

Inclusive Education: Better and for the Best

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Abstract

This article discusses on how teachers practically implement Inclusive Education and the challenges faced by the Special Education teachers while implementing the Inclusive Education. The study was conducted at two Special Education-Learning Disabilities (SELD) Programs and both programs are located in a same district in one of the state in the Peninsular Malaysia. The participants were four Special Education teachers, and they were chosen using the snowballing technique. All the participants were experienced and graduated teachers. The selection criteria for the teacher participants are; (1) teach students in Inclusive Education; and (2) teach in secondary school level. Three instruments used in this study are interview protocol, observation forms and documentation analysis. The results will be discussed in two aspects; (1) pedagogical aspects that influence teachers' instruction; and (2) challenges faced by the Special Education teacher. The finding shows that students with mild learning disabilities who joined the in full or partial inclusion are lack of guidance and support from Special Education teachers. This challenge is occurred when there is lack of Special Education teachers. All trainees at the Teacher Education Institute and undergraduates who studying education at the Higher Education Institutes are suggested to be exposed to the Special Education and Inclusive Education. This study shows that educators should make positive strides to engage learners in inclusive classes for a better Inclusive Education in the country.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Special Education, Learning Disabilities, Qualitative.

Introduction

Malaysia involvement in The World Declaration on Education for All that was held in 1990 in Thailand, signaled Malaysia's schools to start focusing on integration and equity issues regarding students with special needs. The orientation towards emphasizing changes from integration to inclusion really begun soon after the Salamanca Statement on Principles, Policy and Practice in Special Needs Education which was held in Salamanca, Spain in 1994 (Zalizan 1997). In mid 1990s inclusive education in Malaysia was first introduce as a part of reform initiative.

Along with the transition in education, the current reformation in Special Education in Malaysia has witnessed an increasing number of Specific Learning Disability (SLD) who enrolled in the inclusive program each year. Acknowledging the obstacles to full inclusion, most of the schools implement full-time practice of Inclusive Education, while there are

schools only practice partial inclusion. In such manner, the students are either partly or fully included in the mainstream classes based on their level of ability in following instruction. These reformations also apply to the transformation of Malaysia education system to cover comprehensive changes to meet new demands and high expectations of the community (Malaysia, 2013).

SLD starts pouring into the mainstream classes. This scenario meets the concept of mainstream classes can be adapted and restructured to meet the needs of students with special needs. There are categorized as learning disabilities, hearing impairment and visual impairment by the Malaysia Ministry of Education. Students with hearing and visual impairment are either placed in special schools or in the integration programs in the mainstream school. Unlike students with visual and hearing impairment, most of SLD have been regularly placed in special classes in the integration program in the mainstream schools or better known as the Special Education Integration Program for Students with Learning Disabilities. The program provides educational services to the heterogenous group of students which was conducted in regular classes as a part of a service continuum for SLD (and students with hearing and visual impairment). Somehow it is still struggling to achieve its aims to encourage interaction between SLD and the mainstream students. This is due to many factors and one of which comes from the study conducted by Manisah, Ramlee and Zalizan (2006). Their findings revealed that lack of exposure to Inclusive Education and the skills to deal with students with special needs contribute towards the effectiveness of an inclusive program.

Statement of Problem

Despite federal mandates to educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment, teachers continue to have mixed feelings about their own preparedness to educate students with disabilities in the general education setting. However, research has documented that teachers with more positive attitudes toward inclusion are more likely to adjust their instruction and curriculum to meet individual needs of students and have a more positive approach to inclusion (Taylor & Ringlaben, 2012). Previous research had shown the necessity of updating and expanding on teachers' knowledge based on Inclusive Education. In a related study, Rodríguez, Saldaña & Moreno (2012) explored Special Education teachers' attitudes toward teaching students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and at determining the role of variables associated with a positive attitude towards the children and their education. Sixty-nine Special Education teachers were interviewed with two multiple-choices questions. They found out that a positive view of teachers' expectations towards the education of ASD students. Three variables, experience with the child, school relationship with an ASD network and type of school (mainstream or special) are found useful in predicting Special Education teachers' attitudes but the most relevant was the relationship with an ASD network.

Therefore, this would support the idea that clear practical and theoretical frameworks are necessary for teachers who involved in Inclusive Education. This article discusses on how teachers practically implement Inclusive Education and the challenges faced by the Special Education teachers while implementing the Inclusive Education.

Methodology

Setting and Participants

The study was conducted at two Special Education-Learning Disabilities (SELD) Programs and both programs are located in a same district in one of the state in the Peninsular 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 fourth participants. All the participants were experienced and graduated 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 are; (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 interview 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 the field notes reports. The process of collecting data was completed once it is 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; (1) teachers' documents; (2) public documents; and (3) students' documents. The researcher needs to review the whole documents to obtain the required disclosures. For this reason, the information received will support the findings from observations and interviews. The researcher reports the information obtained in the form provided. Subsequently, each information or document that has been collected will be gone through the process of coding.

Procedure

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. Through the observation, the researcher learns about behavior and the meaning attached to the behavior in the social settings chosen for study. Observations 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 was taken placed at the teachers' rooms. Each interview took 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 was 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 Kumar (2011), when analyzing data in qualitative research, the researcher goes through the process of identifying themes and describing what have been found out during the interviews or observation.

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 had been written out.

Results

Pedagogical Aspects that Influence Teachers' Instruction

The current finding shows that students with mild learning disabilities following partial inclusion are more fortunate as compared to two of their friends in full inclusion. This is because they received more attention and supports from Special Education teachers. An informant explained that:

...students who have acquired the 3R skills will be inclusive. When they go back to their programme, they learn together with other students. I need to know the development and revise curriculum specifications to assist students undergoing partial inclusion...

Code: BPR/ink/PKSaI

In my group, basically three teaching methods are used. Firstly, two students, Asmawi and Ekin followed Inclusive Education partially. They are taught partially by general education teachers in general classroom and will sit for PMR in the middle of October 2008. The second group... fully inclusion and the third group study in Special Education classroom...

Code: BPR/ink/PKFahmi

This happen because students with mild learning disabilities in partial inclusion were also learning in the Special Education classroom. This situation enables the informant to supervise their learning and achievement. Only a handful of the students with mild learning disabilities in Malaysia were involving in Inclusive Education program. Past researches had proven that the implementation of Inclusive Education overseas was attended by students with mild, moderate and severe learning disabilities. This situation indicates that there is still a gap in the implementation of Inclusive Education in Malaysia which probably occurs because Special Education teachers, general education teachers and the administrators are not highly exposed and have limited knowledge in the implementation of inclusion. Inclusive Education can be more effective if the responsible parties can organise courses and training to assist teachers in increasing their knowledge in relation to teaching approach for Inclusive Education. In fact, the Teacher Training Institute and Public Higher Institute of Education can assist in the preparation of short courses to general education teachers who are involving in Inclusive Education setting. This finding is parallel to Bi Ying Hu (2010) for significant implications on professional development and teacher preparation programs, as both avenues are responsible for preparing in-service and pre-service early childhood teachers for the educational innovation of including special needs children in general classrooms.

When students with mild learning disabilities joined the full or partial inclusion in general education classroom without accompanied by Special Education teachers, the situation clearly becomes more complicated because they are learning without additional education service and teachers support. An informant clarified that:

... students attending Inclusive Education in normal classroom find it difficult to learn without teacher's supervision...

Code: BPR/ink/PKAli

This statement indicates the informants' anxiety towards the implementation of Inclusive Education in School A. The finding however contradicts with Scanlon et al. (1996) which they found that students with special needs are able to learn effectively in an Inclusive Education classroom because the educational needs are the same, and hence the same teaching approach and strategies can be applied. This contradiction explains by the differences of the curriculum and teaching approach applied in overseas and Malaysia.

Challenges Faced by the Special Education Teacher

PKAli voices out his complain about the management of Inclusive Education Program that is carrying out in School A. Even without involve directly in the Inclusive Education Program, PKAli worried about the situation as the students with mild learning disability are involving in Inclusive Education Program, especially the full inclusion, will continue left out in their study as they did not receive any guidance from Special Education teachers. Similarly, PKAzlina admitted that she seldom follow up the progress of the Nabil and Mila who participated in the full inclusion of Inclusive Education Program. According to PKSal,

I seldom follow up the progress of students who involved in full inclusion. The coordinator monitors their progress and achievement by cooperated with the teachers teaching in mainstream.

Code: 1P/BPR/ink/PKSal/s13.18/p463

PKAzlina explained that program coordinator always monitor the progress of Nabil and Mila. This matter is admitted by the program coordinator, PKNorleha herself, by telling that,

We had discussion with the mainstream teacher, discuss about their progress and we called the students themselves from time to time to discuss. Full inclusion is hard to carry out because there are many obstacles. The most significant is lack of teacher.

Code: 1P/BPR/ink/PKNorleha/s8.59/p441

PKNorleha and the other Special Education teachers realised the problems arise when sending the mild learning disability students to normal classrooms to participate in Inclusive Education Program. Based on the observation, the researcher found out this problem was solved through discussion. According to the response of PKNorleha, the mild learning disability students who participated fully in Inclusive Education Program were not so close with the Special Education teacher. This situation became more serious when the teacher and students seldom meet. Consequently, the Special Education teachers are not able to help them in their learning. PKNorleha said,

Additional teaching should be given, but we are lack of teachers as I had mentioned just now. So, I suggested that the students' parents to send their children to extra classes. One to one tuition.

Code: 1P/BPR/ink/PKNorleha/s8.61/p445

PKNorleha suggested an additional form of instruction is needed to help the students who are involved fully in the Inclusive Education Program. Unfortunately, the lack of Special Education teachers in School A had limited this effort from being implemented. As an alternative, PKNorleha hoped that the parents of Nabil, Mila, Asmawi and Ekin are able to take the initiative to send their children for extra classes after school. The researcher is also informed by Nabil's mother that she did had a Special Education teacher to teach Nabil at home as a preparation to sit for Lower Secondary Assessment (PMR).

There are still many things to be considered by the Special Education teachers while planning for the the programmes within Inclusive Education Program, as expressed by PKFahmi,

One more thing, Inclusive Education has to be planned in detailed and be monitored with a professional way. Thereby, weaknesses are able to be overcome as soon as possible and assistance can be provided. I considered that normal education teachers who involved in Inclusive Education should be exposed with the management of learning disabilities students. Also, IPTA and IPG should see the provided training curriculum in the respective curriculum framework... early exposure is vital.

Code: 1P/BPR/ink/PKFahmi/s7.2/p255

Feedback on the teaching of Inclusive Education Program by PKFahmi contains a deeper meaning, cynical but transparent to end this section. He voiced out the suggestion as an additional value for Special Education system to be more excellent in the future.

Discussion

This finding is also in line with research by McLeskey et al. (2004) and Carlson et al. (2002). The researchers stated that post for Special Education teaching students with learning difficulties is filled by less qualified personnel. It is commendable that the exposure related to Special Education and Inclusive Education should be given to all trainees at the Teacher Education Institute and undergraduates who take up education at the Higher Education Institutions. In fact, teaching contents should include Introductory Course to Special Education and inclusion in the Faculty's Compulsory Course Outline for all graduate education programs. In this way, all teachers teaching in government aided schools will have exposure to teach and implement inclusion to students with mild learning disabilities. At the same time, they can render their service and knowledge when asked to run the Inclusive Education program.

The study was able to explore the idea that implementation of Inclusive Education is crucial in current education system in Malaysia. This reflects that Inclusive Education should provide an appropriate education for students with learning disabilities if it was properly planned. Findings from this study indicate that planning and implementation in Inclusive Education had been carried out but there were lots of gaps that still need to be improved.

Even though it does have some limitations, it is suggested that if Inclusive Education is carried out with appropriate collaboration, changes will occur. In spite of that, the process of learning and teaching must be continued with or without appropriate inclusion. In addition, there are alternative ways done by the teachers that are helpful for students with learning disabilities. It is varied according to the coordinators and teachers in each program. One of the most frequently used approaches is the yearly lesson plan followed by the daily lesson plan. This

lead to a situation where students are taught to differentiate and group together objects and also to form and vocalize the vocal and consonants letters.

PKNorleha seemed quite confidence to implement the inclusive mode in School A for PKFahmi used to teach in the special school for the deaf. There are no objection among the parents, teachers and school administrator. In our point of view, this solution might work in School A. But by doing so, consciously or not they are putting the students in most restrictive environment. In some countries, stay-put placement probably defined as instruction provided by the general education teachers with some support of colleagues which is so call as teacher assistance team. In other countries stay-put instruction might involve collaboration among two or more teachers such as the reading specialist or as we call it remedial teachers in Malaysia.

Dealing students with learning disability is indeed a challenging experience for most Special Education teachers. Teachers ought to understand the individual differences of the students in order to help them to achieve the highest success as possible. Many educators agree that the amount of knowledge on pedagogical and the capability to handle students with disabilities influence their readiness to hold responsibility for these students in inclusion. Mukhopadhyay, Molosiwa & Moswela (2009) have conducted a qualitative research on eighteen final year Special Education student teachers. Findings of their study revealed that Special Education student teachers were not prepared to meet the learning needs of diverse categories of learners with disabilities in inclusive settings. They believe that the success of Inclusive Education rests on quality teacher preparation gearing towards Inclusive Education and they proposed a teacher preparation model of inclusive basic education in Botswana.

It seems that each country has its own way dealing with inclusive. For some reason we do recognize and agree with the implementation in School A is the best solution within the school but it might be unpopular for outside parties. Even though we agree very much for such services but somehow we were worried about it. For some reason it is quite difficult to accept such implementation given that lack of Special Education teachers in the program. Beyond that, it is also believed that all students should have the priority to learn together inclusively and they should have the benefit from the education system. If general education teachers, Special Education teachers and administrators could work collaboratively, show high commitment and play their roles, these challenging matter can be solved by applying least restrictive environment rather than most restrictive environment.

The finding also revealed that partial inclusion was not carried out comprehensively. It is just merely placing the students with mild learning disabilities in the general classroom. This situation amplifies the difficulties for students with mild learning disabilities because they will have to learn without guidance from trained Special Education teachers. The finding also revealed the anxiety of the informant towards the teaching of students with mild learning disabilities following this pattern. These students have been noted that they need guidance from Special Education teachers in their learning because their ability level is still low compared to peer without disabilities.

The current finding contradicts with Stanovich (1991) which claimed that cross category approach happens in Inclusive Education classroom, whereby students are taught fully by general education teachers and assisted by Special Education teachers or student management assistant, so call as the paraprofessional, during teaching process. The finding shows that the informants did not reject inclusion if only the human resource is sufficient. The finding shows that full inclusion need to be given more attention because the teaching process is conducted by general education teachers who does not have Special Education

background. It shows that the quality of Inclusive Education in Malaysia has the potentials to be improved if the general education teachers who teach in inclusion setting are sent for in-house training in Special Education. This kind of training enables the teachers to get good input in handling students disruptive behaviour, conduct cooperative learning and also encourage learning in order to achieve students actual potential. We suggest that all general education teachers who are involved in inclusion received the same amount of allowance for teaching students with learning disabilities as the Special Education teachers.

Mokobane (2011) reported in her article on significant findings regarding facilitating the engagement of differently-able learners in inclusive schools. Her study was conducted in one of the schools considered to be a model of Inclusive Education in a semi urban area located in the northern part of Tshwane, Gauteng Province, South Africa. Her findings revealed that even though their frustrations educators still put an effort to make positive strides in engaging the intellectually challenged learners in inclusive classes. Mokobane also found that teachers indicated that they use various strategies of engaging learners in academic activities, such as giving immediate feedback, but there was no consistency in using the strategy. She recommended that there should be consistency when using strategies, so that they can yield positive results.

Conclusion

Some students with mild learning disabilities have the opportunity to participate in inclusive education in general classrooms. They will be involved in the school activities with their typical peers. In this situation they will be following instruction based on the national curriculum instead of the alternative curriculum used in the integration program. In this scenario, the process of learning and teaching were usually carried out by general education teachers. General education teachers in this research refer to the teachers who are involved in inclusive education without special education academic background.

The finding of this study shows the challenge face in inclusive program is the lack of Special Education teachers. Nevertheless, it is believed that the quality of Inclusive Education in Malaysia has the potentials to be improved. This can be done if the general education teachers who involved in Inclusive Education are sent for in-house training in Special Education. Educators should make positive strides to engage learners in inclusive classes for a better Inclusive Education in our country.

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