

Challenges, Strategies and Success Gained By a Teacher in Teaching Autism Students in a Private Centre

R.SUDHA NAIR

Abstract: The Education (Special Education) Regulations 2013 stated to include children with speech disabilities, physical disabilities and multiple disabilities, compared to those with only visual, hearing, and learning disabilities previously in the inclusive education programmes. This led to an increase of 58,253 special needs students enrolled in Malaysian schools in 2014, compared to 7,797 previously. Even though there is a lot of dissatisfaction among parents, the special education teachers have a higher rate of burnout than is found in most other professions. The burnout rate is the result of a number of issues that often culminate in these teachers leaving their jobs. It is estimated that 75 percent of those who teach special needs students will leave their job within 10 years of starting. This paper presents a findings of a teacher who is in a private educational setting in Melaka, Malaysia and the challenges, strategies and successes she obtained while them. It is to identify the teaching approaches applied by the teacher during the process of teaching pupils with Autism. The research is based on triangular qualitative research with document analysis, observation and interview. It discusses the challenges, strategies and success the teacher gained in the process of teaching and learning. This study has demonstrated impressive results in which one realizes that there are teachers' who are trying to reach out and attract the attention of students with certain teaching methods.

Keywords: autism, challenges, strategies, success, teaching and learning.

1. INTRODUCTION

The way that children are schooled is an important way of knowing that they are perceived and treated in a given society. Many kinds of risks – social, political, economic, and even religious – are literally entwined to create a favourable climate that respects the rights of all individuals in a certain society. Hence, the changing nature of the social climate and the treatment of, attitudes toward, and schooling provided for exceptional individuals is the story on how the development of special education arises [1].

SPECIAL needs education in Malaysia still has a long way to go if it is to prepare young people afflicted with various disabilities for life beyond school. Parents with special needs children have pointed out that one of the shifts in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 stipulates that equal access to quality education of an international standard must be available to all. Yet many remain sceptical [2]. The Blueprint acknowledges that, although this group has access to different schooling options, the quality of education for them is not without its short comings [2].

In Malaysia, the shortage of qualified teachers, speech and occupational therapists is but one. The limited support and funding for those with autism, dyslexia and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder are among the others. In line with current education policies, special needs students can enroll in special education schools for students with different disabilities. They also have the choice of enrolling in a special education integrated programmes in which there are dedicated classes for such students, or in inclusive education programmes where they are integrated into mainstream classes.

The purpose of the present paper is to explore the individual difference and special educational needs base on a particular disability of learner(s) by conducting an interview with a practitioner in her/his field. It further investigates how the practitioner applies his/her knowledge and skills in the teaching and learning process in a private school for special needs students. The chosen practitioner has experience in teaching autism students', therefore this paper will see the sights of students with autism.

2. BACKGROUND STUDY

2.1 Autism:

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a term that covers the many subgroups within the spectrum of autism. Autism can be termed as a lifelong complex developmental disorder, characterised by a triad of qualitative impairments in social communication, social interaction and social imagination [3]. The basic observation of the spectrum is such that while some people with ASD may be able to live relatively independently, others will require lifelong continuous support.

The most compelling factor driving identification of individuals on the autism spectrum as early as possible was the creation of a highly effective intervention strategy based on principles of applied behavior analysis [4] that made it possible to significantly improve life outcomes for most young children with autism spectrum disorders.

Marie Montessori, who had studied Edouard Seguin's 'physiological method' for teaching young children with developmental disabilities [5], developed the Orthophrenic School for training teachers in educating children with intellectual disabilities. Seguin had argued that children with disabilities lacked skills because of sensory and motor weaknesses that could be strengthened with repeated practice of prescribed activities. She experimented with allowing children free choice of the materials, uninterrupted work and freedom of movement and activity within the limits set by the environment [6]. Montessori's approach became identical with early educational intervention for children with disabilities throughout the world.

In Malaysia, there is no official registry for the number of children with autism [7]. This is partly because autism is categorized under learning disabilities along with other cognitive and developmental disabilities [8]. It is estimated that one out of every 600 children in Malaysia is born with autism [8]. Recent statistics show that some 47,000 of the people in this country are autistic. Of the figure, it is estimated that four out of every 10,000 suffer from severe autism [9]. The children listed for inclusion sat for a series of tests given by the mainstream school and were placed in inclusive classroom if they passed. In 2007, a new set of criteria was introduced, ASD (Autistic Spectrum Disorder) children were given an opportunity to gain knowledge and experience in the mainstream setting. Even so, many parents believed that their children would get better emphasize in education rather than giving importance to social skills education in segregated special need centres.

In Malaysia, due to the long waiting list in the public centres, it is more common for parents to seek treatment from NASOM or privately-owned entities. For example, 'Early Autism Project Malaysia Sdn Bhd' is a private company, which offers both home- and centre-based Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) therapy [10]. The same therapy is also offered by 'Autism Link Sdn Bhd' through classroom and group programmes for children aged 3-6 years [10]. Parents would need to pay a certain amount of fees for treatments at these centres.

2.2 Common characteristics:

According to [11] common characteristics that can be identified among autism children are:

- Strong visual spatial thinking skills and exceptional awareness of visual details.
- Unusual ability to maintain attention or focus during distractions
- Good memory for a set of unrelated facts
- Difficult planning and organizing a future course of action
- Abnormal posture and movement
- Strong need for a consistent, predictable environment

These characteristics require a skilled teacher to modify the classroom environment and instructional strategies to support children with autism. According to [12], when working with young children with autism, some general principles should be applied. Each child with autism is different, but they generally share some of the same learning characteristics such as:

- children with autism tend to be visual learners;
- materials need to be clearly organised for children with autism; and
- Children with autism learn best when sensory stimuli are kept to a minimum.

According to [12], these principles should be utilised for children with autism, and also benefit all young children.

3. METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative case study conducted using purposeful sample and triangulation through interview, observation and document analysis. An Interview Consent Letter has been signed by both the researcher and the respondent to give validity to the research. The interview conducted, has been verified by getting signature from the participant after transcribing.

The place:

The place is a Salvation Army Centre for Special Children which has grown over a period of time and the focus is on young people with learning disabilities.

The participant:

In order to answer the research questions, the researcher has chosen her friend Miss M (Pseudonym) to be interviewed. The researcher has known the teacher for 4 years. Miss M has been involved with special need students for nine years. She has been attached to the above centre for Special Need Children for 3 years now. Miss M has a Diploma in Fine Arts and a Certificate in Care-Givers.

The students:

Miss M teaches 3 students with autism aged 7, 10 and 11.

4. FINDINGS

Autistic children are described as being "locked in their own world" and struggle to communicate with others. They usually have heightened or lowered acuity of the senses and can display repetitive behaviour. Those affected often have other learning difficulties, such as dyspraxia, or may exhibit compulsive behaviour [13]. Therefore, teaching and learning becomes a challenge and a teacher need to take certain actions/strategies in order to solve the arise problems.

4.1 Delays to process verbal or written language/Giving sufficient time:

One of the challenges faced by Miss M is the delays in the ability to process verbal or written language which have a neurological basis. For those individuals who suffer delays, facts, ideas, and questions are often delayed or even lost in translation from language to thought and vice-versa. In a classroom, where children are expected to shoot up their hands in response to questions, processing delays can present a seemingly impossible barrier with both learning and social consequences [1]. Children with autism often experience delays in understanding verbal language and identifying and attending to information in the environment [14]. Miss M admitted that the strategy that is often used is to give the student the time needed to process a fact or a question, before expecting a response. Some students can be taught various methods to buy needed time, including restating of the question, asking for a few seconds, or simply putting up a finger to signify they are thinking and this can encourage an answer from them.

4.2 Weakness in verbal/Embedded teaching or activity-based approaches :

As the conversation flowed, it was not surprising that Miss M was talking about embedded teaching. Even though it is encouraged in inclusive settings but yet teachers can alter the activity based on the developmental level of the child, creating a better learning environment for the student.

[15] compared an activity-based approach with a direct-instruction approach to teach children how to label objects. Results showed that children labelled more objects during the activity-based approach than during the direct-instruction approach. Embedded teaching also has been used to teach target skills to children during transitions between activities [16].

Miss M has two groups of students, one who is quite smart and two who are slow-learners. The smart student, she gives him/her pictures so that he/she narrates stories, while the slow-learners she presents them with flashcards and word or to connect picture to picture or picture to word activities. Scaffolding is of course important so that students can perform well. Hence, Miss M assist the students by helping with grammar and vocabulary in making proper sentences. Using objects such as ball, comb, chair or table also enhance the learning process. She also place some items in the classroom so that the student is familiar with them. This strategy proves successful as Miss M feels that the students respond well. She feels the students find it as a fun activity because they can identify objects and words and connect more words from them.

4.3 Discomfort/Quiet Room:

During the interview with Miss M , she disclosed the fact that autism students are most of the time uneasy with their surroundings. At times they do feel that they need a quiet place or corner for them to relax. The centre has prepared a quiet room for them. The room has a dim light, it makes the children feel calm and relax. Once they feel at ease, the child will join the rest of the students.

4.4 Hold Attention/Using of visual aids and Rein forcements:

During the researcher's observation in the classroom, the researcher noticed the teacher using many visuals to aid the students. Miss M said that this is one method of getting students attention which is the usage of aids which help in getting the learners attention as the students also partake in the teaching and learning activity. She was holding pictures with words and asking out loud to students what they were. She then wrote the word on the board as well. She even elaborated an object on the picture with hand gestures. I watched the interaction among the students with their teacher. Miss M has the skills needed to do her job effectively because she has been trained to use procedures that have a substantial impact on these children. When she approached them with questions, they answered her! Miss M praises immediately once she gets a respond from her students. Miss M feels that using aids helps in gaining the students attention towards learning.

She uses the same reinforcement when she faces students being rather inattentive. She admitted that at times it is difficult to capture their attention and it can be rather tiresome. Many children with autism can appear demotivated during learning tasks [17]. The things that motivate most typically developing children (i.e. receiving praise from their parents and teachers, imitating peers and successfully completing a task given to them) do not always impact on the behaviour of a child with autism. Some of the problems faced were they would look away , throw away the cards or refuse to participate. Miss M disclosed that in order to gain their interest she rewards them by promising them to do activities that they find interesting for instance reading picture story books, doing puzzles and building blocks. These strategies help in making them perform the given task. The researcher than explained to Miss M the principle behind the reward system that she uses is known as the Premack Principle. The Premack Principle [18] promises access to a highly motivating activity contingent on an assigned task: 'If you do your maths work, then you can play with blocks'.

4.5 Social Skill Deficits/Group Participation:

Social skill deficits can develop a student with autism, the odd child out. Lack of training and sufficient mindfulness, can create well-meaning teachers slipping indirectly into intimidating and at times even develop bullying behaviour with the child who is always lagging behind and just odd. The schoolroom is the perfect setting to acquire and practice social skills. The conscientious teacher can do much to help promote this and encourage the tolerance and involvement of other students to help the child become socially fluid both in terms of emoting their own feeling and state of being as well with interpreting the meaning and feeling implied in the expressions, words, and actions of others.

This was what was disclosed to the researcher about the students by Miss M. She felt the students' performance in academic is not the biggest challenge faced but their behaviour! They like to hit, spit, too many negative behaviours, were her comments! Autism students' weakness is they lack in social skills whereby they actually do not mix or work in groups. They prefer to be alone and even do not like to be touched.

Miss M admits that she performs more activities so that the students' communicate with each other. The approach does give some positive results where the students' need to accept the activities performed as a group. She encourages them to play games together, play ball, swing, see-saw, hold each others' hand when they return back to the classroom. She feels there is change in this approach as the students make it become a routine and actually do mix around.

4.6 Motor skill challenges/Reinforcements:

Motor skill challenges can present as an inability to mastering handwriting. Forcing a child to do endless handwriting practice is not recommendable, yet this is the most common approach that is taken for children with poor handwriting. What typically occurs with forced such solo practices is that the child's bad habits are reinforced. With some children, handwriting issues are best addressed by a trained occupational or behavioral therapist rather than parents or untrained teachers.

[19] Compared the performance of children with different disabilities on the Bruininks-Oseretsky Test of Motor Proficiency-Short Form. Participants included 49 children with ASD, 46 children with developmental coordination disorder (DCD) and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), 38 children with DCD, 27 children with ADHD, and 78 children with typical development. The results indicated that although all the typical groups displayed significant impairment of motor skills, children with ASD were significantly more impaired compared with their cohorts with specific motor skill deficits.

No doubt, Miss M totally agrees that the bad handwriting had at times made her in great annoyance. She has to keep reminding her students' to write tidily, write above the line, to leave spacing and at times the rewarding system comes to her aid! She encourages good handwriting by promising them to do activities that they like such as playing blocks or doing puzzle.

4.7 Problems expressing emotions and feelings/ Consistent encouragement:

Miss M has identified that autism students had always problems in expressing themselves. Numerous times when they want to express something, they fail and finally feel distressing. She never gives up on them and constant encouragement had proved fruitful when communicating with autism students.

Speech and language ability can still present a number of hindrance to those children who has the intellectual capacity to function in the normal class, therefore it is not surprising that the same occurs in segregated classes. They may have problems expressing their own emotions and feelings as well perceiving and knowing how to respond to those of others. This can be as extreme as lacking the ability to recognize faces and differentiate between different people, or as subtle as lacking the ability to appreciate and make use of a certain tone of voice when communicating.

It has been indicated that language deficits result because children are not tuned into the words aimed at them and thus do not form relationships between verbal input and the context [20].

Miss M feels that overtime with the right and consistent encouragement, they can be taught to moderate their speech and speak in ways that don't make them stick out from their peers.

5. IMPLICATION

Through this research, the researcher had come to appreciate all the preceding educational approaches that had been taken in educating autistic students. The researcher realized that the difficulty that most children with autism have an imitation is related to executive dysfunction. Imitation skills that involve sequences of movements and symbolic movements (such as pantomime) are often impacted. This has great implication for the child's ability to learn about others' intentions and mental states, speech, language, and social skills. It also has implications for the child's ability to learn complex fine motor skills such as writing. However, despite the imitation impairment in children with autism, these children are often able to learn to engage in imitation in highly structured contexts. People working with children with ASD need to be passionate and motivated to work in challenging conditions. Teachers need to know their students' need and adapt. Training of teachers takes time and dedicated teachers are very much in demand.

Communication and imaginative play are areas of challenge for children with autism. Many never develop a functional verbal communication system. Learning to understand language, particularly language that is non-literal (as in humour, puns), is difficult. Some children with autism develop early and extensive rote language systems. This can manifest as

learning the alphabet before being able to say ten words or learning clips from videotapes that are recited in communicative or non-communicative contexts. Children with autism who are verbal may have great difficulty getting the 'gist' of a story or conversation. Teachers, practitioners and therapists who deal with autistic children should have patience and dedication as it is not easy to involve them in the teaching and learning process.

6. CONCLUSION

The autism journey over the 60 years, only recently received widespread recognition as the number of children diagnosed with ASD has sharply increased. In the beginning, the etiology and treatment of autism was a mystery even to professionals in the area. Children with autism in the 1950s and 1960s who received formal education worked with teachers who relied on their intuition to serve them. As educational service slowly evolved in the 1970s and 1980s, states began to create programs and classroom specific to students with ASD. A neglected area for research has been transition for adolescence to adulthood for individuals with autism spectrum disorders with varying degrees of disability[21]. However, since 1990, individuals, families, and professionals have benefitted from increased awareness and funding, however, the prevalence has increased at such a rate that many educational agencies are searching for methods of expanding appropriate service. Major advances in understanding the facets of autism and the focus of research provide hope for the future. As a result of the rapid growth spectrum disorders in schools, education, researchers, and parents have expended a great deal of efforts on determining the underlying causes of these disorders as well as appropriate educational interventions. An active support system is crucial and a crisis management team would be helpful in addressing arising issues. A sufficient funding is necessary to start the program and the maintenance could be carried out with collaboration between NGO's and the government. Even though there is a small fund from the government to private centres run by NGO's yet many of the teachers are untrained! A comprehensive preparatory process would be able to introduce and expose new environment and process to better prepare parties concern.

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