusion as it was closely related to motivation working with students with disabilities. Kalyva, Gojkovic & Tsakiris (2007) discussed the effectiveness of changes that were implemented in Serbia regarding the educational rights and needs of children with special education needs and found that experienced teachers showed positive attitudes towards inclusion.

Teachers and school administrators are generally in favor of mainstreaming children with disabilities into normal or typical schools. However, insufficient training of teachers and itinerant teachers along with shortages of teaching materials and resources present major challenges to address special education needs (Franck & Joshi, 2017). It is worth exploring what changes these programs may bring about over the years of preparation with regards to pre service teachers' attitudes towards school diversity and their confidence in educating all children (Wei Gao & Mager, 2011). However, the reform agenda has not quite emphasized in preparing teachers for inclusive education. Consequently, most universities that offer education program do not sufficiently stress on inclusive education (Amr, 2011).

Statement of the Problem

Hu (2010) claimed that through data analysis, behaviour management, the process of implementing individualized education plans (IEP) and inclusion strategies are primary training needs by teachers. In line with it, McIntosh, Vaughn, Schumm, Haager & Lee (2003) indicated that SLD who were in the general classes were treated much like other students but they obviously did not receive differentiated instruction or adaptation/modification. According to Charema (2010), inclusion is not an easy situation whereby it involves many changes in education such as change of attitudes, values, teacher training programmes and the school systems. Combs,

Elliott & Whipple (2010) revealed that two participants in their study who showed positive attitudes towards inclusion had taken adapted physical education courses during their formal education. They found that participants with the negative attitudes had not taken any adapted physical education or special populations classes. Thus, there are indeed many ways to be taken into consideration when inclusion is the main focus of discussion.

To facilitate quality in inclusive practice, it is important to develop and promote positive attitudes and beliefs about inclusion of diverse students in mainstream education (Markova, Cate, Schwerdt & Glock, 2016). Provisions for inclusion are currently limited to only the primary and secondary school systems in Singapore (Yeo, Neihart, Tang, Chong & Huan, 2010). Substantial numbers of children diagnosed with mild to moderate degree of autism spectrum disorders (ASD), when identified and enrolled in multidisciplinary intensive early intervention, can be mainstreamed in regular schools. Parental suggestions on extended support for enhancement of social communication skills and networking with schools for smooth transition to the school set up, needs to be addressed (Karanth & Chandhok, 2013). The type of classroom environment that a teacher creates and encourages can either increase or decrease a student's ability to learn and feel comfortable as a member of the class (Bucholz & Sheffler, 2009).

General education teachers have differing views about the inclusion of students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms. However, the type and severity of the children's disabilities affect teachers' willingness to accommodate certain students and their confidence that they will effectively manage their classroom (Cassady, 2011). Although inclusion literature has been documented to be of value, to date there has been no research that specifically examined the use of inclusion literature with nontraditional pre-service teachers (Sutton, 2015). There is great debate over including students with disabilities, in particular students with learning disabilities, in inclusive classrooms (Ford, 2013). This study aims to investigate the implementation of inclusive education among SLD and how the adaptation of certain aspect in the curriculum is done prior to the implementation of inclusive education.

Methodology

Setting and Participants

The study was conducted at two SELD Programs and both programs are located in a same district in one of the state in the peninsula of Malaysia. Both schools are located in the same district in State S. The participants were four Special Education teachers, and they were chosen using the snowballing technique in which the first participant introduced the second participant. Then, the second participant introduced the researcher to the third and forth participants. All the participants were experienced and graduate teachers. Three of the chosen participants were females and one was a male teacher. In order to protect the confidentiality of the participants (teachers and students), pseudonyms have been used. The selection criteria used to identify potential participants required that teacher participants (1) teach students in inclusive education and (2) teach in secondary school level.

Instruments

Three instruments namely interview protocol, observation forms and documentation analysis were used in the study.

Interview Protocol

In depth interviews were used to gather data in this case study and it was conducted face to face. Interviews were necessary to support, strengthen and equipped the observation data. The interviews were conducted in an informal situation where the researcher had developed a semi-structured interview protocol. The interview protocol consists of six semi-structured questions related to pedagogical aspects in inclusive education. According to Bogdan and Biklen (2003), qualitative research is inductive, descriptive, and it focuses on meaning from the point of view of the participants. There are many advantages in using semi-structured interview, namely (1) the data can be obtained systematically according to the research questions and the statement of the problem, (2) the data is available immediately and it is more detailed and (3) the participants could engage actively in the interview.

Observation forms

The study was conducted using observation forms. In this study, researcher had written down the information gathered from each period of the observation. Further, the data was rewrite in her field notes reports. The process of collecting data was completed once it enough to explain the phenomena under study. The researcher slowly pulled herself out from the fieldwork after encounter the study needs was fulfilled. Through the observation, both teacher and student participants were observed in the classrooms for six months to see how was the pedagogical aspects were implemented.

Documentation analysis form

Documentation analysis forms were used to analyze three documents namely the (1) teachers' documents, (2) public documents and (3) students' documents. The researcher need to review the whole documents to obtained the required disclosures. For this reason, the information received will support the findings from observations and interviews. The researcher report the information obtained in the form provided. Subsequently, each information or document that has been collected will be went through the process of coding.

Procedure

The researcher visited both schools in a number of occasions to familiarize herself with the schools environment before beginning data collection. It was also important to gain entry into the field. Data from classroom observations were collected using the observation forms. Notes were written on a new page every time a new observation was conducted to facilitate the process of data management. In this study, event or activity did not occur as quickly as was expected at the beginning of the study. Hence the researcher has to rewrite the observation notes in order to complete full observations report. By doing so, the researcher has the opportunity to rise up and seek for new hypotheses and things to look into in the next observation. Data reduction process was carried out to ensure that only meaningful data will be used in the reports.

Researcher had received ethical approval from the Ministry of Education, The State Education Department and the school management to do fieldwork. The researcher visited the participants in a number of occasions to familiarize herself with the school's environment before beginning

the data collection. It was also important to gain entry into the field. The data collection was completed over a six months period and through the observation, the researcher learns about behavior and the meaning attached to the behavior in the social settings chosen for study. Observation were done one hour daily and data from classroom observations were collected using the observation forms. Notes were written on a new page every time a new observation was conducted to facilitate the process of data management. After each observation, researcher had to rewrite the observation notes in order to complete a full observations report. By doing so, the researcher had the opportunity to rise up new hypotheses and things to look into in the next observation. Data reduction process was carried out to ensure that only meaningful data will be used in the narrative.

Interviews were conducted with the teacher after school or during recess and most of the time it were taken placed at the teachers' rooms. Each interview will take at least half an hour depend on the issues rise during the observations. Data from interviews will support observations when writing the reports or narrative. To establish content validity, two experts were selected to review the items from the interviews for the inter-rater reliability. The experts specialised in special education and had experienced in conducting qualitative study. From their suggestions, the items has been reworded to match the categories. The revised protocol was then piloted and the researcher had conducted two rounds of analysis because the accuracy of agreement for the second expert in the first round was at $K=0.63$. As a result, the overall accuracy of the agreement between experts was at $K= 0.74$, which was in good agreement scale. Then, the researcher had reviewed each unit which was not approved by the second expert and replaced them with a new node. Again each new unit had been reviewed by both experts. Through discussions with experts, the researcher had recounted the accuracy of agreement. Cohen Kappa's formula was used to find the reliability index (K) and the final value of K was found to be 0.81, which was in almost perfect agreement scale.

The analysis of documents were done for three documents, namely the teachers' documents, public documents and students' document. A color-coded file system was used for easy storage of documents. Green file was used to store students' documents, white file for public documents and blue file for storing teachers' documents. All the documents gave better insight about the learning and teaching process as with empirical evidence, it will suggest essential content of instructional design.

Data Analysis

This study analyzed data in four levels, (1) organizing the data, (2) generating categories, themes and patterns, (3) searching for alternative explanations of the data and (4) writing the report. According to Marshall and Rossman (1995), data analysis entails data reductions when the collected data were brought into manageable chunks and interpretation. In the first level, the data were transcribed to identify excerpts needed as data for the study. In the second level, the data were then read and analyzed repeatedly to find the themes and patterns which could explain the phenomenon under study. The themes and patterns were then identified to bring meanings to the categories. The researcher also developed child nodes for the sub-categories. Coding stripes were then developed for each categories and sub-categories. In the third level,

the data were reorganised into their respective categories and sub-categories to search for alternative explanations of the data. Finally, based on the finding of the data, a narrative was written out.

Results

Results were written in narrative on the implementation of inclusive education among students with mild learning disabilities and on how the adaptation of certain aspect in the curriculum was done in this case study. We agreed that students with mild learning disabilities are to be educate indeed. We also agreed that the curriculum should match their ability accordingly towards building up their own career and to be useful to the society. We found out that these group of students may have the same intellectual ability with their peers, however they show late progress most of the time. This happens due to the mild learning disabilities that they face which affect their learning abilities as compared to their peer group. Therefore, how teaching is conducted should be properly planned so that it can assist students with mild learning disabilities to achieve their goal and try to become productive citizen in future.

Based on data analysis, the researchers found an interesting information from respondent, a senior teacher, also the main person that involved in planning the inclusive education in the School A. He said,

At the moment there are four students undergoing inclusive education here, two of them are SPM candidates and another two are being sent to Form Four Progressive a month ago.

Code: BPR/ink/PKFahmi

Based on the document proof analysis, we found that there were eight students with mild learning disabilities in PKFahmi's classroom, the two students mentioned as the first group of students were Asmawi and Ekin (not their real name). During the research, they attended partial inclusion in general classroom as a preparation to sit for Lower Secondary Assessment (PMR). Asmawi and Ekin, both 17 years old had just joined Form Four Progressive for about a month. Based on the observation conducted, the researchers found that both students will walk towards the classroom when told by the coordinator or their special education teachers. Following their steps, we found that Asmawi and Ekin were very eager to be in the general classroom for selected subjects at stipulated time. Based on the time-table analysis, we discovered that they attended the Bahasa Melayu, History and Geography subjects in the general classroom. If they are not in Form Four Progressive's classroom, they will be with other students with mild learning disabilities in the special education classroom where most of the time, they learn reading, writing and counting skills with a few other subject.

As mentioned earlier by PKFahmi, we found that Nabil and Mila are in the second group and they follow full inclusion in one of the Form Five classroom. They have been following inclusive education ever since they were in Form One. Nabil and Mila have sat for their PMR and they will sit for the Malaysian School Certificate soon. The researchers were told by PKFahmi that Nabil scored 7D and 1C for his Lower Secondary Examination. This finding indirectly shows students with mild learning disabilities have the potential to sit for public examination and that

they have brighter future compared to their friends with learning disabilities who follow the alternative curriculum. The third group comprises of students with mild learning disabilities that follow the national curriculum specification and are taught by special education teachers in Special Education Program for Students with Learning Disabilities.

There are two differences obviously showed between inclusive education pattern discussed. First, the learning environment and second is the human resource. Students with mild learning disabilities who following fully and partially inclusion in School A are taught by general education teachers who are not exposed to special education or inclusive education. PKNorleha, the programme coordinator's explained,

Inclusive education is conducted fully and partially. Special education teachers only monitor students' development from time to time. If it is fully inclusive, students are taught by general education teachers. There are no special education teachers to supervise them as we are lacking of teachers.

Code: BPR/ink/PKNorleha

The feedback is supported by PKAli who also shared his concern over lack of teachers. He said: There is no special education teachers to accompany students because we are lacking of teachers in Special Education Program. This is normal, however according to the coordinator there is a strong possibility that it will not be continued next year.

Code: BPR/ink/PKAli

When this matter was brought up to the program coordinator, PKNorleha nodded her head and she explained to us that she had suggested another alternative to replace the ongoing inclusive education in the program. She claimed that it was for better and benefit all parties. She said, ...the students that we sent for inclusive, is alright...but, students will have to be independent all the time because we don't have enough teachers to back up...

Code: BPR/ink/PKNorleha

Regarding this, the informant was not mean to avoid inclusive education if there are enough teachers in the Special Education Program for Students with Learning Disabilities in School A. To overcome this problem, gradually students with mild learning disabilities will not learn in fully or partially inclusive education, but instead they will stay put in the special education classroom and the special education teachers will teach them using the national curriculum and prepare them for the examination.

Discussion

The informants' effort in conducting so call as the alternative procedure in special education classroom against ordinary inclusive education for students with mild learning disabilities should be complimented too. All obstacles are overcome among them, just to give space and opportunity to their students to achieve their full potentials. In this paper, if lack of teachers is the main topic of discussion and obstacle, without doubt inclusive education will not shift to a new dimension. This will lead to its deterioration in time. But if we take other alternatives that depend on socio culture perspective, which is also the basis of this research, then the children

development between actual development and their potential level can be resolved through collaborative teaching, suitable preparation of support and assistance.

Therefore, it will be the responsibility of every teacher to modify the curriculum. If it is required, so it could fit in for students with learning disabilities and so called as the tailored made curriculum. Korkmaz (2011) examined 66 elementary teachers' perceptions of inclusive education through a questionnaire which consisted of eight open-ended questions on their opinions and experiences about the implementation of inclusive education in the elementary schools. Findings showed that students with disabilities cannot follow the general curriculum which is developed for non-disabilities students. Teachers responsible has been double up in inclusive classrooms for they have to prepare a regular preparation for non-disabilities and the individualized educational program for disabilities students. Educators were positive about educating students with disabilities in general education settings. They were conservative about how to best do this, with many of them preferring to have the included students accompanied by a special education teacher or instructional assistant or continuing to have resource room services. Idol (1997) mentions that in the inclusive school, all students are educated in general education programs and inclusion is when a student with special needs is educated full time in the general education program. Choate (2004) claims that mainstreaming which is now generally referred to as inclusion allows students with disabilities be taught on a stay-put basis in general classrooms but the stay-put placement should be supported through some kind of teachers collaboration.

The research finding is in line with Downing et al (1997) and Ryndak et al. (1999) that state students with learning disabilities are still being taught with low technology teaching aids. It was completely related to the research conducted by Boe and Cook (2006) which discussing about quality and quantity of teachers to overcome the needs problem, products and lack of special education teachers. The restructuring of educational process by updating use of technology, cooperation of student management assistance and increase of general teachers' responsibilities in inclusive education program are among the steps that can be taken. In this research context, Boe's and Cook's view is true and benefitting many parties if implemented in schools with School A background, especially in Malaysia. The restructuring of special education is timely as it adds colours to the special education system to be more competitive. This step should be taken a decade ago but its better now than never. In this way, students with learning disabilities can receive quality service in special education.

Individual Educational Programs are the legally required planning tools for school- age students with disabilities in America. Subsequently, it can be a model to other teachers in different countries. A modified document to suit Malaysia setting should be considered and desirable to put in practice. Individual Educational Program is not one and the only document in planning a program, there are other alternative ways to plan such program that might be suitable for local use. They are not intended to replace current planning requirements but they can add significantly to the quality of planning in teaching.

Some of the elements that must be included in the propose modified document are consent from parents, collaborative team working with parents to develop and implement the plan, student's present level of educational performance, goals of teaching, placement, alternative assessment, duration and a statement of transition service beginning at certain age. Basic instruction delivered in teaching pre reading skills varies and many Special Education Program for Students with Learning Disabilities provide specific direct instruction in teaching language. It is extremely important to use the diagnostic test.

Recommendation and Conclusions

In short, all findings however revealed that even though inclusive education was carried out but it was not satisfactorily done. Educating those who can cope with national curriculum is better through inclusion because when students with mild learning disabilities gathered in school, they need to experience and participating in social interaction with their peers in the general classroom. We should have the confidence to carry out an inclusive education program within the mould of Malaysian culture and setting. Those implemented in other country may not be successfully deliver here as the exposure and the policy on owned was different..

This study was able to answer all the research questions with regards to how the participants perceived the pedagogical aspect in teaching pre reading skill. These finding might be relevant for special education teachers who teach pre reading skill. By investigating the pedagogical aspects of teaching pre reading skill, teachers will be able to understand how to plan and implement a better lesson in their classrooms. They will also be able to develop activities that are more effective. Summary of recommendations are as follows:

1. Students to be accompanied by special education teacher or student management assistant when learning in normal classroom.
2. General education teachers involve in teaching inclusive education may be consider to be given allowance for teaching handicapped children as what is received by the special education teachers and student management assistants.
3. Restructuring of student management assistant responsibilities.
4. Include Introductory Course to Special Education and inclusion program in the Faculty's Compulsory Course Outline for all graduate education programmes so that all teacher trainees at the Teacher Education Institute and undergraduates in Public Institute of Higher Learning have basic knowledge in special education.

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