

Teachers' Perceptions of Including Children with Autism in a Preschool

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Abstract

Inclusive education supports the vision of the United Nations (UN) in upholding the fundamental rights of children with special needs towards education. In Malaysia, the Persons with Disabilities Act 2008 recognized the rights of children and persons with disabilities in regards to education. However, the implementation of inclusive education for children with autism in Malaysia has been problematic, especially in preschool. Therefore, this study investigated teachers' perceptions of including children with autism in a mainstream preschool. The objectives of this study were: 1) to determine the attitudes of teachers towards inclusive education 2) to identify the knowledge and skills of pre-school teachers regarding inclusive education 3) to identify the barriers and challenges in implementing inclusive education in pre-school 4) to investigate the reasons behind the non-acceptance of preschool teachers on having children with autism in their classes. Data were collected using a structured interview. Three pre-school teachers in Selangor agreed to participate in this study. The interviews were transcribed text verbatim and information was analyzed by identifying relevant themes. The findings showed that the teachers were not prepared to teach children with autism in their class because they did not know the characteristics of children with autism and did not understand the importance of inclusive education. In conclusion, the practice of inclusive education in pre-school is yet to be implemented successfully due to some constraints experienced by teachers and lack of support in the environment.

Keywords: inclusive education, autism, preschool, teacher

1. Introduction

Inclusive education involves including children with disabilities in mainstream classes with typically developing children and providing them with educational support. Inclusion enables them to participate in the teaching and learning activities conducted in the classroom (Allen & Cowdery 2009; Block 1994). Inclusive education provides various benefits to children with disabilities. According to Allen & Cowdery (2005), there are three benefits for inclusive education; firstly it is related to the fundamental rights of children no matter what their abilities and disabilities are; secondly, the provision of quality education and thirdly; the provision of opportunities to develop the children's social skills. Fundamental rights of children towards education mean all children have the rights to learn together regardless of their ability. Segregating children into separate classrooms discriminates their chances of learning with their typically developing peers.

Various international declarations enacted on inclusive education have given the rights to all children to access education in mainstream settings (UNESCO 1994). Research by Koegel et al. (2011) had proven that children with disabilities displayed better social skills and academic achievement when they learnt in the same environment with their typically developing peers. Inclusive education is very important as it provides access to quality education for children with disabilities. Segregation in education causes fear, discrimination and prejudice towards people with disability. All children need education that will support them in building friendship and prepare them for future life. On top of this, inclusive education assists children with disabilities in reducing the anxiety in building friendship and attaining respect from others around them.

Strain et al. (2001) suggested that inclusive education among children with autism have been practiced for more than twenty years whereby children with autism had been placed together with typically developing children in the same class for at least forty percent of the school day. The justification of placing children with autism in the same class as typically developing children is based on the educational goals such as to help children with autism to be able to go through daily activities independently (National Research Council [NRC], 2001).

1.1 Education for Children with Autism

Autism originates from the Greek word 'autos' that means 'alone' and was officially introduced by a scientist named Kanner in 1943. Autism or its clinical name, Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs), is a complex disorder involving abnormal development of the neurological system and is suffered throughout the lifetime. Although billions of dollars have been spent on research, the cause of this disorder is still unknown, (Newschaffer et al., 2006; Rao & Gagie, 2006; Huang & Wheeler, 2006). Autism occurs all around the world, irrespective of religious, race, social status and economy (Perko & McLaughlin, 2002). According to the United States Department of Education (USDE, 2001), autism is a mental disorder that is characterized by impairments in social and communication skills, including lack of imaginative ability and playing, demonstrating limited and repetitive behaviour, usually related to interest, activity and attitude.

The latest studies on autism reported an increase in prevalence of autism (Croen et al., 2002; Volkmar et al., 1997). During the early 70s, its prevalence is three or four cases of autism for every 10,000 children. Bryson et al. (2003) stated that the ratio of individual having autism is 6 to 7 out of 1000. However, the latest research by Baron-Cohen et al. (2009) indicated there was an increase whereby the latest ratio was 1 out of 64. The research by Ganz (2006) stated that the lifetime cost for an individual with autism is USD 3.2 million. The total number of people with autism in the United States of America is 1.5 million and therefore the lifetime cost for them in that State was estimated to be about USD 35 billion a year. The official statistic on the prevalence of autism in Malaysia is 1 case per 600 children (Ministry of Health, 2004). However, as the research is dated, the current prevalence remains unknown.

The awareness on the needs of children with autism have become prominent which started initiatives from different organizations to provide special education for children with autism. Autism Learning Laboratory (ALL) was one of such initiatives developed by the Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) in 2009. The objective of the laboratory is to develop education modules for children with autism in Malaysia and study the effectiveness of these modules for children with autism in various educational settings. Additionally, ALL also conducts research in identifying the best teaching strategies for children with autism and has created a model classroom that can be replicated by service providers for children with autism. The laboratory also provides education and consultations for parents and guardians of children with autism. Various courses and training sessions on care and education for children with autism are conducted for teachers and parents.

Simpson (2004) stated that in order to provide effective education for children with autism, special education teachers need to be equipped with basic management skills for mainstream and special education, including special skills in the field of autism. Teachers need to understand the characteristics of autism, assessment and evaluation of children with autism. Teachers also need to master teaching modules that comprises of four teaching steps which comprise of strategies to increase social interaction skills, communication and self-regulation skills of students, providing support and learning tools, management methods and environmental accommodation and intervention of positive behavior (Toran et al. 2010).

ALL not only provides full-time education for children with autism but also provides support for a number of these children who receive inclusive education in mainstream primary school and preschool settings. This research was conducted to explore mainstream preschool teachers' experiences in teaching children with autism in their preschool. The focus of this research was to determine the perceptions of these teachers on inclusive education of children with autism based on the research questions problem statements stated below:

What is the teachers attitude towards inclusive education?

Are the teachers' knowledgeable and skillful about autism and inclusive education?

Are preschool teachers willing to accept children with autism in their classrooms?

What are the obstacles and challenges in implementing inclusive education in their classroom?

2. Problem Statement

Inclusive education focuses on the effort of eliminating or reducing learning obstacles that was caused by inaccessible pedagogy, unsuitable expectations or the environment that limits physical ability (Johnstone, 2010).

One of the main objectives of inclusive education in placing students with disabilities with other typically developing students in the same classroom, is for them to benefit from teaching and learning in the mainstream setting. However, in the Malaysian context, "inclusive education" still practices the integration concept rather than the inclusive concept (Zalizan, 2009; Lee, 2010). Lee (2010) stated that the current Malaysian education system does not support the needs of students with disabilities, mainly due to the unfavourable conditions of the mainstream classrooms which do not support their learning process.

In order for inclusive education to be successful, teachers need to be knowledgeable about it and skillful in implementing it. However, studies on mainstream teachers involved in inclusive education reported that they seemed to be lacking in terms of exposure and training in special education (Manisah, Ramlee & Zalizan, 2006; Hanafi, Hasnah & Shaharuddin, 2008). Another issue reported by Manisah et al. (2006), was the lack of communication and collaboration between mainstream teachers and special education teachers. These studies highlighted the issues that arise in the process of implementing inclusive education in schools. To date, studies on inclusive education in Malaysia exclusively focused on the primary and secondary levels; therefore research is urgently needed on the implementation of inclusive education in Malaysia at the preschool level.

3. Research Methodology

This research is a narrative inquiry carried out in a preschool in the state of Selangor, Malaysia. The interview protocol was built based on previous research and adapted from a study by Yu (2008). Three teachers (R1, R2 & R3) working in a mainstream preschool agreed to participate in this research. They were interviewed face-to-face on their experience teaching students with autism in their classes. They were interviewed and the interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder to obtain information on inclusive education based on the research question. The interviews were transcribed in text verbatim and analyzed based on the constructed themes.

4. Findings and Discussions

All three teachers were female and had experiences in teaching a child with autism who was included in their classes. Two of them (Rx, Ry) had at least one child with autism in their classes. Meanwhile, one respondent had previous experience as a shadow aide of two children with autism in a typical classroom. The following sections explain the findings from the interview.

4.1 The Teachers' Attitude towards Inclusive Education

The inclusive educational approach in classrooms proved that the children with autism spectrum disorder benefited when they successfully increase their social skills, and thus increasing their confidence in facing their typical peers (McGee et al., 1993; Wooten & Mesibov, 1986). In addition, the actual inclusive environment enabled the typical children to be aware of the disabilities and imperfections of their other friends (Strain & Kohler, 1998). Since the past five years, the number of children with autism who undergo inclusive education increases every year (USDE 2004). In 1992 to 2003, the percentage of children with autism between the age of 6 to 21 years who acquired inclusive services increased from 18.7 percent to reaching 42.5 percent (USDE 2004).

The data in this study found a mix of the negative and positive attitudes among the respondents towards inclusive education. According to R1, "For me, inclusive education does not really help and is not suitable for students with autism because they are in their own world and have uncontrollable behavior when they are in the preschool." R1 added, "children with autism were not very good at adapting themselves (to the environment) and they find it hard to adapt with their friends when they were playing in a group, therefore they will be sidelined". However, most of the other typically developing children who were informed of the presence of these special friends in their class did understand and were aware of their existence during their time together.

On the other hand, R2 and R3 reported positive attitudes towards inclusion. R2 described that she was willing to accommodate children with autism in her classroom, as the presence of these children did not affect the quality of her teaching. R2 also highlighted that the children with autism did not socialize with the rest of their typical friends. "He played with the others when something attract his attention such as the toys or craft books but did not know how to share the toys with the other children," explained R2.

4.2 The Knowledge and Skills of Teachers in Relation to Inclusive Education

With the increasing incidence of autism, there is an urgent need to have trained teachers to educate them. This is to ensure that they receive the best education to help them become independent and productive members of society. However, according to the National Research Council, U.S. (2001), teacher training is the weakest element in providing effective services for children with autism and their families. This study conducted in a preschool seems to support this statement. In Malaysia, a study by Philips (2005) on the level of mainstream teachers' knowledge on autism, found that 84.3% of mainstream teachers in schools in Malaysia were poorly

informed about the aspects of cognitive, social and emotional development of children with autism. While a study by Toran et al. (2010) found that special education teachers have poor knowledge of autism and expressed the needs for more and better preservice and inservice teacher training on autism.

Based on the interviews, all three respondents demonstrated a lack of knowledge and understanding on inclusive education. In fact, they themselves admitted that they were not sure about the inclusive program conducted at their preschool. According to R1, preschool teachers were informed by the management of the preschool about children with autism who were going to be included, however there was not any initiatives such as training carried out by the administrators. The teachers stated that they did not have adequate training, which they felt that they urgently needed, as they did not know the techniques and teaching strategies that were appropriate for these children.

4.3 Teachers' Readiness in Accepting Children with Autism

R2 and R3 have positive views on accepting children with autism in their classes. However, they mentioned the need for continuous training before and during the children being included in their classes. R2 stated that she received two trainings, which helped her to understand autism and correct teaching techniques. Whereas, R3 had not undergone any courses or workshops on autism. On her own initiative, R3 educated herself on these issues by reading appropriate materials on the internet. Meanwhile, R1 stressed that she was not confident to accept these children in her class due to her lack of expertise and ample training. The research done by Ocloo & Subbey (2008), Chhabra et al. (2010) and the review of 26 researches of De Boer et al. (2011) discovered that most teachers either have a neutral or negative perception regarding the placement of students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms. These studies suggested that the negative attitudes were based on type of disabilities of the students, including those who were not doing well in terms of academic and behavior (De Boer et al. 2011). Lack of resources, support and professional training also contributed to these negative attitudes.

Therefore, providing appropriate resources, support services and training is necessary in order to ensure the success of inclusive education. Cooperation and support from various parties were much needed especially from other the administrators, teachers, parents and the community towards inclusive education. According to R1, at the preschool where she is working, the administrator provided a room to support children with special needs but up until the time of the interview, there was no activity there. She was hoping that this room could be used to place children with special needs for teaching and learning activities. Her statement indicated that teachers were expecting children with special students to be taught in a segregated classroom even though they may be in a same building, highlighting the fact that teachers were still unaware of the true definition of inclusive education.

Another support discussed by R1, R2, and R3 in implementing inclusive education was the provision of a shadow aide. Based on the interviews, the respondents hoped that a shadow aide would be provided to assist children with autism to adapt themselves with the new environment. All three of them expressed the need of a shadow aide for children with autism to be included successfully in their classes as they said that they already had their hands full of teaching twenty four typically developing children. This is because shadow aide can provide support and help children with autism during the process of inclusion. According to Robertson et al. (2003), the role of a shadow aide is to help students with special needs to be more prepared and focused on the daily and academic tasks, preparing any modification in accordance to the environmental needs, helping to increase their understanding, minimizing social and academic stress, reducing problematic behavior and helping the students to participate in smaller groups together with typically developing children. Therefore, the existence of shadow aide will positively affect the relationship between teacher and students with special needs (Robertson et al. 2003).

Apart from the need of a shadow aide for children with autism, the teachers also expressed the need of a regular teacher aide in their classes. They stated that the current ratio of one teacher to twenty four students in their classroom was too high. Even without a child with autism in their classes, the teachers expressed the need of an aide to assist with their current typically developing students. They stated that a ratio of one adult to twelve students would be more appropriate. It seemed clear that when teachers feel that they are already struggling to cope with current responsibilities, including a child with special needs seemed to be an extra burden to them.

4.4 Obstacles and Challenges of Inclusive Education

There were several obstacles and challenges of inclusive education. R1, R2 and R3 had same views regarding this issue. The main obstacle was that they were not provided with proper guidance. There was no training for the teachers involved in inclusive education. R2 stated, "There were only two workshops on autism that I managed to follow this year". Other obstacle was time restraint. Every class in the preschool had two teachers to manage twenty four students. Every students had their own target to be achieved such as reading and counting.

Therefore, R2 experienced problem delegating her time to prepare the teaching aids for the typical students as well as special students. R2 said, "I didn't do much with Ahmad (not his real name). Honestly, I just make sure that he does not endangered himself (in class)." This statement indicates that students with autism do not have the opportunity to showcase his or her potential as the teachers were too focused on self-injurious behaviour but not their ability to perform well academically.

5. Suggestions

This research was an effort to investigate the execution of inclusive program for students with autism at the preschool level. The findings suggested the execution of inclusive program at preschool to be unsuccessful due to several reasons. Firstly, it is because of several restraints experience by teachers to execute the inclusive practice in their classes. Therefore, several suggestions were made for the improvements of inclusive education in the future. The administration should make a thorough planning prior to considering implementing the inclusive program. The administration should be attentive, knowledgeable and have clear understanding regarding the true concept of inclusive education. Without these, its objective is unachievable. Furthermore, parents of typical student should be informed so that the presence of students with autism will not be a shock to them as well as able to give good cooperation. On top of that, teachers must be provided guidance via workshops or on-going training in order for them to have a better understanding on autism.

Research show that most government schools do not offer inclusive program for special children at preschool level (Lieber et al. 2000). According to Shonkoff and Philips (2000), it is difficult for parents to find preschool programs for their children with disability. In addition to this, it is difficult to find good quality inclusive program service that fulfills the needs of the children with special needs. Furthermore, the existing inclusive programs are usually implemented by individuals who lack expertise in early childhood education or early childhood special education. Due to this, most programs are not able to provide class structure and suitable materials for children with special needs who enroll in inclusive programs.

6. Conclusion

The findings of this study showed that inclusive education for children with autism was not implemented successfully in a comprehensive manner due to various obstacles and challenges. To strengthen these inclusive education programs, teachers need to be trained with the necessary knowledge and skills. Teachers are the main agents in executing these inclusive education programs for children with special needs. The success of inclusive education may only be achieved with supports that fulfill the needs of the children with autism. This research highlights the need of awareness and acceptance of all individuals in the educational setting towards children with autism. This will create an inclusive environment, which will lead towards an effective and quality preschool.

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