

Early Childhood Education of Children with Special Needs in Malaysia: A Focus on Current Issues, Challenges, and Solutions

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Abstract

This study aims to examine issues, challenges, and solutions concerning the current practices of teachers and operators of early childhood education teachers and operators of both public and private sectors in Malaysia. This research was based on a qualitative method involving a series of interviews, which were carried out at the Department of National Unity and Integration (Jabatan Perpaduan Negara dan Integrasi Nasional, JPNIN), the Department of Social Welfare (Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat, JKM), the Community Development Department (Jabatan Kemajuan Masyarakat, KEMAS), and several public and private preschools (for children aged 5-6 years) and childcare centers (for children aged 1 – 4 years).

The sample of the study consisted of xxx practitioners, namely teachers, supervisors, operators, trainees, and officers, who were selected from several TASKA and TADIKA centers in Malaysia. In this study, Malaysia's provisional Early Childhood Career Educator (ECCE) National Quality Framework (NQF) was analyzed, which helped highlight four critical standards relating to leadership, organization and management, children's experiences, and learning opportunities, which have become a major concern among practitioners. Through the interviews, the researchers were able to record and interpret ECCE teachers' perceptions of the need for a policy that emphasizes their professional and career development. As revealed in this study, practitioners had to face a host of challenges and issues relating to leadership, organization and management, children's experiences, and learning opportunities, which could adversely affect their current practices. In tandem, several solutions were identified to help them overcome such problems. In summation, the findings suggest that teaching children with special learning needs can be extremely challenging that entails all concerned to take appropriate measures, with each party having to focus on its role to help provide equal access to education to all children. Surely, through concerted efforts, special needs education in Malaysia can be further improved to help children with learning disabilities to learn as efficacious as their mainstream counterparts.

Keywords: children with special needs, childcare centers, early childhood education, preschools, service providers

1. Introduction

The main aim of early childhood education (ECE) of Malaysia is to develop and nurture children's potentials in all aspects of their development, especially in acquiring basic skills and fostering positive attitudes toward learning. Also, it aims to help pupils to develop good personal characters and strong self-concept that help them to observe and practice virtuous values in lives and to become patriotic citizens (Anderson & Krathwohl 2001; Shin, Lee, & McKenna 2016). In Malaysia, public ECE service providers are the TASKA (childcare centers for children whose ages range from birth to four years) and the TADIKA (centers for the care and education of children whose ages range from four to six years). As such, it is important that such institutions be given support and assistance to help achieve the main aim of ECE in Malaysia. For example, such centers that provide care and education to children with

special needs need to have quality teachers who can help such children to attain holistic development encompassing cognitive, social, and emotional aspects. Premised in this context, this study was carried out to examine issues, challenges, and solutions for special needs education, which concerns both teachers and providers in Malaysia.

1.1 Problem Statement

Increasing awareness of the rights of children with disabilities to have the same access to educational services as that of normal children has led to the idea of inclusive education (UNESCO International Bureau of Education, 2009). However, in Malaysia, the understanding of such a noble concept and the responsibility demanded thereof has remained large low (Bailey, Nomanbhoy, & Tubpun 2015). To make matters worse, parents of such children generally do not have a good understanding and knowledge to effectively address their children's special needs and to deal with issues affecting their children's learning, which more are challenging than those affecting normal children in the mainstream school. In this study, the researchers examined prevailing issues, problems, and challenges that parents and educators had to face and recommended several solutions thereof. In this regard, a sound career pathway framework for early childhood educators is needed to guide the development of quality, competent teachers, who, in turn, can help foster the holistic development of children with special needs. Such a framework must also highlight available opportunities for the career advancement of teachers. Hence, such a framework development needs to be aligned with established standards that relate to the objectives of early childhood education. Currently, no such standards exist in Malaysia, given the lack of coordination between various ECE service providers. Therefore, the main focus of this study was primarily concerned with issues and challenges affecting the current practice and finding a solution for the development of a career path development framework for ECE educators.

1.2 Objectives

Admittedly, the growing global emphasis for inclusive education for all students has made significant impacts on the educational policies of many countries, including Malaysia. For example, education for Malaysian students with learning disabilities or those requiring special needs have undergone significant transformations, which are in line with recommendations and emphasis laid down by the United Nations' World Program of Action Concerning Disabled Persons and the World's Declaration on Education for All (Jelas 2000). Against this backdrop, this study was conducted to examine issues and challenges affecting both public and private providers of early childhood services and to propose solutions that could help mitigate prevailing problems in running such an enterprise.

2. Research Background

Special needs children are defined as children with developmental disabilities, mental retardation, emotional disturbance, sensory or motor impairment, or significant chronic illness who require special health surveillance or specialized programs, interventions, technologies, or facilities. In recent years, many nations have set up special schools with highly trained teachers to help teach such students. Alternatively, some mainstream schools have been equipped with special classes in which teachers with specialized training teach students with special needs. Surely, ECCE service providers play an important role in the holistic development of students with learning disabilities. In this regard, such development entails quality education that relies on highly-skilled, competent teachers. A case in point, many leading nations, such as the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, and Singapore, have carried out professional development programs to help special education teachers to enhance their professionalism. In addition, the quality of centers that provide special education is critical to ensuring such children will be given the care and education that they deserve (Jelas, 2000).

As such, in Malaysia, childcare and early childhood education centers, namely TASKA and TADIKA, are compelled to follow all procedures prescribed by the Malaysian government. For example, caretakers of such centers have to attend the KAAK course that focuses on the Child Act 2001 and Act 611, which were established in line with the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, of which Malaysia was one of the signatories. According to Nair, Hanafi, and Yassin (2017), preschool teachers with higher educational qualifications tend to have a positive perception of their career path than those with lower academic qualifications. Therefore, it is important that public and private teacher training colleges and education universities in Malaysia train preschool teachers at the bachelor's degree level and higher that help them acquire new knowledge and pedagogical skills in teaching children, especially students with special needs. To date, a majority of Malaysian students with learning disabilities have enrolled in the Special Education Integration Program to help them learn under a more conducive learning environment (Malaysia Educational Statistic, 2013).

Recent studies of ECCE in Malaysia by Foong and Veloo (2018) showed that most of the teachers of the private sector were young, under qualified, inexperienced, and underpaid, which certainly can harm their teaching practice.

Arguably, such teachers might be aware of the need to improve their knowledge and skills, which could only be realized if they were given opportunities to do so. Such findings underscore the need to improve the level of professionalism of such teachers, especially those of the private sector. In the public sector, such a problem is almost absent as most of the special education teachers have undergone pre-service training in several specialized areas, with many having earned diplomas in early childhood education (which have been accredited by Malaysian Accreditation Agency, MQA). Unlike their counterparts who work in publicly run centers and schools, private teachers have to work under unfavorable conditions. Further compounding the problem, most private teachers have no formal academic qualifications in early childhood education and special education. To date, it is estimated that more than 30,000 of these teachers are working without proper qualifications throughout Malaysia, signifying the urgent need to help such teachers to acquire the necessary qualifications.

3. Methodology

This study was conducted based on a qualitative method involving a series of interviews to elicit practitioners' thoughts and feelings about the current practice. Such an approach is deemed more effective than observations ((Patton 2005) as it can help researchers gather specific kinds of information and explore participants' thoughts more fully (Creswell & Miller, 2000). However, unlike surveys, interviews entail the presence of the researcher that makes the data collection process time consuming and, therefore, more costly. Through the interviews, the researchers were able to record and interpret ECCE teachers' perceptions of the need for a policy that emphasizes their professional and career development. The sample of the study consisted of xxx practitioners, namely teachers, supervisors, operators, trainees, and officers, who were selected from TASKA and TADIKA centers in Malaysia.

The interviews were conducted by three experts from Sultan Idris Education University and the Institute of Teacher Education. All the interview feedback was transcribed, coded and categorized using the thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006). After the analysis was completed, relevant audio tapes of the interviews were disposed of to protect the confidentiality of the interviewees. Two experts from the Department of Social Welfare were recruited to validate the interview process, which is vital in the data collection phase of qualitative studies based on interviews (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane 2006). Also, eight academicians who were experts in qualitative research were recruited to analyze the same set of data to highlight relevant themes, a process that is known as peer debriefing.

4. Data Analysis

4.1 Perceptions of Teachers, Trainees, Officers, Supervisors, and Operators of the Standards and Components of Special Needs Education

The following tables summarize the findings of the analysis of data collected through the interviews that highlight perceptions of teachers, supervisors, operators, trainees, and officers concerning the standards of special needs education.

4.1.1 Perceptions of Teachers and Trainees

Table 1 summarizes the teachers' and trainees' perceptions regarding the standards and components of special needs education.

Table 1. Teachers' and trainees' perceptions regarding the standards and components of special needs education

Standards	Components in special needs education
<i>Policy, legislation, and regulation</i>	Curriculum design: <i>Issues:</i> The proper practice of special education curriculum for children with learning problems was lacking.
<i>Involvement of parents, family, and community</i>	Parental involvement <i>Issues:</i> Some parents did not acknowledge that their children are those that are categorized as children with special needs.
<i>Leadership, organization, and management</i>	Managing staff: <i>Issues:</i> The management sometimes had to seek help from other centers, such as special education kindergartens, when the needed assistance was not available. Handling children with autism in the classroom: <i>Issues:</i> There was no specific teaching method that they could use to teach children with autism.
<i>Children's experience and learning opportunities</i>	Special needs children <i>Issues:</i> Teachers should identify activities that are suitable for children with specific needs.

4.1.2 Perceptions of Officers and Supervisors

Table 2.0 summarizes the officers’ and supervisors’ perceptions regarding the standards and components of special needs education.

Table 2. Officers’ and supervisors’ perceptions regarding the standards and components of special needs education

Standards	Components in special needs education
<i>Policy, legislation and regulation</i>	Job Scope <i>Issues:</i> The difficulty of meeting teachers’ needs is due to the small number of students. The Practice <i>Issues:</i> Parents have to know how to determine if their children require special learning needs.
<i>Involvement of parents, family, and community</i>	Knowledge of special needs children <i>Issues:</i> Some parents refused to send their children to schools that cater to special needs education.
<i>Leadership, organization, and management</i>	Managing Staff <i>Issues:</i> Most teachers did not have the expertise to identify children with special needs. Handling children with autism in the classroom <i>Issues:</i> The process of managing teachers to teach children with special needs was time-consuming.
<i>Children’s experience and learning opportunities</i>	The management of the practice of special needs education <i>Issues:</i> The management of PERMATA concerning the practice of special needs education was lacking.

4.1.3 Perceptions of Operators

Table 3.0 summarizes the operators’ perceptions regarding the standards and components of special needs education.

Table 3. Operators’ perceptions regarding the standards and components of special needs education

Standards	Components in special needs education
<i>Policy, legislation, and regulation</i>	Exposure to children with special needs <i>Issues:</i> Employers need to exercise greater caution and care in dealing with parents who seemed reluctant to acknowledge their children’s shortcomings.
<i>Involvement of parents, family, and community</i>	Knowledge of children’s special needs <i>Issues:</i> Parents seldom got involved in students’ activities, citing that they were too busy with their works.
<i>Leadership, organization, and management</i>	The management of children with special needs <i>Issues:</i> Discussions with their staff regarding suitable approaches to manage children with special needs were lacking. <i>Issues:</i> Parents were not involved in any discussions regarding the appropriate placement of their children.
<i>Children’s experience and learning opportunities</i>	Learning opportunities for children with special needs <i>Issues:</i> Opportunities for teachers to attend training courses on children with special learning needs were hardly available.

As shown, the current practice of early childhood care and education have many issues relating to policy, legislation and regulation, involvements of parents, family, and community, leadership, organization, management, children’s experiences, and learning opportunities that need to be addressed.

4.1.4 Qualitative-Thematic Code Analysis of Special Needs, Children’s Experiences, and Learning Opportunities

The researchers also carried out the qualitative-thematic code analysis, which helped reveal how the current practice of early childhood care and education, especially concerning children’s special needs, children’s experiences, and learning opportunities, could be improved based on the perspectives of operators and teachers.

The following is the interview transcript involving one of the operators that highlight the role played by the management of TASKA or TADIKa in motivating and encouraging their staff to improve their profession.

"We always motivate our staff, no matter what. Actually, we want to let them know that they need to move forward. If I can do it, anyone can do the same thing. I told them that if they are really good and committed to their job, they can certainly improve their performance and advance their career to a better height." (Respondent: Operator1)

The following interview transcript gathered from one of the teachers signifies the need to provide opportunities for teachers to attend courses that can broaden their career paths.

"As I said earlier, career benefits don't have to be in terms of money, rewards, or vacation packages or something like that. More importantly, relevant courses are needed to help teachers improve their profession ... say, enabling someone to open his or her own school? For us, that, by itself, is highly rewarding " (Respondent: Teacher 2)

The following is the interview transcript involving one of the operators that indicate opportunities that are available for teachers to advance their careers in such a teaching profession.

"If they (teachers) are ok, we'll give them a chance to supervise one of our premises" (Respondent: Operator 3)

5. Discussions

5.1 Special Needs Education Practiced in TASKA and TADIKA

The above findings show there are many issues confronting teachers, supervisors, operators (owners), and officers in handling and catering to the needs of students enrolled in special needs education in various TASKA and TADIKA. As revealed, such issues relate to four standards of the ECCE NQF (see Table 1, Table 2, and Table 3) that emphasize the responsibility of employers (operators) to provide support and guidance to help their employees (teachers) to advance the careers. In addition, the findings highlight the importance of the former to assist the latter to acquire leadership and organizational skills, which are essential in helping them to deal with the special learning needs of children. Surely, these teachers have to be made aware of children's specific learning needs to ensure they can teach more efficaciously (Lee et al. 2015). The following subsections discuss the findings based on several factors, which are summarized in Figure 1.0.

5.1.1 Leadership, Organization, and Management of Special Needs Children

In this study, the awareness of the special needs of children with learning disabilities among parents was found to be low (made evident by the absence of any form of counseling they had ever attended). In addition, teaching assistants only looked after the children in these centers in terms of food and health requirements. In fact, they were not allowed to teach such children, except in certain cases where, for example, the teachers were absent. Admittedly, managing such children is very challenging to some teachers, as the former are generally hyperactive and lacking communication skills. Thus, teachers need to be more patient and responsive in dealing with such children, who generally come from poor family backgrounds. In extreme cases, these children have experienced some form of sexual abuse, rendering them to be emotionally scarred. In this sad state of affairs, teachers are the only persons that these children can trust. Lacking parental care and guidance, some of these children would tend to grow to be emotionally unstable and aggressive. As such, teachers have to be made aware of these children's family backgrounds to ensure the former can deal with the latter's learning needs more effectively. By taking into account children's backgrounds, teachers need to diversify their teaching approach to motivate such children to learn. Teachers can use various teaching methods, such as using games and flashcards, to attract and engage these students in the learning process.

5.1.2 Children's Experiences and Learning Opportunities

Children with special learning needs have to be exposed to a diverse range of learning experiences at TASKA and TADIKA. As such, teachers must conduct their classes articulately and creatively by taking into account these children's backgrounds, especially their cognitive abilities, communication skills, and demographics (such as gender, age, and the social-economic status of their parents). Likewise, teachers must also factor in the developmental stages of these children to select the most appropriate teaching approach. In this regard, teachers can refer to existing guidelines to help them plan teaching and learning activities that are deemed appropriate to these students. For example, outdoor learning activities, such as swimming and horse riding, can be carried out to help such students experience learning that is both meaningful and fun.

In a nutshell, such students must be given opportunities to help them learn in an environment that fosters close interaction and intimacy among their friends and teachers. As such, teachers have to pay closer attention to their students' learning needs, particularly those who are hyperactive and slow in learning. However, as revealed in this study, teaching such students is very challenging given that all these children are placed together in a single classroom, making it difficult for teachers to teach according to students' specific learning needs. The following is an excerpt of one of the interview transcriptions that highlights such a predicament:

"There are no specific and practical programs for children with specific learning needs (such as those with autism or those throwing tantrums) in our early childhood education. There are but not as good ... She just exposes... Don't

focus ... She just tells her about autism, all of that tantrum. She just tells it like which way do we identify a person with such temperament...” (Student of Private Institution, 568).

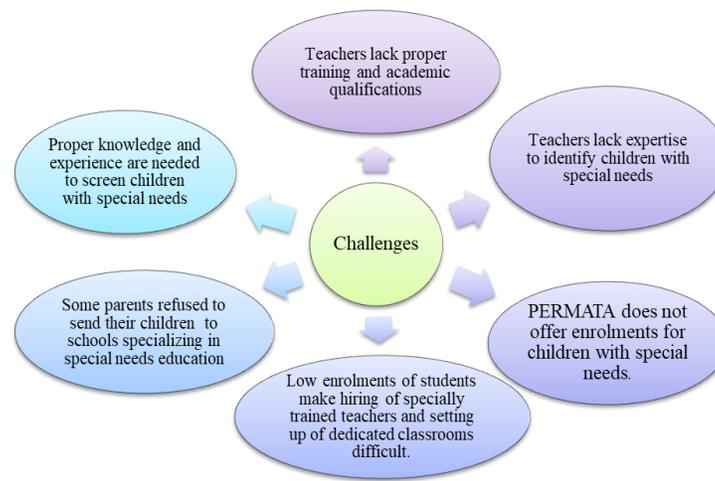


Figure 1. Challenges faced by Malaysian teachers of special needs education

5.2 Solutions for Problems in Special Needs Education in Malaysia

As acknowledged, teachers must have relevant knowledge and experience to help them identify and screen children with special needs. It must be recognized that the types and levels of severity of children's disabilities vary considerably. Some may be severe who surely need more care and attention compared to those diagnosed as less severe (Yan & Sin, 2014). Learning disabilities can impede student learning as such children normally have several neurological disorders that make them incapable to perform basic learning tasks effectively, such as listening, thinking, writing, speaking, spelling, or making simple calculations. As such, teachers need proper training to help teach such children more effectively. It is, therefore, important to identify the types of training that can impart relevant knowledge and skills to these teachers, which can help realize a more inclusive education for these children such that no child will be left out.

Over recent years, education that promotes equality and inclusivity has become a major concern in many nations, as evidenced by a growing emphasis on such education on a global scale (Tait & Mundia, 2014). Thus, it is hardly surprising to see efforts to help teachers in special needs education have been gaining traction by giving them proper training and support (both financially and materially) (Hastings & Oakford, 2010). Hence, such teachers must understand that students with special needs have a wide spectrum of learning disabilities, with each student requiring specific teaching and learning approaches. Put simply, in an ideal situation, such children should not be placed together with normal students in the same classroom. What is needed is a dedicated classroom in which the teacher can teach students with special needs more systematically and efficiently.

In this respect, such a classroom must be set up to support a healthy balance of structured and unstructured activities (Kamarudin et al. 2018; Lee et al. 2015). For example, everything that is placed on each student's desk must be clearly labeled (using highlighted words or colors). For unstructured activities, allow them to modify their work areas while they are completing their homework or studying and assign them tasks that entail moving around the classroom. Studies have shown that students with special needs respond well to diverse voice articulation and tones; therefore, teachers can use a mixture of loud, soft, and whispering to attract students' attention. Music and voice inflection can also be used to attract students in learning activities. For example, teachers can play short songs to make students feel relaxed and composed during the learning process. As children learn in many different ways, it is important for teachers to choose and use appropriate media, such as audios, videos, graphics, and animations, which can capitalize on students' perceptual senses, such as visual, aural, and tactile senses. Students with learning disabilities may learn better with the use of visual and auditory cues. Clearly, helping children with learning disabilities to learn more efficaciously entails a strong understanding of prevailing problems and identifying solutions thereof.

6. Conclusion

As highlighted, education has to be made inclusive and equitable to all students, irrespective of their social, physical, and cognitive background (Lee et al. 2015). Such inclusivity is in line with Malaysia's National Philosophy of Education (1989) that emphasizes "education in Malaysia is an ongoing effort to develop the potentials of individuals in a holistic, integrated manner so as to produce individuals who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally, and physically balanced" (p. 5). Moreover, Malaysia's education system is deeply rooted in the national ideology or the *Rukunegara* (Gomez 2004), which guarantees equal opportunities for every Malaysian to lead a harmonious, peaceful life. Therefore, special needs education should be treated with equal emphasis and the same priority as those of mainstream education to ensure all children, irrespective of their backgrounds, be given the same opportunities to education. However, providing equitable education for children with learning disabilities is extremely challenging as practitioners, especially administrators, operators, and teachers, will face a myriad of issues and problems inherent in their practices. As revealed in this study, relevant parties have to be made aware of the issues and challenges of teaching and managing students with special needs and solutions that they can use to help mitigate existing problems. Through concerted efforts, special needs education in Malaysia can be further improved to help children with learning disabilities to learn as efficacious as their mainstream counterparts.

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