

Teachers' perception on the role of social interaction among special needs in preschool

Revati Ramakrishnan*

HELP University, Bukit Damansara, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
*revati.ramakrishnan@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Special education is a field which is growing, commanding more attention in the recent years. There have been more children over the past decade who have been diagnosed with special needs. There have been schools which provide education specifically for children with special needs for many years. In the recent years regular preschools have started to cater for children with special needs. This research mainly looks at if teachers think social interaction can be used as a tool to enhance cognitive development and on how can social interaction be used as a tool to enhance the cognitive development of children with special needs. 25 teachers who work with special needs children within Klang Valley were interviewed. An interview questionnaire that consists of 14 questions was prepared. Results showed that social interaction can be used as a tool to enhance the cognitive development of children with special needs, however there are many factors involved in achieving this.

Keywords: *special education, social interaction, cognitive development*

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood is an extremely critical period of an individual. It is at this time in which a child's foundation in all developmental domains are built. Early Childhood Education is a specially tailored program for children from birth till the age of 8. It consists of activities and experiences that are intended to effect developmental changes in children before they begin formal education (Encyclopedia of Children's Health, 2018). Article 28 of United Nations Convention on Rights of Child states that every child has a right to receive education on the basis of equal opportunity which includes children with special needs. Special education is a specially tailored program that addresses the special requirement of a child.

Social development is a process whereby children learn to interact. Through social development, children are able to enhance their language skills, develop self-esteem, and strengthen their learning skills amongst others. Social skills are needed to interact appropriately in a cultural environment and plays an important role in a child's well-being (Baines & Blatchford, 2011). Therefore, social development is an essential facet of learning for young children as it prepares them to effectively integrate into society. Children with special needs have difficulty in their verbal communication (Mutumburanzou, 2018). Communicating and connecting with peers is a vital part of social development. It is extremely important when it comes to the education of children with special needs as this is an area of difficult for them. They should be provided with opportunities to enhance their social skills and should be allowed to learn at their own pace within a learning environment (PBS Parent, 2018).

Cognitive development is the process whereby an individual is able to acquire knowledge and acquire skills like thinking, exploring and problem solving (Joubish and Khurram, 2011) and is a domain which enables children to acquire knowledge based on their surroundings through the skills as stated. Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory speaks about the role of social interaction in the development of cognitive skills of a child. This makes it evident that social and cognitive development complement

each other and are both essential to a child's ideal growth as it is also stated that social factors contribute towards the cognitive development of a child (Leod, 2014).

Peer interactions in early childhood education (ECE), as well in mainstream and special education, can be compromised because of individual needs and characteristics of the children involved (Syrjämäki, & Sajaniemi, 2019).

Buli-Holmberg & Jeyaprabhan (2016) studied the effective practice in inclusive and education of special needs. Effective teaching practice for children with special needs was conducted in traditional setting, variety and flexible practice, one on one practice and small groups. The observation was conducted based on three different categories; interaction, support and adaptation for analyzing the best inclusive classroom. Although advantages and disadvantages was seen in each type of practice, results indicated that one on one learning was an aspect of learning was most effective. The traditional practice showed that the children did not get the desired support to enhance their learning. Through one on one support practice, children were able to master their learning and have positive interaction with the teacher during the learning process. In small groups there was seen to be more interaction with the teacher as compared to traditional practice. However, the study also found that there is a lack of expertise to general teachers to deliver adapted teaching learning process in inclusive classrooms and it was stated there is a need to improve teachings, learning interaction, support and adaptation in all types of inclusive practices.

The advantages of inclusive education; the challenges and barriers in achieving inclusion as well as providing a platform for parents and teachers who are unsure if mainstreaming is the right choice for a special needs child is always a concern. Ferguson (2014) reviewed the inclusion of special needs children in mainstream education by studying attitudes, experiences and perspectives of primary school teachers and parents with special needs children. It was found that inclusive education was beneficial for both children with and without disabilities especially in terms of their social development. However, cognitive development was compromised due to challenges faced in the education system (Ferguson, 2014).

Evins (2015) stated the importance to understand the perspectives of teachers who work in inclusive settings and the purpose was to seek the opinion of teachers to describe the development that teachers see in inclusive classrooms. The objective was to inform educators about the potential for growth among students when children with disabilities are included as well as to raise awareness for additional support for teachers within these settings. Interviews with teachers revealed that inclusion affects students in a classroom, children of normal abilities learn about tolerance and look out for others while children with special needs learn more appropriate social and emotional skills. Looking at the overall result obtained teachers do approve of mainstreaming children with special needs but are aware of the challenges.

Realities and challenges of support for children with special needs in nursery schools was studied by Ishiguro and Yoshioka (2016). The learning societal resources required by nursery school teachers to support the special needs children in the future was looked into. Results indicated that nursery school teachers need to be educated regarding particular coping methods, the different special needs and skills for supporting parents. Looking into societal resources, the nursery schools required more additional assistant teachers and recruitment of mentors. Ishiguro and Yoshioka (2016) concluded that there are many more challenges in providing support for children with special needs and they are to be looked into.

Aller (2017) conducted a research on developmental impact of inclusion classrooms on autism spectrum disorder. After looking at extensive reviews, this research identified a few themes, social interaction, and teachers' preparedness, impact of age on education and individuality of education. Looking at the results of this research it was seen that the setting of the education is not the only factors which has an impact on the development of children with special needs and therefore further researches need to be conducted to fill the gap especially regarding the cognitive development impact on educational settings and the determinants of the best educational setting for children with autism.

This shows there has been much importance which has been given towards special needs children and their development. There are many other factors which contribute to the challenges which are faced when children with special needs are placed in mainstream classroom and these factors play a vital role in the development of children with special needs. However the aspect of

looking at a specific area of development was something which was not looked into. The use of social development as a mode to enhance cognitive development of children with special needs was something which was not looked into.

PROBLEM STATEMENTS

In Malaysia, as stated in the Education Act 1996, formal education begins with preschool. Under the Educational (Special Education) Regulation (2013), special education needs refers to an individual who is certified to have: (1) visual disability; (2) hearing disability; (3) speech disability; (4) physical disability; (5) learning difficulties (LD); or (6) any combination of the disabilities mentioned, on the other hand, the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (MWFCDD) categorizes students with Autism, Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD), and specific learning difficulties such as Dyslexia into a common category of learning difficulties (LD) group (Yan-Li and Sofian, 2018).

Research found that children with special needs were unable to interact with their peers (Chimwaza, 2015). According to Lavoie (2008), isolation from their peers causes these children with special needs to feel different from others. The societal norm used to be parents sending special needs children to special education schools where they do not learn to interact with children of normal ability and thus preventing growth in the social domain of development. Seeing this, many parents want their children to learn how to socialize with children of normal ability so that they learn how to interact with their surroundings and do not feel different. Apart from social skills, enhancement of academic skills is another reason for including special needs children into mainstream classrooms (PBS Parent 2018). Article 28 of United Nations Conventions on Rights of Child states that all children have a right to equal opportunities in education, may it be early years or formal education regardless of their gender, disability, race or socioeconomic status. Based on the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025, it is pointed out that all children should have equal access to quality education of international standards (Ministry of Education, 2012). As such, in the recent years regular preschools have started to cater for children with special needs as there is a high demand for them to be placed in mainstream schools.

The manner in which children learn and gain knowledge considerably varies between each individual more so with children with special needs who will require additional support. Hence it is challenging to always include them in mainstream classrooms. They can potentially disrupt the class, and thus, are given toys or materials unrelated to the class with the intention of distracting them and reducing interruptions to the class. These distractions does not only hinder these children to benefit from the lesson but also obstructs their cognitive development which could prevent the child from attaining maximum potential in all domains of development. It is not favorable for a wholesome development of a child. Having said that, cognitive development being one of the vital domains is seen to not receive enough attention when children with special needs are placed in a mainstream classroom with children of normal abilities.

Social development is a domain which can be used as a tool to enhance the other areas of development of children. Positive learning outcomes in all domains can be achieved by focusing on social development (California Department of Education, 2018). Thus social development can be used to enhance cognitive development. However this is not seen to be taking place in a mainstream classroom with special needs children. Seeing that children are distracted with other materials because they are disrupting the class shows that the social domain is not being used as a tool to help develop cognitive skills of these children.

OBJECTIVES

1. To identify the effectiveness of social interaction in the cognitive development of children with special needs from a teacher's point of view in a mainstream classroom.
2. To identify the methods through which social interaction can enhance cognitive development of children with special needs in a mainstream classroom from a teachers perspective.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

A total of 25 teachers were approached. 15 of these teachers have experience teaching in regular preschools and have had at least one special needs child in their classroom. The other 10 teachers have experience teaching in special needs schools and centers. The experiences of the teachers ranged from two and a half months to nine years of working with children of special needs.

Measure

An interview questionnaire that consists of 14 questions was prepared. The questions were developed based on the literature which were reviewed. These questions were focusing on the teacher's viewpoint on special needs children being in mainstream classrooms; the behaviour of children with special needs in mainstream classrooms; role of social interaction in enhancing their cognitive development of children with special needs and methods to enhance their cognitive skills through social interaction. The questions were tailor-made to match the objectives of this study. Eight questions were based on the first objective and six questions were based on the second research objective respectively.

Procedure

Data collection was done in two phases:

Phase One: Pilot Study

A pilot study was carried out with a group of pre-service and in-service preschool teachers. Five teachers were interviewed. Based on the result of the interviews which were conducted, it was seen that the questions were not clear hence some of the questions were amended to ensure it is towards the research objectives of the lesson.

Phase Two: Interview

15 preschools were approached to interview their teachers, however only seven preschools were able to accommodate an interview session. A total of 20 teachers were interviewed. The data was collected through visits to preschools over a period of eight weeks.

Data Analysis

The method used to analyze data is content analysis. Results were transferred from the transcriptions and categorized based on similar answers and results were deduced.

RESULTS

Research Question 1: Do teachers think social interaction can be used as a tool to enhance cognitive development of children with special needs in a mainstream classroom?

Question 1: Why are children with special needs placed in a mainstream classroom?

Finding: 11 respondents stated that special needs children are placed in mainstream classrooms for social purposes where the children learn to interact with normal children. Four respondents stated that these children are placed in mainstream classrooms so that they do not feel left out. The remaining respondents stated reasons such as the children are ready for mainstream education; it is a cheaper option compared to special needs schools and to reduce discrimination.

Question 2: How are they in mainstream classrooms?

Finding: Eight respondents stated that these children can be disruptive in a mainstream classroom environment however they can be kept under control with the presence of the shadow teacher. Another eight respondents stated that the behavior of the child depends on the severity of the special needs. Six respondents stated that the special needs children have trouble in social settings and are usually in their own world or only mingle with others for a brief period of time. The other two respondents stated that not every child can be mainstreamed in regular classroom. One respondent stated that the special children are comfortable in the mainstream classroom environment.

Question 3: How are these children during a lesson in the mainstream classroom?

Finding: Nine respondents stated that the special needs children are capable of being disruptive but learn better with the guidance with a shadow teacher. Eight respondents stated that special needs children are not able to follow a lesson. Five respondents stated that it varies according to their needs. Three respondents stated that these children are fine and are able to follow lessons as they have good and bad days.

Question 4: What are the advantages of including these children in mainstream classrooms?

Finding: 15 respondents stated that the advantage of including them in mainstream classrooms is they get to socialize, communicate and learn to interact with their environment. 10 respondents stated that by including these children in mainstream classrooms, there is awareness created about special children and allow them to grow with different children.

Question 5: What are the disadvantages of them in mainstream classrooms?

Finding: Eight respondents stated that the disadvantage of including them in mainstream classroom is that the special needs children can be disruptive and disturb the other children. Six respondents stated that being in a mainstream environment leads to them to be bully victims and being left out in the group interactions. The remaining respondents stated that the special needs children's needs are different, their behavior has an impact on normal children, they are not given enough attention, their learning could regress and they require one on one support when they mingle with the rest.

Question 7: How does interacting with children of normal abilities benefit children with special needs?

Finding: 12 respondents stated that the benefit of being with normal is that they learn how to socialize and interact with other children. Seven respondents stated that special children learn by role modelling the behavior of normal children. Five respondents stated that they get to build their confidence and improve their functional routines. One respondent stated that being with normal children does not have a big impact on the special needs children.

Question 8: What type of social interaction is seen in the regular class setting among children with special needs and children of normal ability?

Finding:11 respondents stated that play is the most seen type of social interaction among the special children and the normal children although not all of the interactions may be verbal. Five respondents stated that the special needs children do not interact. Four respondents stated that the children with special needs learn to wait and regulate themselves when they are in the same environment as normal children. Four respondents stated that there are limitations whereby it is hard for them to engage in interactions during academics; interactions happen during question and answer sessions and they are able to form short sentences.

Question10: What are the cognitive skills seen among the children in the classroom and are they seen to be developing in the environment?

Finding:12 respondents stated that some cognitive skills which are seen in mainstream classrooms are enhanced. Eight respondents stated that reading and writing is one of the areas which are seen to be developing in the classroom. Three respondents stated that it depends on the interests of the child. Two respondents stated that alphabets are seen to be developing.

Research Question 2: How can teachers use social interaction as a tool to enhance cognitive development of children with special needs in a mainstream classroom?

Question 6: Why is social interaction important for children with special needs?

Finding:16 respondents stated that the reason social interaction is important for children with special needs is because they need to learn how to socialize in the real world. Six respondents stated that it is important for social interaction as the special needs children get to understand the world around them and be aware of the world. Three respondents stated that through social interaction the special needs children are open to all interactions, it gives them confidence and they develop their speech and enhance their vocabulary.

Question 9: How is the cognitive development of children with special needs?

Finding:Seven respondents stated that the cognitive development of the special needs children depend a lot on the child and their IQ. Seven respondents stated that children with special needs are very good visual learners. Five respondents stated that children with special needs have good academics and in fact some better than normal children. Two respondents stated that these children are behind time; two respondents stated that good instructions are very important and that they need to be motivated to learn and given rewards. Two respondents stated that these children are a little different and take a while to learn and requires the guidance of a shadow teacher however they learn a lot but it is not seen.

Question 11: Why is cognitive development important for these children and how does it benefit them especially in the same environment as other children?

Finding:11 respondents stated that cognitive development is important for children with special needs so that they are able to function independently without assistance from their surroundings and this is how it benefits them as well. Four respondents stated that it is important for them to enhance their academics. Four other respondents stated that cognitive development also helps to enhance their social and communication skills, they will be able to interact better. Four respondents stated that by enhancing their cognitive development the children get to have a glimpse of the outer world. However one respondent did say their academics have poor progress.

Question12: Does social interaction can help enhance the cognitive development of these children during a lesson, as part of a lesson?

Finding:20 respondents stated that social interaction can be a tool to enhance cognitive development. Five respondents stated that it can help a little.

Question 13: How can social interaction be used as a tool to enhance the cognitive development of children with special needs particularly during a lesson?

Finding:14 respondents stated that small groups can be used as a tool to enhance the cognitive development. Four respondents stated that the interaction can happen during a lesson, particularly asking the children with special needs questions and getting them to interact during the lesson. Four respondents stated that these children learn by imitating their friends and use sounds and be expressive during a lesson. Three respondents stated that scaffolding when they need assistance and depending on how the children are given instructions.

Question 14: State a few methods to enhance cognitive development of children with special needs using social interaction as the foundation in the environment of a mainstream classroom during a lesson?

Finding:Six respondents stated that group work is an essential method to enhance cognitive development using social interaction. Six respondents stated that play is a very important and easy method to enhance cognitive development. Four respondents stated that buddy system, pairing a special needs child with a normal child helps to enhance their cognitive development well. Three respondents stated that visuals, videos, flash cards and pictures should be used. Three respondents stated that teachers should regularly ask questions to children and keep them interactive in the lesson. Three respondents stated that rewards, reinforcement and repetition is the method to enhance.

DISCUSSION

On the whole, the idea of inclusion is well received. The finding indicate that children with special needs are included in mainstream classrooms to learn socializing. Socialization and educating alongside peers are among the reasons special needs children are placed in mainstream environments physically, however it does not mean they participate in all the lessons of the class (Ferguson, 2014). Findings also indicate that social interaction can be used as a tool to enhance cognitive development of the special needs children in mainstream classrooms. Social development showed to be enhanced very well for children with special needs in mainstream classrooms however other areas showed minimal development. Cognitive development was compromised due to challenges faced in mainstream classrooms and this was seen in the results as well (Ferguson, 2014).

Among the challenges faced were, children with special needs being victims of bullying, unable to interact with their surroundings, unable to pay attention to the lesson taking place, disruptive during the lesson but could be controlled by shadow teachers. A lack of expertise on the general teachers to adapt their teaching learning processes in inclusive classrooms (Buli-Holmberg&Jeyaprabhan, 2016). Therefore difficulty to adapt to different learning process by teachers could be a possible reason for which children with special needs are unable to pay attention to the lesson taking place supporting the results on varied teaching methods contribute to the special needs children not paying attention. The teachers should build competencies on providing necessary teachings, learning interaction and support.

Being bully victims affects the effectiveness of social interaction to enhance cognitive development. Special needs children are victimized to bullying as they are labelled as being different from the norm of the children in the classroom (Didaskalou, Andreou and Vlachou, 2009). This is evident from the findings whereby it was stated special needs children are victimized to bullying due to being different from the others. This shows there should be more emphasis given to educating teachers and children of normal abilities to further enable inclusive education as it is both beneficial for children of normal abilities as well as children with special needs.

Children with special needs being disruptive in mainstream classrooms was a common factor found in the finding. However, the children can be less disruptive under the supervision of a shadow teacher. This turns out to be a very influential factor in the development of a special needs child especially in a mainstream classroom environment.

The effectiveness of social interaction in enhancing the cognitive development of children with special needs is also established. Among the forms of interaction were buddy system, interaction during a lesson, play time, visual lessons, rewards and reinforcement and group work. The given responses are currently practiced by the teachers in schools and learning centres on a regular basis. When a child interacts with their peers they learn and develop. Thus developing and enhancing their cognitive skills.

RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods are suggested to further study this aspect. As the importance of special needs education is growing in Malaysia, awareness and acceptance is indeed crucial. More early childhood educators should be approached to investigate this as this would help to focus on empowering ECE educators to plan and execute appropriate intervention strategies within their means in their classrooms.

There are many challenges faced and seen in teaching these children to socialize with other children. Hence these challenges should look into to provide special needs children a more integrated learning environment.

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