

Policy into Practice: The Challenge for Special Education in Malaysia

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Abstract. The mission of education in Malaysia is to develop a world-class quality education system which will realize the full potentials of all Malaysians and fulfill the national aspiration of attaining a developed country status by 2020. This Malaysian mission of education endorses the UNESCO declaration of 'Education for All' and the 'No Child Left Behind' policy for the purpose of sustainable development. The transformation of these policies to practice presents challenges to Malaysian educators, specifically the educators in the area of special education in Malaysia. This paper seeks to discuss the challenges identified in transforming policy into practice and how such challenges can be overcome in Malaysia. Some observations and feedback were gathered through research visits to a non-governmental organisation which runs programmes for children with autism and also associated inclusive education programmes in a government school. Among the challenges identified are a lack of financial support, insufficient teaching resources, the lack of staff members, difficulties of integration and programme implementation. The paper further discussed ways in overcoming the challenges of applying policy into practice, among them includes smart partnership, managerial support, continuous professional development, provision of teacher aids and related facilities.

1. INTRODUCTION

Public policies that endorse the practice of special education add value to human capital development. The practice of special education is complicated by the numerous disabilities of individuals. Given the limited funding and time constraint, this paper addresses special education for children with autism. Rephrased, focus is made on specially designed education for enabling children with autism to meet their individual needs, develop their potentials and sustain their well-being (Cohen & Spenciner, 2007; Brandes, 2005; UNICEF Malaysia, 2008).

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This paper attends to autism as a developmental disability with outcomes which are outlined by the National Autism Society of Malaysia (NASOM, 2008) as:

A. Qualitative impairments in reciprocal social interaction:

1. Marked impairment in the use of multiple nonverbal behaviors such as eye-to-eye gaze, facial expression, body posture, and gestures to regulate social interaction.
2. Failure to develop peer relationships appropriate to developmental level.
3. Lack of spontaneous seeking to share enjoyment, interests, or achievements with others.
4. Lack of socio-emotional reciprocity.

B. Qualitative impairments in communication:

1. A delay in, or total lack of the development of spoken language (not accompanied by an attempt to

compensate through alternative modes of communication such as gesture or mime).

2. Marked impairment in the ability to initiate or sustain a conversation with others despite adequate speech.

3. Stereotyped and repetitive use of language or idiosyncratic language.

4. Lack of varied spontaneous make-believe play or social imitative play appropriate to developmental level.

C. Restricted, repetitive, and stereotyped patterns of behavior, interest, or activity:

1. Encompassing preoccupation with one or more stereotyped and restricted patterns of interest, abnormal either in intensity or focus.

2. An apparently compulsive adherence to specific nonfunctional routines or rituals.

3. Stereotyped and repetitive motor mannerisms (e.g. hand or finger flapping, or twisting, or complex whole body movements).

4. Persistent preoccupation with parts of objects.

Ever since autism was instituted as a distinct disability category in 1990 by the Congress of the United States, the schooling of children with autism ceased to be a simple matter. A case in point is the cessation of the practice of enrolling children with autism in the health impaired programmes, which were the only places available in special education services for children with autism (McLaughlin & Wehman, 1992; Brandes, 2005). It is reported that rethinking of children with autism as a separate disability category draws global public support in the designing of special education for meeting the needs of these children (Jordan, 2001; Quek, 2008; UNICEF Malaysia, 2008).

While much remains to be learned about the actual causes of autism, the fact that autism is recognized worldwide as a distinct disability category makes it relevant that children with autism receive all possible assistance including inclusive education, to enable them to have a fulfilling life. According to NASOM (2008), for more than a decade ago, much thought has already been given to the practice of making special education and inclusive education accessible to children with autism. This concern is supported with records of NASOM's referral service. Accordingly, individuals clinically diagnosed with autism by government hospital and private medical practitioners are often referred to NASOM for treatment and therapy. In addition, the number of refereed cases is increased by 30% per annum.

Special education for children with autism, like other types of education, is expensive to implement and monitor on a nationwide basis. Due to this heavy financial expenditure most government takes the social responsibility of providing special schools and inclusive education for children with autism. It is documented in the Seventh Malaysia Plan (Malaysia, 1996) that the implementation of universal primary education during 1990 to 1995, in tandem with UNESCO's calling of 'education for all' (Little, 1990) witnessed the establishment of 26 special schools for children with disabilities, including autism. In addition, the inclusive education programmes saw the enrollment of children with disabilities with normal children in 139 schools. It is observed that that between 1996 to 2000, (Malaysia, 2001), the special schools offered about 2,050 places to children with disabilities, Additionally 6,890 places were extended to children with disabilities in inclusive education programmes in the primary schools. Presently, public policies in Malaysia endorsing the practice of special education in government special schools and inclusive education programmes also propagate research in special education so as to add value in transforming policies into effective education practice.

3. AIMS OF THE STUDY

This study explores special education in the context of children with autism to obtain insights into the challenges faced by educators of special education in Malaysia. These insights form the feedback to facilitate the improvement of special education for children with autism in Malaysia.

4. METHODOLOGY

In this exploratory study, an interview was conducted with a focus group comprising eight (8) members, of which seven were special education teachers and a NASOM volunteer. Of these seven were special education teachers, one was the Chief Coordinator of the inclusive programmes for children with autism. This government primary school, situated in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia first started the inclusive programmes for

children with autism in 2005. A team of three researchers was involved in the interview, which was unstructured but stayed in focus on probing the interviewees for missing links during the two-hour interview. Prior to this interview, the logistics such as obtaining official permission to do the interview and requests for visiting classes while teaching was on-going were duly complied. Permission was also obtained to video-tape the children with autism in classes. Observations were also documented and noted.

5. SOME FINDINGS

From our visitations, observations, and interviews, some notable findings are as follows:

1. Inclusive education policy has a greater success with the involvement and dedication of special education associations in educational programmes for special children in schools. In our case, the association like NASOM bargains for the facilities and amenities for the special children in schools, and NASOM also provides tutorial lessons to the special children after school.
2. In many instances, the ratio of teacher assistant to special children is 1: 3. At this ratio, teacher assistants are found to be comfortable in their job and special children are well cared for in terms of their psychological welfare and cognitive assignments.
3. Special children demonstrate self-confidence, positive self-esteem, and trust of people in the collaborative inclusive education approach. The autistic children were able to complete some challenging academic assignments.
4. The primary school headmaster and assistants had substantial awareness and basic knowledge and understanding about inclusive education policy and their roles in implementing special education for autistic kids. The awareness and understanding are found to be critical for the success of inclusive education by the concept of 'equal opportunity for all.'
5. The autistic children interacted well with normal children, and there were no instances of abuse and harassment of the special children.
6. The after school programme for the autistic children involved games and sports so as to 'normalize' the children to their social environment.
7. Parents preferred the school-NASOM collaborative inclusive education policy. The parents were satisfied with the services at the school and NASOM. Hence, this collaboration is a success and should be promoted to other communities.

6. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The interview yielded responses on challenges to transform policy into practice for special educators

engaged in inclusive education programmes for children with autism in the government school. These findings were also congruent with the studies reviewed (Cohen & Spenciner, 2007; Brandes, 2005; McLaughlin & Wehman, 1992). In summary, the challenges faced by the interviewees are presented as:

6.1 A lack of funding

Inclusive education programmes are expensive to conduct. High costing is involved in improving the infrastructures such as room modification , purchase of teaching aids/resources and raw materials to facilitate teaching and learning.

6.2 A lack of staff members

Inclusive education programmes require dedicated and committed individuals to conduct seminars and workshops. The difficulties of getting competent staff pose difficulties.

6.3 Difficulties of integration and programme implementation

Inclusive education programmes require parental support for their success. Parental support is minimal and sporadic in most cases. This makes integration in learning difficult. In addition, programme implementation is hampered by poor community support.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

Most of the interviewees recommended that smart partnership, managerial support, continuous professional development, provision of teacher aids and related facilities are needed to transform policy into practice for special educators engaged in inclusive education programmes for children with autism in the government school.

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