

TOWARDS HOLISTIC INCLUSION IN MALAYSIA: KNOWLEDGE OF SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS AMONG IN-SERVICE DISTANT LEARNING STUDENTS

Supiah Saad¹, Haniz Ibrahim², Nordina Nayan³

¹Institute of Education, International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM)

²Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI)

³Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE)

ABSTRACT

The findings of previous researches showed that mainstream teachers' have a negative attitude towards students with special educational needs (SEN) in Malaysia due to the lack of information and awareness. The purpose of this study was to determine the knowledge level of SEN among experienced mainstream teachers in Malaysia. A survey was distributed among 147 teachers undergoing distance learning Bachelor of Education (BEd) degree in a public university. Teaching experience and familiarity with SEN persons did not affect the knowledge level of the three groups of participants. The results of the study revealed that teachers had a moderate level of knowledge on SEN. The implication of these findings for inclusion and for future research in Malaysia is also provided. This study also made recommendations on how to improve the knowledge level of SEN in-service teachers in Malaysia, and the need to assess the knowledge on SEN among parents, paraprofessionals, educational administrators and other stake holders in order to achieve holistic inclusion for pupils with SEN.

Key words: learning disabilities, in-service teachers, inclusion, mainstream teacher, distant learning.

INTRODUCTION

A Malaysian inclusive education pioneer project was launched in 1995 (Bosi, 2004). The effectiveness of the inclusive education project was studied by researchers and the MOE. In 2005, the MOE in smart cooperation with the National Autisms Society of Malaysia (NASOM) implemented an inclusive education pioneer project for autistic pupils. The 'education for all' policy (EFA), with emphasized towards inclusive education for all pupils from all forms of disabilities. Opportunities for special need pupils to learn alongside normal peers were improved with the implementation of special education transformation (reference?)

Currently, around 1% of special needs pupils are included in mainstream classes (MOE, 2013). The MOE has opened bids from international and local companies that are experienced and skilled in the field of special education to implement pioneer project that will develop a holistic inclusive system in Malaysia. The MOE have projected an increase percentage of special needs

pupils included in mainstream classrooms by 30% in 2015. By 2020, Malaysia will become a developed nation as stated in Vision 2020, and the MOE targets 50% of special needs pupils will be in inclusive classes. Therefore, is it wise for the MOE to estimate a giant leap in placement of special needs pupils in mainstream classes? These pupils will follow the national curriculum, and the majority will undergo public examinations {UPSR, PMR (last cohort 2013)} and SPM. Therefore pupils with learning disabilities will face problems in their academic achievement. Mainstream teachers are directly involved in tackling the problems faced by these pupils in the classroom. Hence, teachers must understand the objectives of inclusive education especially in holistic achievement in all aspects of development for pupils with special needs. Aspects of living skills are most critical for these special need pupils to master. This study was intended to survey knowledge of mainstream teachers taking the Bachelor's Degree in Education through Distance Learning Program (PJJ) in the Institute of Education (INSTED), International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM).

Distance Learning Programme at Institute of Education, IIUM

Distance learning represents one of the solutions to broaden the support system to in-service learners (Abdullah & Mansor, 2002). IIUM offers courses for BEd PJJ programs through the Institute of Education for teachers sponsored by the MOE. This program was started in 2010 and classes began in 2011 using the 'hybrid' method where students will go through a combination of 'face-to-face' classes and also using technology via websites especially the learning management system (LMS). This approach will reduce needs for infrastructure and at the same time increase student's confidence and comprehension.

PJJ students at INSTED, IIUM consists of teachers without degrees that were posted in government primary schools. Programs offered include specialization in Bachelor in Education (TESL), Bachelor in Education (Guidance and counselor) and Bachelor in Education (Islamic studies). Students were selected and sponsored by the MOE.

However, the curriculum used is the same as the curriculum of regular INSTED programs. The length of the PJJ courses is four years. Students will be required to take and pass compulsory INSTED “EDP 1610: Understanding students with Special Educational Needs” course.

Holistic Inclusive Education (IE) Programme in Malaysia

There were many small scaled researches previously done on inclusive education in Malaysia especially by postgraduate students. Many issues were highlighted by the findings of these studies since the past several decades. The implementation of inclusive education in Malaysia is still not reaching the level expected and is one of the issues highlighted by these studies. Furthermore, there’s also the issue of pre-service teachers’ exposure towards the education of pupils with special needs that is still minimal. Mainstream teachers assume the responsibility towards special needs pupils rested solely on the shoulders of special education teachers. Therefore, it is understandable that most mainstream teachers are not aware or even bothered about pupils with special needs. Other researches tends to support this statement. According to Abdul Rahim, Rodger, and Ziviani (2012), comprehension among Malaysian mainstream teachers on LD are low while the success of a holistic IE program will require active involvement of mainstream teachers in tackling problems faced by special needs pupils in the classroom (DeSimone & Parmar, 2006; Wilson, Loprete, & Slostad, 2000). Studies also indicate pre-service and in-service courses taken by mainstream teachers in special education are not adequate for them to understand or even teach special needs pupils in the classroom. This resulted in low acceptance of IE by mainstream teachers. Carroll, 2003; Koay, Lim, Sim, & Elkins (2006) found that the acceptance of mainstream teachers can be increased through training and education on the characteristics and behavior of special need pupils.

Statement of the problem and Objectives of the study

One of the impacts from the transformation of special education was the expansion of IE for all categories of pupils with special needs. The pioneer project for this purpose was planned and will start in 2013, before being implemented in all schools by 2020. Five schools were chosen for phase one of the pioneer project and will be followed by five more schools each in phase two and three. IE implementation is estimated to reach 30% by 2015. The effort must be supported by increasing mainstream teachers knowledge on special education and pupils with special needs so that they will have a clear understanding of their role for IE to succeed. Numerous categories and types of disabilities will also leave a mark on mainstream teachers that are unfamiliar about the needs of these pupils and the role of teachers in making

IE a success. Findings of previous studies indicate that lack of knowledge among mainstream teachers will be an obstacle or even limit the implementation of IE in Malaysia. Therefore, this research will study how far mainstream teachers following PJJ understand children with special needs. Furthermore, this research will review the significance between age and teaching experience toward the knowledge level of these teachers.

Research Questions:

This research was developed to answer the following questions:

1. What is the depth of in-service teachers' knowledge on children with special needs?
2. Does age and teaching experience affect mainstream teachers knowledge about pupils with special needs?

Methodology

Research Design

The survey research method was used in this study. The independent variables were represented by teachers' gender, age, and teaching experience. Listed types of disabilities and special education program represented the dependent variables. As it's known however, survey research does not establish cause-effect relationships.

Participants

Purposive sampling was employed to select sample of distance learning students from IIUM undergoing bachelor degree programs in education to participate in this study. All of them are in-service student teachers. These students were in the first semester of their study, undertaking courses namely English as a second language, Islamic education or Guidance and counseling as a major area in their study.

Instrument

An instrument developed by the researchers consisting of two parts was used to collect the research data. The first part contained four items related to demographic data. The second part was a 36-item test measuring teachers' knowledge of learning disabilities as well as the medium used in getting the related information. These items were formulated based on a review of relevant literature (Bender, 2003; Lerner, 1999 ; Mather & Goldstein, 2001). Three subscale were used namely, type of disability, type of special education programme and the professional team in education of children with SEN.

To establish the face validity of the test, an initial version of it was given to two lectures from University Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPS I) and from the Department of Special Education, MOE. They made comments then provided feedback on a few items and changes were made based on their suggestions. Also prior to distribution, the instrument was piloted on 50

in-service student teachers at IIUM. Their response provided useful feedback that was taken into account in the final version of the instrument.

To determine the reliability coefficient of the scale, the researcher conducted a pilot test. The Cronbach's alpha (Kenapa lain-lain) for each subscale are as in Table 1.

Table 1: Cronbach's alfa coefficient

<i>Subscales</i>	<i>Cronbach's alpha</i>
Type of disability	.869
Types of programme for children with SEN	.760
Support, facilities and professional	.821
Identification and policy/regulation regarding the education children with SEN	.800
Types of media used in gaining knowledge	.852

Thus, the items used to collect data for this study is reliable.

Procedure

A research assistant assisted in distributing copies of the questionnaire at IIUM. A pen was given as a token for their participation. Two follow-ups were made by the researcher and research assistant. Each copy was accompanied by a letter explaining the study and the questionnaire, requesting student teachers' participation.

Data Analysis

SPSS statistical package were used in the data analysis. Descriptive analyses which include a variety of statistical techniques were used to analyse the research data. The techniques included: frequencies, percentages, mean, standard deviation (SD). A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was utilised.

Table 2 reports the distribution of respondents according to gender, age, and years of teaching experience. Data in the Table 2 also show that 19% of respondents were male and 81% were female. Regarding their age, 29.3% of the teachers were below 34 years old. The percentage of respondent between 35-39 years old were 29.7%,

aged between 40-44 years old were 26.2%, and 12.6 % were aged above 45 years old.

Table 2
Distribution of Teachers According to status, gender, Age, and teaching experience

Particulars	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Male	28	19
Female	119	81
Age		
Below 30	7	4.8
30 - 34 Years	39	26.9
35-39 Years	43	29.7
40-44 Years	38	26.2
45 and above	18	12.6
Years of Teaching Experience		
Less than 4 years	2	1.3
4- 6 Years	6	4.1
7-10Years	36	24.5
Above 10 years	105	70.1

N=147

In term of teaching experience, 1.3% had less than 4 years teaching experience, 4.1% had between 4-6 years teaching experience and 24.5% had 7-10 years teaching experience. A total 70.4% had more than 10 years' experience. This showed that more than 70 % of the respondents were highly experience in mainstream classroom teaching.

Findings

This paper discusses the findings of the study focusing on data from subscale 1 only. Overall level of knowledge of respondents according to the types of disabilities listed in the instrument is presented in table 3.

Table 3
Percentage of respondents and types of disability known

Level of knowledge	Percentage (%) according to types of disabilities								
	Visual	hearing	LD	Multipl e	Autism	Dis- leksia	Physica l	CP	ADHD
None/low	24.5	25.5	17	45.6	36.1	32	23.8	70.1	61.3
Moderate	70.1	70.4	72.8	49.7	57.8	60.5	70.1	26.5	35.4
High	5.4	4.8	9.5	3.4	4.8	5.4	5.4	0.7	3.4
Very High	0	0	0.7	0	0.7	7.1	0.7	0.7	0

LD = learning disability

CP = Cerebral Palsy

ADHD = Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder

Table 3 shows the knowledge level of mainstream teachers who were respondents of this research. All respondents have very limited knowledge about all types of disabilities listed in the instrument. Less than 10% of these mainstream teachers have knowledge at a high level for all disabilities stated. In general, over 60% of the respondents have moderate knowledge about visual, hearing, learning, and physical disabilities or even dyslexia. They understood the term but did not comprehend the needs and approach in dealing with education problems for these children. The percentage of respondents stating they have high knowledge about special needs children is minute. Almost 10% have high knowledge on

learning disabilities while 5.4% have high knowledge about dyslexia or visual and physical disabilities. Terms like Cerebral palsy, ADHD and several other disabilities were quite new for mainstream teachers in this study.

The mean rating of all respondents (n=147) when asked to score their level of knowledge on types of disability are as in Table 4. All age group score relatively moderate with mean above 2.5 (5= highly knowledgeable, SD above .5) in all type of disability. Regarding the experience, all subgroup was scored above 2.5 (5 = highly knowledgeable, SD above 0.5) in all type of disability.

Table 4: Mean and SD between groups of age and experience

		Visual	hearing	Learning disability	Speech	Physical	Multiple	Autism	dyslexia	Cerebral Palsy	ADHD
Age	Mean	2.78	2.76	2.92	2.81	2.81	2.53	2.62	2.66	2.13	2.23
(total)	N	145	145	145	145	145	143	144	143	145	145
	Std. Deviation	.583	.604	.578	.638	.589	.614	.729	.731	.719	.814

Experi	Mean	2.78	2.76	2.93	2.80	2.81	2.54	2.62	2.67	2.13	2.22
ence	N	147	147	147	147	147	145	146	145	147	147
(total)	Std. Deviation	.580	.601	.574	.637	.589	.624	.735	.737	.715	.809

Discussion and Conclusions

The in-service mainstream teachers who participated in this study had limited knowledge in dealing with pupils with learning disabilities. It is in line with the previous research findings. This implies that they are not in the state of being 'ready' to participate effectively in teaching pupils with SEN. As a prolong issue in special education, mainstream teachers' lack of knowledge in dealing with SEN pupils will be a barrier to achieve successful holistic inclusive education by 2020.

Since pre-service training programs for mainstream classroom teachers in Malaysia rarely include elements related to special education, most mainstream teachers are incapable to comprehend their responsibility or roles in the inclusive education programme. There is around three years for the MOE to prepare the mainstream teaching system for the task. A drastic action should be taken by the MOE to penetrate the appropriate level of knowledge to all mainstream teachers involved in the inclusive education programme. Training workshops on pupils with special needs, targeting parents and teachers as well as volunteers working with these pupils should be tripled. Training modules and courses by experts from NGOs and private sectors could intensify the number of trained mainstream teachers in the special education field especially in inclusive education concept. Such efforts may influence mainstream teachers' acceptance and support of inclusion (Campbell et al).

The findings of this study may be not encouraging as it indicates that distant learning student teachers in Malaysia appear to have limited knowledge of learning disabilities. It may answer the constraints of cases when the mainstream teachers were unable to provide for pupils with learning disabilities with the necessary adaptations and support services in their classroom. The mainstream teachers may cooperate with resource room teachers if they are clear about aims of inclusive education and have a clear-cut understanding of their role. In light of this, future studies in Malaysia should address the issues related to best practices in delivering training for inclusive education teams.

Inclusive education is one of the main thrust for special education reform in Malaysia. The MOE is responsible in providing social justice and equality so that all pupils can be included in ways that enable them to achieve their full potential.

Limitations

There are limitations which may influence the generalization of findings in this study. The sample used was not a random sample but a purposefully selected one. Thus, the findings of this study are not a representative of the larger population of mainstream student teachers. Also, the sample represented a small segment of the student teachers selected from two public universities in Malaysia and that the sample may differ from the student teacher population of other universities in the country. Another limitation of the present study was the test used to assess teachers' knowledge of learning disabilities. This test was not a comprehensive in that it did not cover all basic domains related to learning disabilities. Several thousand students with learning disabilities are expected to be in mainstream schools where there is no provision of special education services while teachers have not been informed of learning disabilities in their pre-service or in-service training. Thus, future studies addressing teachers working in such schools are obviously needed. Finally, future research needs to use more comprehensive tests and interviews with student teachers to verify this study's findings.

Future Plan of Research

As the number of pupils with LD increases drastically every year, and the MOE is very keen in implementing an inclusive education, there is a need for more short courses and special courses in the special educations field, specifically designed to cater for staff development of mainstream teachers. With this regard, IPTAs should take the opportunity to contribute in providing short courses to the public especially mainstream teachers.

References

- Abdullah Sanusi Ahmad, Mansor Fadzil. (2002), *Distance Learning Development in Malaysia*. Paper presented at a seminar on “Developing Higher Education for 21st Century : UK and Malaysian Perspectives” at The Shangri-La Hotel, on 4 April 2002.
- Ammer, J. (1984). The mechanics of mainstreaming: Considering the regular educators' perspective. *Remedial and Special Education*, 5 (6), 15-20.
- Bender, W. (2003). *Learning disabilities: Characteristics, identification, and teaching strategies*. Allyn & Bacon.
- Campbell, J., Gilmore, L., & Cuskelly, M. (2003). Changing student teachers' attitudes towards disability and inclusion. [*Journal of Intellectual & Developmental Disability*](#), 28(4), 369-379.
- Carroll, A. (2003). The impact of teacher training in special education on the attitudes of Australian preservice general educators towards people with disabilities. [*Teacher Education Quarterly*](#), 30(3), 65-79.
- Culatta, R.A., Tompkins, J.R., (1999). *Fundamentals of Special education: What every teacher needs to know*. Upper saddle River.
- DeSimone, J., & Parmar, R. (2006). Middle school mathematics teachers' beliefs about inclusion of students with learning disabilities. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice*, 21, 98-110.
- Gallagher, D.J. (Ed.). *Challenging orthodoxy in special education: On longstanding debates and philosophical divides*. In L. Florian (Ed.), *The Sage Handbook of special education* (pp. 515-527). London: Sage publications.
- Koay, T., Lim, L., Sim, W., & Elkins, J. (2006). Learning assistance and regular teachers' perceptions of inclusive education in Brunei Darussalam. *International Journal of Special Education*, 21(1), 119-130.
- Papadopoulou, D., Kokaridas, D., Papanikolaou, Z., & Patsiaouras, A. (2004). Attitudes of Greek physical education teachers toward inclusion of students with disabilities. *International Journal of Special Education*, 19(2), 104-11**
- Thomas, G., & Loxley, A. (2001). *Deconstructing special education and constructing inclusion*. Buckingham, England: Open University Press.
- Wilson, K., Loprete, S., & Slostad, F (2000). Classroom teachers' perceptions about inclusion and preservice teacher education. [*Teaching Education*](#), 11 (2), 147-158.