

CHALLENGES OF NOVICE SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS IN THE FIRST YEAR OF TEACHING

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ABSTRACT: *Teaching special needs children is inherently a difficult job. Studies have found that special education teachers suffered high level of burnout which often resulted in teachers leaving their profession. In fact, the turnover rate of special education teachers is among the highest as compared to other professions. One of the most cited reasons for leaving is due to the challenges faced in the job. Arising from this finding, this study aimed to investigate the challenges novice special education teachers encountered in the first year of the teaching job. Questionnaires were used to collect data from these teachers who have recently completed their teacher education programme and currently stations in various schools in Malaysia. The results of the findings showed that novice special education teachers faced multiple challenges in the first year of teaching. Among the challenges reported by these teachers were misconception held by mainstream teachers that teaching special needs students is an easy job; school lacking facilities; administrative overload; negative perception from society; varied student disciplinary problems; shortage of special education teachers and lack of parental support. Although they reported that teaching special needs students is challenging, they were quite satisfied with the moral support provided by school administrators and fellow colleagues. Various recommendations on how to overcome the challenges were also included in the study.*

Keywords: Special Education, Novice Teachers, Challenges, Special Needs Students

INTRODUCTION

Special education was introduced in Malaysia to provide fair and appropriate opportunities to students who require special education according to their individual capabilities and degree of disabilities. This concerted effort was taken by the ministry of education to guarantee the right to learn without discrimination for students with special needs. Special needs students are taught in special education classrooms or integrated into mainstream education classrooms at regular schools. To cater for this demand for special education teachers, special education programmes were then introduced in teaching training institutes throughout the country. Intakes of special education programmes increased tremendously and student teachers were taught both pedagogical and non-pedagogical approaches to deal with these special needs students for a duration of five and half years.

According to Gordon, 2016, the transition from being a student teacher to becoming a full time school teacher may cause high level of anxiety to the teacher concern. The transition may be more difficult for special education teachers than general education teachers. The multiple roles and responsibilities a novice special teacher faces

might be too overwhelming especially if they have to deal with multiple cognitive abilities of students, their varied physical and mental disabilities and the behavioural issues accompanying it. Other challenges may include non-accepting school cultures, inadequate teacher preparation or even insufficient resources.

Objectives of the Study

This study aimed to investigate the challenges faced by special education teachers in their first year of teaching. Additionally, it also aimed to highlight some of the recommendations to overcome the challenges they encountered.

Specifically, the study aimed

- i. to investigate the challenges faced by special education teachers in the first year of teaching
- ii. to provide recommendations to overcome the challenges faced by special education teachers in the first year of teaching

LITERATURE REVIEW

Special education teachers trained in teacher training institutes in Malaysia are specially trained to provide education to students with special needs such as those with visual impairments, hearing

impairments as well as those with learning disabilities. These students are enrolled in either special education schools or integrated into mainstream classes according to their degree of disabilities. Students who have mild to moderate disabilities may be placed in mainstream classroom where they learn together with mainstream education students.

A novice special education teacher often begin their working career full of energy, enthusiasm and hopes aimed at helping students with varying learning, mental, physical and emotional disabilities so that eventually they too can become useful members of the society. However, studies have reported that they faced several barriers and challenges that make the teaching career extremely difficult.

One of the many challenges faced is that many, particularly among mainstream teachers, have widespread misperceptions that teaching special needs students is an easy job (Woods, 2017; Yong Wook Kim, 2013). The differences in the roles and responsibilities between a special education teacher and a mainstream teacher should not be overlooked. The former has to perform all duties with and for students with varying degrees of disability which requires teachers' special attention. A special education teacher also needs to design individualized learning programme based on students' diversified individual needs, which can be uniquely challenging. Moreover, special education teachers need to face many other challenges not assumed by their fellow peers in school. However, studies have shown that mainstream education teachers failed to understand the roles played and had a strong tendency to avoid or ignore their responsibilities in providing education for students with special needs (Yong Wook Kim, 2013).

Another challenge faced by special education teachers is shortage of special education teachers. Schools are facing increased enrolment of special needs students but the increased intake is often not equally matched with increased recruitment of special education teachers. Although both pre-service and in-service training system for special education has long been developed, teacher training institutes and universities has failed to produce adequate number of such teachers to cater for the increasing demand (Meng Deng and Kim Fong Poon-McBrayer, 2012), resulting in a greater workload to limited number of special education teachers in schools. In some cases, class sizes are too large for these teachers to manage and thereby affecting good quality teaching (Alexander, 2014)

Beside schools suffering from shortage of teachers trained in special education, there is another challenge, that is, lack of teaching and learning facilities which have a great impact on the

delivery of good and quality education to students with special needs (Alexander, 2014). Closely related to the above challenge was the issue of inadequate resources for managing behavioural problems and supporting special need students in the mainstream classrooms (Kelly, et al., 2014). School administrators handling special education schools have been found to be lacking in commitment to accommodate the diversified needs of special education students (Cuckle, 1999). It was also reported that they lacked understanding and were not actively involved in the running of special education schools (Yong Wook Kim, 2013). In ensuring quality and success of special education programmes, deep understanding and active participation from school administrators are important. Great Interest and support of school administrators towards the concerns of special education teachers would help them to identify the source of their problems and help them find ways to overcoming them. Therefore, joint collaboration between school administrators and special education teachers is needed for successful implementation of special education programmes.

Successful implementation of special education in school is particularly dependent on the availability and adequacy of school resources to support the programmes as well as the support provided to special education teachers (Ferguson, 2008). They need to possess ability and capability to accommodate the diverse learning needs of special needs students in their classrooms.

Challenges faced by special education teachers can be easily located in related literature review. However, numerous past research on special education has largely focused on challenges faced by experienced special education teachers. This study, however, aimed to investigate the challenges and concerns of novice special education teachers in the first year of teaching special needs students. Their recommendations in overcoming these challenges were also taken into consideration in this study

METHOD

Research Design

This study aimed to investigate the challenges faced by novice special education teachers in the first year of teaching. The researcher employed a mixed mode research methodology, both quantitative and qualitative, to address the objectives of the study.

Population and Sample

The population of the study comprised of 12 novice special education teachers who has recently graduated with a bachelor degree in Special Education from one of the teacher training institutes in Sarawak. They had received their placement letters recently and were posted to

various primary schools throughout Sabah and Sarawak. Out of the total number of 12 students, 8 were female and the remaining 4 were male novice teachers.

Instrument

The research instrument used to collect data for this study was a self-designed questionnaire comprising of three sections, A, B and C. Section A required respondents to fill in their personal particulars pertaining to gender, school, number of special needs students taught and types of special needs students. Section B comprised of 12 statements to explore the challenges faced by novice special education teachers. Each statement is scored on a 10-point Likert-type scale with a score of 1 indicating complete disagreement with the statement and a score of 10 to indicate complete agreement. Section C enabled respondents to provide suitable recommendations to overcome the challenges reported.

Procedure

Before the research instrument was administered, the respondents were contacted and briefed on the purpose of the study and permission to participate in the study was sought. After receiving their verbal consent, the research instrument, which was designed using structured self-administered questionnaires, were uploaded using a social media called 'whatsapp' to reach out the targeted population of the study. During that period, the researcher was also present in the group to clarify doubts or difficulties which they might face when responding to the items in the questionnaires. To ensure confidentiality of responses, upon completion of the questionnaire they were asked to email to the researcher. However, only a total of 6 answered questionnaires were received as the remaining 6 were not assigned any special needs students.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data was analysed using SPSS for Windows. Statistical analyses such as descriptive statistics, were used to analyse the data. Mean scores were calculated and standard deviation was used to measure variability. The qualitative data obtained was closely examined and relevant suggestions put forward by the responded were included in the report.

RESULTS

This study was conducted to investigate the challenges faced by novice special education teachers in the first year of teaching. They have recently been posted to various primary schools in Sabah and Sarawak. Recommendations in overcoming these challenges were also included in the study. However, It should be emphasized that the findings must be interpreted with caution due the limited number of respondents were participated in the study.

Challenges of Novice Special Education Teachers

Table 1 displayed the research data pertaining to challenges faced by novice special education teachers in the first year of teaching. Thirteen items were investigated and 7 items have mean values of 5 and above. The 7 top challenges as revealed by the respondents were (1) misconception that teaching special needs students is an easy job (2) lack of school facilities (3) administrative overload (4) negative perception from society; (5) varied student disciplinary problems; (6) shortage of special education teachers and (7) lack of parental support. Although they reported that teaching special needs students is challenging, they were quite satisfied with the moral support provided to them by school heads ($m=2.50$) and fellow colleagues ($m=1.67$).

Table 1 Means and Standard Deviation of Challenges Faced by Novice Teachers

Challenges	Mean	Std. Deviation
Misconception of the teaching job	7.51	2.43
Lack of school facilities	7.50	2.81
Administrative overload	6.33	2.73
Negative perception from society	5.51	1.76
Varied student disciplinary problems	5.50	2.07
Shortage of special education teachers	5.17	4.36
Lack parental support	5.00	3.16
Integration into mainstream classes	4.50	3.39
High expectations from parents	4.17	2.40
Lack of appreciation	3.50	2.59
Lack of school support	2.50	1.64
Lack of collegial support	1.67	0.52

The greatest challenges faced by novice special education teachers was that mainstream teachers seemed to assume that teaching special

needs students is an easy task ($m=7.51$). This finding was found to be consistent with the findings reported by past studies (Woods, 2017;

Yong Wook Kim, 2013). This misconception has to be corrected as it implies that mainstream teachers failed to understand the roles and responsibilities of teaching students with special needs. This finding could have risen if mainstream education teachers have limited or no contacts with special education students. Hence, they have very little understanding of what is entailed in the teaching of special needs students.

The second greatest challenge is related to school facilities which novice special education teachers found lacking ($m=7.50$). Schools did not provide facilities to properly accommodate students with special needs. Students in these schools suffered from multiple learning disabilities. They faced students who have difficulty with reading, writing and mathematics. Some children with learning disabilities have trouble remembering what they see or learn. Faced with students with multiple learning disabilities, they need suitable and adequate educational materials and facilities to assist them, which were found to be lacking in schools they are in today.

Teaching special needs students can be demanding and tough but on top of this challenge the special education teachers complained that there were overburdened with a lot of school administrative work ($m=6.33$). They often find themselves being required to attend regular committee meetings, write minutes of meetings, perform lots of printing job for documentation and auditing purposes (MS ISO), be involved in various school programmes or projects such as 5S, 'gotong-royong' projects or general school cleaning, co-curricular activities and deal with loads of paperwork. Many of them reported that they are enthusiastic about the teaching job but find themselves burdened with lots of non-academic responsibilities that took them away from their students.

Next challenge relayed by the novice special education teachers is related to the negative perception society held towards the importance of special education ($m=5.50$). Although the society is aware that special needs students is present in every era and in every society but it is not highly supportive of the goals of special education. Basically, the goals of special education are the same as those of mainstream education, that is, the optimal development of the students so that he can reach his or her highest potential as an individual and as a useful member of the society. But sadly, society tends to focus more on mainstream education than special education.

Novice special education teachers also found it a challenge to deal with multiple student disciplinary problems ($m=5.50$) in the classroom. They need to face a spectrum of behavioural problems created by special needs students. These students can get easily agitated, restless and moody.

If left unattended, it could lead to disruptive, uncooperative and even belligerent behaviour (Ageranioti-Belanger et al., 2012). They also exhibited problems like short attention span and unable to remember and understand what is being taught. Having to deal with these problems which is a common occurrence in their everyday classroom, novice special education teachers found it a challenge. Related to this challenge is the need to acquire a repertoire of behavioural management strategies in order to assist them to handle these disciplinary problems.

The next challenge reported was related to shortage of special education teachers ($m=5.17$). Respondents have to take care of as many as 5 to 8 classes of special needs students and the numbers are increasing yearly. To elevate the shortage problem, placement of mainstream teachers were made but most of them are not qualified or well trained to handle special needs students. No doubt educating students with special needs is given the top priority but critical shortages of qualified special education teachers needs to be addressed. The failure to resolve these shortages may impede the ability of students with special needs to reach their full academic potential and also hinder the effort to prepare the students for higher education or career ready.

These novice teachers also revealed that parents of special needs children were not highly supportive of special education programmes planned for the children ($m=5.0$). Many parents cannot accept the fact that their children need special attention to assist them in their learning disabilities. Unable to accept the child's condition, the parents expected the children to be taught in a normal mainstream classroom ($m=4.50$) and demanded teachers to put in all their effort and energy to assist the children. Such high expectations from parents ($m=4.17$) formed another challenge for these special education teachers.

With regards to appreciation for work accomplished, these teachers did not find this a great challenge ($m=3.50$). They also regarded both the school administrators ($m=2.50$) and peers ($m=1.67$) as encouraging and supportive of the nature of their work. These findings have been found to be inconsistent with past studies where school administrators lack understanding, involvement and commitment in the running of special education schools (Cuckle, 1999; Yong Wook Kim, 2013)

Recommendations in overcoming challenges confronted

Beside collecting data on the challenges faced by novice special education teachers in the first year of teaching special needs students, the qualitative section of the research instrument aimed to obtain

data pertaining to their concerns and recommendations in overcoming these challenges. Various suggestions were provided but only those related to the challenges were included in the report.

First, they felt that mainstream education teachers need to remove the misconception that teaching special needs students is an easy task. In actual fact, a special education teacher has to perform all duties with and for students with varying degrees of disability which requires teachers' special attention. He or she has to design individualized learning programme based on students' diversified individual needs, which can be uniquely challenging. To overcome the assumption that teaching special needs students is easy, they suggested having joint collaboration between special education teachers and mainstream education teachers. The main aim is to foster an understanding of the difficulties incurred in teaching students with special needs. Through this collaboration, they, the mainstream education teachers will learn to respect and understand the challenging roles and responsibilities played by special education teachers.

Next, schools need to receive enough funding to provide sufficient and appropriate educational facilities and resources to assist students with special needs to learn better. According to the respondents, though these students are slow in learning, they are eager to participate in the learning process. According to Leahy (2016), many learning disabled students are in fact, very intelligent but need to be properly guided and supported. However, schools must be well equipped with appropriate teaching aids and other learning facilities. Special rooms can be designed to accommodate the needs of these students. These rooms must be fully equipped with all the necessary facilities and equipment to help students increase concentration level or even develop cognitive and psychomotor abilities. Lacking in such facilities would obviously be a significant barrier for them to learn in a conducive learning environment equitable to their peers in the mainstream schools.

As novice teachers are still struggling to adapt to the new teaching job, they also felt that school administrators should reduce their administrative workload to allow them to spend more time and energy on teaching their special needs students. Sargent (2003) also agreed with this suggestion that school leaders should give new teachers less of a workload, fewer responsibilities and duties so that they can concentrate on their classrooms and students. Excessive administrative work is a burden to novice teachers especially if they are still adapting to the new work environment. To lessen their administrative work,

such tasks can be given to assistant school heads or by hiring special education clerks (Fielding and Simpson, 2003) leaving the novice special education teachers to address instructional needs and classroom concerns.

Parents and society's understanding and participation in special education programmes formed part of the list of suggestions provided by the novice special education teachers. They need to understand that special education programmes are designed to provide children with exceptionalities with the same opportunities as any other children. They should not be discriminated against in society. Their support and involvement is critical to the success of special needs students. For instance, outside school, they can assist these students by giving them encouragement, guidance and support to continue learning basic knowledge and vocational skills so that they too can lead a meaningful, purposeful and fulfilling life in society. Hence, involving parents, families and the community in meaningful ways can make life easier for special needs teachers.

To overcome the current shortage of special education needs teachers, they suggested working in collaboration with mainstream teachers. Although, they might not be qualified and most might not be able to handle special needs students, short courses can be provided to those interested mainstream teachers. This short term remedy in providing in-service training is good enough to temporary help address the current needs for special education teachers while waiting for the education ministry to produce more special education graduates which normally takes 4-5 years to complete.

Another recommendation is to counsel parents with special needs children to cope with the fact that their children have learning disability issue. According to Healey (1996), until parents who are having difficulty accepting their child's disability can cope with their own pain and frustrations, their full energies generally cannot be directed toward understanding the child's disability, level of development, readiness for instruction, or participation in the intervention process. School heads also need to be made available to help guide parents through the different stages of adjustment towards reasonable acceptance of their child's condition. Once parents have accepted the child's condition and fate, then only they can work collaboratively with special education teachers to help the children succeed in school. As students spend most of the time outside of school, special education teachers need parents to reinforce lessons learned in schools.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study raise a few important issues related to special education. Firstly, the transition from being a teacher student to a novice special education teacher is definitely not an easy process. Research evidence in the study has proven that taking up this new role and placing them in a new workplace has brought about a list of challenging experiences for novice special education teachers. Among the major challenge was mainstream teachers seemed to think that teaching special needs students is an easy task. From the school, there were insufficient special education teachers to lessen their teaching workload, facilities were lacking and they were heavily burdened with non-academic roles and responsibilities. Perception from the society on the importance of special education was not very positive and support from parents with special needs children was not encouraging either. All these difficulties, if not unattended could trigger novice teachers to leave the profession (Gorden, 2016). According to Ingersoll (2012), the turnover rate of first year teachers could be as high as 33%. Therefore, the study on the challenges faced by novice special education teachers in the first year of teaching could be used as an important starting point for taking immediate remedial actions to prevent the problem of teacher attrition among new professionals.

Novice teachers, although have been well trained with both pedagogical and non-pedagogical skills to accommodate the needs of special needs students, they need to work in a supportive school environment. A conducive and supportive work environment can function to assist them to overcome the uncertainties of the transition period particularly in the first year of teaching. Commitment, support and guidance on the part of school administrators, peers, parents and society are crucial to help novice teachers get adjusted to the newly assigned roles and responsibilities. Such positive school environment can also assist them in removing the feeling of anxiety and stress normally linked to the first year of teaching.

Special education teachers who have been trained in teacher training institutes throughout the country took five and half years to complete. However, data collected back from the teachers found that half of the students who took part in the study were not involved in special education although they have successfully completed the teacher training programme. They were not assigned to special education schools nor were they involved in educating special needs students. Instead they were being absorbed into regular schools teaching mainstream education subjects, which they were not trained for. The other half of the teachers surveyed reported that their schools

fell short of special education teachers. This seems to imply that there is a mismatch in supply of special education teachers and demand of special education teachers, which need to be urgently addressed.

As in all studies, there are limitations in the study that should be acknowledged. This study only took into consideration the views of 6 novice special education teachers. Due to the small statistical sample size, the results of the study need to be interpreted with caution. The challenges reported by this small sample of teachers cannot be generalized to all special education teachers in the first year of teaching. Therefore, further research should include a larger sample to verify the findings of this study. Additionally, future research can also include the perspectives of parents, peers and school administrators to provide a deeper insight into the challenges faced by these teachers in their first year of teaching. Further studies could also investigate the challenges faced by mainstream education teachers who are also involved in teaching special needs students in their respective classes.

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