

Challenges of Special Education in Rural Schools: Teachers Perspective

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Abstract

This research is set to understand the challenges faced by teachers teaching special education in rural schools. Special education and rural education are exclusive in their own challenges. Thus, this research aims to highlight the issues arising from the combination of special education and rural education based on the following research questions; What are the factors that contribute or impede the efficiency of special education in rural schools?, How do teachers overcome issues pertaining special education in rural schools?, How can special education in rural schools be developed to provide quality education for rural special needs children?. The Framework of Action Salamanca, 1994 is used as a basis of understanding the essentials of special education school. This research is conducted qualitatively using a narrative research design. Samples are selected purposively, whereby 3 special education teachers from a rural district in Johor with experience of more than 4 years are interviewed using semi structured interviews. The combination of narrative and semi structured interviews provides rich information of experience narrated in their own words and own settings. Data is analysed verbatim and triangulated using member checking and document analysis. Ethical issue is also upheld.

Keywords: Challenges, special education, rural education, teachers

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is a developing country with a population 28.9 million (Economic Planning Unit, 2012). The land mass consist of 330,803 square kilometers, which consist of urban and rural area in which 35% of the population remains in rural areas (PEMANDU, 2010). As the country strives to achieve a developed nation status by the year 2020, many parts of the country including rural areas are being developed to help accelerate the process.

Developments in rural areas are crucial because more than 7% of the rural population in Malaysia is living in poverty (Henry Ngun & Amir Hussain, 2011). Eradication of poverty is vital as it is seen as a stumbling block towards a nation progress. One of the strategies to eradicate poverty is through education (World Bank, 2013).

Realising the importance of education, government enacted the Education Act 1961 which states that all children from age 6 and above have to attend compulsory primary school. However, the act did not include children with special needs. The education act mentioned free education for children with special education needs (SEN) but it was not compulsory. It was only in 2003 that a revised act 29(A) mentioned that education for children with SEN is compulsory.

The revision of the education act proves to be a turning point in Malaysia education system because equal opportunity in education is given regardless of the child's capabilities. By educating children with SEN, they will be equipped with skills which will help them in terms of employment, thus making them independent (Mohd.Nordin Awang Mat, no date).

HISTORY OF SPECIAL EDUCATION IN MALAYSIA

Awareness of educating children with SEN in Malaysia emerged during colonial era. Prior to that, deformed children were abandoned in holy places, kept hidden at home or placed in orphanages (Noraini, 2000). In the 1920's school for the blind was established and later followed by schools for the deaf.

The development of special schools brought about reforms in the education act. Two decades after the Education Act 1961 was enacted, a Cabinet Committee report was published and it focused on delegating tasks to different part of ministries such as Social Welfare, Education and the Health ministry (Mohd.Nordin, 2010). The report also stated that children with cognitive disabilities (mental retardation) should also be given formal education.

Education Act 1996 which replaced Education Act 1961, placed special education under the umbrella of Ministry of Education and stipulated that the duration of children with SEN in primary or secondary schools can be extended depending on their needs but not lesser than normal children. This act was also influenced international stands on education for children with SEN such as UNESCO's International Declaration on Education for All (1990). Subsequently, many other acts have been enacted concerning special education.

The acts mentioned cover the entire population of children with SEN in Malaysia. Nevertheless, as stated by Nora Mislán (no date), although there are numerous effort to educate children with SEN, some of them are "left out due to geographical and socioeconomic factors". Geographical factors comprise areas such as rural or remote areas where education for children with SEN might not be prominent.

As an educator in a rural special education school, I have encountered numerous issues. For instance, despite having a well-equipped classroom, there is low enrolment rate due to three other schools placed within the vicinity. Besides that, there is lack of parental involvement due to the fact that some of them are illiterate and embarrassed to admit that they have children with SEN. Furthermore, when there are few students, the funds allocated are based on the number of students thus making it difficult to carry out activities. Hence, it is my concern in this research to identify the challenges conducting special education rural school so that the issues highlighted can be rectified.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The objective of this research is to identify the challenges of implementing special education in rural schools based on teachers' viewpoint. Based on the teachers' experience, methods of rectifying the challenges will be identified and further guidelines will be formulated to improve teachers' effectiveness of teaching special education in rural schools.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research will seek to answer the following question; What are the challenges faced by special education teachers in rural school that impede the efficiency of special education?, How do teachers overcome the issue?, How can special education in rural schools be developed to provide quality education for rural special needs children?.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Quality Special Education

The Salamanca Framework of Action 1994 is used as a guideline to identify the criteria of a quality special education in Malaysia. Basically, this framework identifies seven important guidelines for conducting special education at national level.

- Policy and organisation
- School factor
- Information and research
- Recruitment of education personal
- External services
- Priority area

Firstly, policies implemented in Malaysia regarding education for children with SEN are based on the concept of total rehabilitation whereby vocational, social and medical aspects are included as part of the rehabilitation process to ensure the potential of children with SEN are optimised throughout their schooling years (Mohamad Nor, no date).

Next, school factor such as curriculum flexibility, technology and management also plays an important role in ensuring the quality of special education. The 1997 Rules of Education (Special Education) regarding curriculum flexibility mentions that teachers are allowed to modify the existing method or technique of teaching and learning, stipulated time or arrangement of activities, subjects and teaching aids to accomplish the objective and aim of Special Education (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2003). ICT is also incalculated in special education by providing blind schools with screen reader and emboss devices, training teachers on how to use these devices, providing teachers with ICT methods during training and setting up websites for to overcome the lack of resources in special education (MOE,2010). Malaysian school teachers also agree that administrators involvement is vital for the improvement of special education schools and implementation of special education policy (Manisah, Ramlee & Zalizan, 2006).

Conducting action research has been part and parcel of Malaysian pre service and in service teaching. Sadly, studies show that Malaysian teachers have not grasp the concept of action research and the importance of conducting researches due to "uneven or limited distribution of information, differing value systems, negative attitude of teachers and administrators, lack of awareness and understanding, lack of autonomy, heavy workload and exam-oriented teaching" (Subahan, Abdul Rashid and Jamil, 2001).

Recruitment of special education teachers are done by Bahagian Pendidikan Guru. These teachers are trained in teachers training college or universities for a specified number of years and later posted to selected schools.

There are also many substantial NGO'S who are providing resources and funds which are direly needed by special education. Among the active NGO'S identified are Malaysian Federation of the Deaf, Malaysian Association of Blind, National Autistic Society of Malaysia, The Dyslexia Association of Malaysia, corporate bodies such as Royal Rotary Club, National University of Malaysia, Tenaga National Foundation and many more (Mohamad Nor, no date). Besides that, Malaysia also collaborates with international bodies such as Japan International Cooperation Agency to transfer knowledge skills and expertise from Japan to Malaysian counterparts (Mohamad.Nor, no date).

Challenges of Special Education in Rural Schools

The combination special education and rural education may seem like a double jeopardy. According to Review of Educational Report (1933), rural special schools face problems which are different from urban schools. In this report, it is mentioned that rural schools have less handicapped students thus making it difficult to form a class. Besides that, medical care is also lacking in availability.

Besides that, teachers have to teach various disability and varying age in one go. At the same time, these children live far away from school making it difficult for them to attend school or to be given medical care from various agencies (Mills, Vadassy and Fewell, 1987).

Parents from rural areas also have to make do with the available resources unless they are willing to send off their children which most are inclined to do so (Dunne, 1977). A possible explanation to this stems from the fact that many families in rural areas live with below average income. Hence, financial constraint may hinder them from providing the best facilities available at urban places for their child.

There is also an acute shortage of teachers and early interventionist in rural special schools (Rosenkoetter, Irwin, & Saceda, 2004). Their findings also indicate that teacher attrition is caused by “work environment factors such as low salaries, poor climate and lack of administrative support”. What is more disheartening is, the shortage problem has serious and far-reaching implications for students with disabilities. The consequences of the shortage include inadequate educational experiences for students, reduced student achievement levels, and insufficient competence of graduates in the workplace (Cooper & Alvarado, 2006).

In contrast to earlier findings, rural schools are not solely at a disadvantage. Smaller classrooms means, teaching and learning are more individualized (Dunne, 1977). Teachers are able to form a closer relationship with students and focus on their needs which is impossible to do in bigger classrooms. Teachers are also able to form good rapport with parents and have community support (Bouck, 2004).

CONCLUSION

Education of children with SEN in rural schools should not be taken lightly. By rectifying the challenges faced, the quality of special education in rural schools can be enhanced. In other words, these children are given equal rights to a quality education that will allow them to maximise their potential and contribute productively to the society.

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