



Involvement of Mainstream Teachers in Inclusive Education: Are We Ready?

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ABSTRACT

The implementation of inclusive education is a challenging task because the teachers involved in inclusive education must equip themselves with field knowledge and pedagogical skills and, more importantly, they must have great passion for inclusive education. This research attempts to investigate the readiness of mainstream teachers who engaged in an inclusive education programme. Readiness was measured in three different aspects: (i) field knowledge, (ii) pedagogical skill, and (iii) attitude. A total of 128 mainstream teachers who were actively involved in inclusive education programmes in primary schools were invited to participate in this research. A questionnaire was constructed to measure the level of readiness among the participating teachers. The results revealed that although the readiness level in terms of pedagogical skill was high, the readiness for field knowledge and attitude were at medium level. Our findings suggest that more effort and pragmatic actions are required to facilitate mainstream teachers who teach in inclusive classes to enhance their field knowledge and strengthen their positive attitude towards inclusive education.

Keywords: Attitude, field knowledge, inclusive education, pedagogical skill, readiness

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INTRODUCTION

In the context of special needs, the Inclusive Education Programme (IEP) is a programme prepared for students who require special needs in learning where the students study together with normal students in classes taught by general teachers at mainstream schools (Madan & Sharma, 2013; Selamat, 1994). Historically, IEP for special-needs

students was started in 1987 by the Ministry of Education (MoE) in accordance with the National Educational Philosophy. However, many schools face various issues and challenges in implementing IEP as a whole.

Most mainstream teachers do not understand why it is ideal for special-needs students to receive education together with mainstream students (Ammer, 1984) as teachers for special-needs children were specially trained and even receive an extra allowance to teach. This assumption has become an excuse for separating learning of special-needs students from that of normal students in mainstream classrooms. The situation is made worse when mainstream teachers who do not understand the situation are burdened with the presence of special-needs students in their own classrooms (Newton, Hunter-Johnson, Gardiner-Farquharson, & Cambridge, 2014). In fact, mainstream teachers tend to have questions regarding why special needs teachers cannot teach their students. Another question that may arise in their minds may be why special-needs students should be sent to mainstream schools when they are special needs. Sometimes, parents of normal students also carry misconceptions that the presence of special-needs students in mainstream classrooms may interfere with the teaching and learning (T&L) process. Worse, some may perceive special-needs students as 'problematic' students.

The fact that mainstream teachers already have a target and Take-Off Value (TOV) for their students may further contribute to some problems since they may

be reluctant to accept special needs students as reports and special documentation may need to be prepared (Schultz, 1982), thus increasing their workload in school. In addition, the problem of achieving good examination results for special-needs students is questioned especially during grading of examination papers and giving marks according to the specific scheme. Sometimes, when special-needs students receive good marks in their examinations, the special-needs teachers are thought to have furnished some answers or have facilitated the students in the examination due to the misconception about the student's abilities. Moreover, the rights of special-needs students to be given extra time in examinations are denied as they are required to follow the examination rules set for all students.

Negative perceptions may arise from various quarters since special-needs students are seen as a group who cannot achieve success or excellence in their studies. Therefore, the success of IEP is not only dependent on the efforts, initiatives and motivations of the teachers who implement the programme, but also on the attitude, knowledge and skills mastered by the teachers to help special-needs students. To date, it is still unclear whether mainstream teachers have sufficient teaching skills, attitude and field knowledge to carry out this huge task. Therefore, this study was carried out to investigate the readiness level (teaching skills, attitude, and field knowledge) of mainstream teachers in teaching special-needs students in IEP.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Inclusive Education Programme (IEP)

The Inclusive Education Programme (IEP) is implemented in certain schools throughout the country to fulfil the needs of special-needs students and also based on the requests of parents who have special-needs children. The present policies that stress on the rights for formal education for special-needs students have been firmed up by the Compulsory Education and Education for All policies that have now become the basis for planning prediction in implementing Special Needs Education in Malaysia (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2004).

The Education Act 1996 prepared by the MoE underlined the ministry’s responsibility in providing education services for special-needs students. Individuals identified by registered medical practitioners as “having disability that can interfere with the learning process in a normal classroom” due to problems of eyesight, hearing and learning are categorised as students in need of special education.

Table 1 shows the formula for the education and status and the agencies involved of various categories of special-needs students (Ministry/Department) that provide educational programmes based on the specific categories.

Table 1
Categories of special-needs students and allocation for education programmes

| No | Categories of special-needs students | Status | Agency/Placement |
|----|---|---|--|
| 1 | Cognitive (Light): Learning problem | Special-needs students | MoE/Integration and Inclusive |
| 2 | Physical (Normal cognitive) | Non-special-needs students | MoE/Inclusive |
| 3 | Emotion and Behaviour (Light/Moderate) [Autism and Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)] | i Included in “problem” category if mental ability is below that of normal ii Non-special-needs students: If capable | MoE/Integration (learning problem) Inclusive (normal students) |
| 4 | Dyslexia (Light/Moderate) | i Included in the category of Learning Problem if mental ability is below the normal limit ii Non-special-needs students: if detected before diagnosis | MoE/Integration (learning problem) Inclusive (normal students) |

Besides Special Education Schools and integration programmes (Special Education classroom in mainstream schools), the Inclusive Education approach is among

several choices available for special-needs students in Malaysia. In the context of Special Education in Malaysia, the approach is still limited in implementation as it is

available in certain schools only. As shown in Table 1, there are only four categories of special-needs students who participate in IEP. IEP is a programme offered to students with special educational needs to learn with their normal friends in the same classroom and school, enjoying all the learning facilities in a normal situation regardless of status (MacKichan & Harkins, 2013). Based on "The Statement", Art 2 (UNESCO, 1994, p. ix), "regular schools with this inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discrimination, creating welcoming teaching-learning environments, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all...."

From the perspective of philosophy, education is a fundamental human right since it is the basic right of all humans in the world to learn. The handicapped, who also have the same level of interests, desires and ambitions as that of normal individuals, must be given equal opportunities as other individuals in order not to be left out of the national learning streams. After all, some of them have cognitive intelligence at the same level as that of normal individuals, with some even able to exceed the level of achievements of other normal students (Lipsky & Gartner, 1996). The objectives of IEP are as follows:

- i) To increase the awareness of normal students that special-needs students are also part of the community;
- ii) To provide opportunities to special-needs students to adapt to learning with their normal peers and to join prepared activities together;

- iii) To give similar knowledge and skills to special-needs students as given to normal students to increase their self-confidence; and
- iv) To avoid discrimination among students in education and/or facilities provided by the MoE.

The effectiveness of teaching and learning in the classroom is mostly dependent on the interaction styles between teacher and student, student and student as well as student and teaching materials. In order to fulfil the requirement of special-needs students in the classroom, mainstream teachers must make some adaptation in the aspects of teaching strategies and teaching materials (Denning & Moody, 2013).

METHODOLOGY

Research Sampling

The study was conducted among mainstream teachers in Ayer Hitam zone, Johor, Malaysia. Teachers who were involved in the study were those who taught special-needs students in IEP in primary school. The number of respondents was 128 teachers. The majority (84.4%) were females, with the remaining (15.6%) being males.

Research Instrument

The research instrument utilised was self-developed questionnaires that consisted of 35 items based on the study's objectives. The questionnaire applied a 5-point scale (1="Strongly Disagree", 2="Disagree", 3="Less Agree", 4="Agree")

and 5=“Strongly Agree”) to assist the respondents in choosing their options to the questions asked. The reliability coefficient for the questionnaire was good ($\alpha=0.96$).

RESULTS

The research findings are presented in three parts based on the studied aspects.

Readiness Level in Terms of Teaching Skills

There was medium-to-high readiness levels in terms of teaching skills for teaching specials-needs students (see Table 2).

Table 2
Readiness levels in teaching skills

| No | Item | Mean (M) | Standard Deviation (SD) | Readiness Level |
|------|--|----------|-------------------------|-----------------|
| 1 | I understand the teaching strategy for the Inclusive Education Programme (IEP). | 3.55 | 0.71 | Medium |
| 2 | I use an appropriate teaching strategy for the teaching and learning process for IEP. | 3.62 | 0.74 | Medium |
| 3 | I arrange the seating arrangement of students according to the classroom model practised in the IEP. | 3.64 | 0.73 | Medium |
| 4 | I use coloured cards and photographic materials during teaching and learning. | 3.68 | 0.74 | High |
| 5 | I conduct group activities based on students’ abilities. | 3.83 | 0.75 | High |
| 6 | I make sure assignments given to the students are on par with their abilities. | 3.92 | 0.74 | High |
| 7 | I prepare teaching materials that are suitable for the students’ ability level. | 3.97 | 0.72 | High |
| 8 | I always provide opportunities for low achieving students to interact with high achieving students. | 3.96 | 0.74 | High |
| 9 | I often give encouragement and support to special-needs students. | 3.99 | 0.74 | High |
| 10 | I believe that the social development of students may influence students’ academic performance. | 4.05 | 0.74 | High |
| Mean | | 3.82 | 0.60 | High |

Seven items regarding the readiness level of teaching skills investigated in the questionnaire achieved a “high” readiness level. The item with the highest readiness level (M=4.05, SD=0.74) was the 10th

item, which stated teachers’ belief that the students’ social development may influence their achievement in the academic field. The item that achieved the lowest mean score (M=3.55, SD=0.71) was teachers’

understanding of the teaching strategy for IEP. Overall, the mean readiness level of teaching skills was 3.82 (SD=0.60), which is rather high.

Readiness Level in Terms of Teachers' Attitude

The readiness level in terms of teachers' attitude was generally lower than that of teaching skills (see Table 3).

Table 3
Readiness level of teacher's attitude

| No | Item | Mean (M) | Standard Deviation (SD) | Readiness Level |
|----|--|----------|-------------------------|-----------------|
| 1 | I pay full attention in teaching during inclusive class. | 3.63 | 0.83 | Medium |
| 2 | I like to read materials related to special-needs students' development. | 3.39 | 0.82 | Medium |
| 3 | I am interested in attending courses related to teaching special-needs students. | 3.28 | 0.92 | Medium |
| 4 | I often search information related to learning problems among special-needs students available in the mass media. | 3.20 | 0.81 | Medium |
| 5 | I always discuss and share the idea of teaching methods with other special education teachers. | 3.42 | 0.89 | Medium |
| 6 | I do not feel depressed when dealing with special-needs students. | 3.48 | 0.88 | Medium |
| 7 | I am interested in inclusive education as more opportunities are given for further education and career development. | 3.41 | 0.81 | Medium |
| 8 | I am always ready to attend enhancement courses related to inclusive education. | 3.19 | 0.92 | Medium |
| 9 | I am caring and friendly when communicating with special-needs students. | 3.69 | 0.71 | Medium |
| 10 | I think that educating special-needs students is a new challenge for a teacher. | 3.57 | 0.85 | Medium |
| | Mean | 3.43 | 0.71 | Medium |

Mainstream teachers who are always caring and friendly when communicating with special-needs students tend to achieve the highest mean score of 3.69 (SD=0.71). Nevertheless, mainstream teachers who showed interested to attend training to

enhance their knowledge on Inclusive Education achieved the lowest mean score of 3.19 (SD=0.92). On the whole, all the mainstream teachers showed a medium readiness level (M=3.43, SD=0.71) in terms of attitude towards involvement in IEP.

Readiness Level in Terms of Field Knowledge

The readiness level in terms of field knowledge of mainstream teachers towards

involvement in IEP involvement ranged from low to medium (see Table 4).

Table 4
Readiness level in terms of field knowledge

| No | Item | Mean (M) | Standard Deviation (SD) | Readiness Level |
|-----------------|--|----------|-------------------------|-----------------|
| 1 | I attended the basic special education course. | 2.20 | 1.06 | Low |
| 2 | I understand the different types of learning problem faced by special-needs students. | 2.89 | 0.82 | Medium |
| 3 | I know the techniques to manage special-needs students in the classroom. | 2.92 | 0.77 | Medium |
| 4 | I know the characteristics of an autistic student. | 2.97 | 0.85 | Medium |
| 5 | I know the characteristics of a spastic student. | 2.94 | 0.86 | Medium |
| 6 | I know the characteristics of an intelligent student. | 3.24 | 0.87 | Medium |
| 7 | I know the characteristics of a dyslexic student. | 3.02 | 0.88 | Medium |
| 8 | I know the way to identify a special-needs student in an inclusive class. | 2.95 | 0.84 | Medium |
| 9 | I know the types of inclusive education implemented in school. | 2.98 | 0.86 | Medium |
| 10 | I know the strategies that should be practised for a successful inclusive education programme. | 2.97 | 0.86 | Medium |
| Average of Mean | | 2.95 | 0.82 | Medium |

Overall, the readiness level of mainstream teachers in field knowledge was the lowest ($M=2.95$, $SD=0.82$) compared to teaching skills and attitude. Specifically, the readiness level of mainstream teachers in identifying the characteristics of special-needs students who were categorised as “intelligent” showed the highest level ($M=3.24$, $SD=0.87$). Mainstream teachers who had attended basic training in Special Education yielded the lowest mean score of 2.20 ($SD=1.06$). On the whole, the mean readiness level of field knowledge for

mainstream teachers involved in IEP was medium ($M=2.95$, $SD=0.82$).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present findings showed that there was a high readiness level in terms of teaching skills among mainstream teachers who engaged in IEP. This finding was different from other findings obtained in other parts of the world. In South Africa, Hay, Smith and Pualsen (2001) found that teachers were not prepared to teach in inclusive classes due to lack of teaching experience, training and

facilities. Teaching skills is an important component in inclusive education. This is in line with the statement from the European Agency for Development in Special-Needs Education (2010, p. 7): “Underlying the process of inclusion is the assumption that the general classroom teacher has certain knowledge and understanding about the needs of different learners, teaching techniques and curriculum strategies.”

Apart from teaching skills, the present results indicated that the mainstream teachers had a medium readiness level in terms of attitude. This outcome was not in line with the findings from Subban and Sharma (2005) and Ahsan, Sharma and Deppeler (2012), who found that regular-education teachers had a positive attitude towards the idea of an inclusive programme and perceived the inclusive programme to be beneficial for all participants. The current findings revealed that mainstreams teachers did not show interest in understanding the needs of IEP generally and students with special needs specifically. This might affect the effectiveness of IEP implementation. According to Agbenyega (2007), the elements of concern as well as attitude are important to ensure high commitment among teachers in IEP implementation. The change in attitude and belief can be promoted by providing generic support as well as training services related to inclusive education.

In the aspect of field knowledge, the current findings indicated that mainstream

teachers had a relatively low level of readiness compared to teaching skills and attitude. This discovery contradicted the outcome of Bari, Mohd Yasin and Hamzah (2014), who noticed that the special-education trainees had shown a high level of knowledge for teaching in an inclusive programme. The teachers of inclusive programmes are required not only to master new knowledge but also to acquire knowledge continuously. Support from their school and the MoE in the form of training is one of the effective ways to equip teachers with knowledge (Alias, Harrington, Paimin, Sern, Foong, Mohamed, & Mohamed, 2016). Apart from this, it is even more important for teachers to engage in self-directed learning to gain more profound knowledge. This can be achieved through receiving relevant information from the mass media (Saad, Abd Hamid, & Ismail, 2014). As mentioned by Reynold (2009), teachers’ knowledge plays a pivotal role in creating an effective and conducive learning environment and in critically influencing the development of inclusive education.

Taken together, the readiness of teachers in IEP in terms of teaching skills, attitude and knowledge has to be improved in order to make sure that IEP is a successful and sustainable programme. As Biamba (2016) stated, a successful special education within a mainstream setting is largely dependent on teachers’ attitude, knowledge and skills, teaching technique and materials and of course, time.

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