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Exploring the implementation of employment preparation programmes for special needs learners in five integrated secondary schools in Malaysia

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Employment Preparation Programmes (EPP) are not part of the Special Education Integrated Programme (SEIP) curriculum in Malaysia, and there is no specific operational guidance provided to schools. As a result, EPPs are currently performed in a non-uniform way. This study aims to explore the implementation of EPPs, delineate the challenges faced by educators; teachers and head of department, and identify the areas of improvement needed. Semi-structured of teachers and department heads interviews were carried out to elicit data from a purposive sample of fifteen EPP participants. Data was also collected about special needs learners' activities using an observational method, in a real-life setting, over twenty observations: four observations in each of the five schools. Relevant documents; module and annual report were then be collected from the respective schools. This paper is concerned with one example of data analysis from a broader piece of ongoing research.

Background to the study

According to United Nation statistics, around 10% of the world's population are classified as disabled (United Nations, 2017). In Malaysia, there are 20,296 students with disabilities aged between 13 and 19 years old, who have been enrolled on the Secondary School SEIP out of a National Secondary School population of 2,344,891 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2017). Specially tailored EPPs to prepare special needs learners are currently being provided with increased levels of attention globally (Johnson, 2017; Hussain, 2017). However, in Malaysia, the application of EPPs is highly dependent on the initiative of the teachers, as the programme does not form part of the curriculum (Cheong et al, 2013).

Research focus

One of the objectives of this study is to identify the factors that pose challenges and hindrances to teachers in the effective implementation of employment preparation programmes in schools. In order to examine this aim, the researcher describes how interview and observational data were analysed to explore the challenges faced by the special education teachers who undertake EPP in five selected schools.

Methodology

A qualitative approach was adopted to evaluate the data from observations which comprises in-depth, open-ended interviews and document analysis, to generate rich narrative descriptions and outcomes (Patton, 2002). The interviews were semi-structured and used open-ended questions to elicit data from participants; five of whom are Heads of Special Education Departments (HOD), along with ten SETs. The participant observation method was used to collect data regarding special needs learners' practical task-related performance: with four observations taking place at each of the five schools included in the study. Each observation monitored a class of special needs learners who were undertaking EPP in their school's SEIP. Whilst non-participant observations may not present the opportunity to interact with the participants during the activities and learn the significance of the activities as how participant observation would allow, the researcher gain understanding of the activities through the interviews sessions with the participants. Further, it may be regarded that being a participant observant would generally make it easier to ask for clarifications of actions during an activity rather than before or after it (Robson, 2016). Classes comprise learners aged between 16 and 19 with a range of learning disabilities, both physical and mental. Each interview was recorded and the audio files created were transcribed and verbatim using the QSR Nvivo11 software.

A purposive sampling technique was used to select interview participants because of the limited number of people involved in the delivery of employment preparation programmes in Malaysia. Each interviewee was required to have held the position of SET or HOD for a minimum of one year. The research population of the study was delimited as one class in each

of five SEIP Secondary Schools that are conducting special needs EPPs, in two States in Malaysia, Melaka and Perak.

In terms of ethics, apart from obtaining consent from gatekeepers and parents or guardians the participants (special needs students) the researcher consider special needs students' as vulnerable adult within classes need to be informed that the study is happening and they could be observed in the setting.

The researcher also changed the participant's name by giving them pseudonym to protect their identities and maintaining the integrity of the data.

Preliminary data analysis

Interview data was analysed using the thematic analysis method (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Relevant segments of the interview text were selected and subsequently coded to facilitate thematic analysis; firstly by importing the interview transcription into Nvivo 11 software to explore the content of the interview document, then by identifying the most frequently occurring themes and patterns; finally, a node was then created to collect all related references (coding). A text search was run to determine if other participants had identified the same issues (query). The results of the query were gathered in the node, and the material refined through a process of ongoing review and revision (reflection). Commonly occurring words and phrases were visualised in a word tree. The findings were recorded in a memo, and the elements derived from this process were used to verify the subthemes with other method; observation report and document analysis before finalized the themes identified from the literature review.

Observation data will be in the form of description content, physical setting, social environment, patterns of specific behavioural patterns, and impact that the researcher have had on the activities observed and reflection content, reflection upon the activity observed were noted. A preliminary analysis which helps identify emergent themes during observation which then facilitates a more developed exploration during observation promotes self-reflection which is crucial in understanding and meaning-making in the study (Emerson, 1987).

Knowledge, Vocational Skills and Attitudes of Educators

Interview transcripts analysis

The above element is derived from interview quotes taken from Special Education Teachers among five selected schools:

‘Knowledge of how best to work with the passive Special needs learners is important in conducting EPP’ (Sarah).

‘I attended 2 weeks of special education courses which I felt were not sufficient in order for me to gain a better understanding of special needs learners’ (Helena).

‘I was not provided with any comprehensive syllabus to conduct the EPP’ (Louise).

‘I do not know how to conduct the EPP as I didn’t major in that field. How do I teach my special needs learners systematically? Recently, I attended skills related courses on my own but my school didn’t support me financially’ (Dervla).

The above participants highlighted that not all SETs are specialised in delivering vocational education and training in schools. Moreover, according to the participants, some of the special education teachers are from a mainstream teaching background and by receiving just two weeks of training were unable to effectively teach students with learning disabilities. Some participants stated that they found it difficult to apply their knowledge to students with special needs due to insufficient training and guidance, especially for those participants coming from mainstream education.

Observation analysis

A summary of the observation analysis of elements related to knowledge, skills, and attitudes of educators is presented in Table 1.

Based on the above interview quotes and the observation reflections, it is apparent that a substantial portion of the SETs do not have the relevant vocational skills; in fact, these are experienced mainstream teachers who have attended a short programme of study to learn how to teach students with disabilities, and who do not understand the complex characteristics of special needs learners. This lack of knowledge, vocational skills and attitudes therefore results in failure to achieve the objective of the EPP. This statement

by the researcher is supported by a conceptual framework regarding effective teaching, which comprises knowledge of curriculum content, and knowledge of teaching (Darling et al., 2007).

Table 1: Elements: Knowledge, Skills and Attitudes of educators

Description content	Reflection content
<p>School 1: SET 1</p> <p>1. Module used in this setting</p> <p>2. Task divided fit the capabilities of the students</p>	<p><u>Attitudes</u></p> <p>Initiatives of the teacher to create own module to conduct EPP creatively.</p> <p><u>Vocational Skills</u></p> <p>Vocational Training and education session is very smooth with simple instruction which enable the students to follow the lesson effectively.</p> <p><u>Knowledge of Special Education</u></p> <p>It evidenced of teacher's knowledge regarding special education background understand the students capabilities which enables all students to integrate in the programme activities</p>

<p>School 2: SET 4</p> <p>1. No Module used in this setting</p> <p>2. Task divided fit the capabilities of the students</p>	<p><u>Vocational Skills</u></p> <p>Vocational Training and education session seems to be disorganized in terms of documentation; module.</p> <p><u>Knowledge of Special Education</u></p> <p>Teachers divide the same task for all the student. This indicate that teacher do not understand the nature of the students with disabilities and their level of receiving and following the lesson which leads to have passive students in the setting.</p>
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Preliminary discussion

The initial findings based on the above subtheme support the assertion that the implementation of EPPs is compromised in various ways. Using the above Thematic Analysis Method, the researcher was able to elicit one of the element by analysing participants’ responses and observational reflection by the researcher.

This report is concerned with the perception of 10 teachers and 5 heads of department engaged in the delivery of EPPs. For this paper, the researcher has reviewed partially from the interview from five schools, and has drawn meaning from it without looking for multiple instances (Creswell, 2013). The data from this analysis has been used to develop themes by inductively moving from data to theory and back again, until the themes are verified and

validated the findings (Basit, 2010; Chenail, 2012; Golafshani, 2003). The researcher intends to critically analyse the challenges faced by educators in the effective implementation of EPPs in schools, and ascertain the areas of these programmes which require improvement.

In other research, Pantic and Wubbels (2010) stated that a better understanding of the education system, in terms of subject knowledge, pedagogy and curriculum, leads to an effective and organised programme of education. Similarly, Malle et al (2015) underlined the need for staff to be trained in special needs education, to conduct more effective vocational education and training for special needs learners. In terms of theory, Bandura's Social Learning theory supported the notion that special needs learners develop their skills by observing their teachers who, as a role model to their students, should master the necessary knowledge and vocational skills for their EPP to be effective (McLeod, 2011).

Preliminary conclusions

This study provides an analysis of educators' perceptions of EPPs, based on their own experiences. It also reveals the importance of the knowledge and skills of educators in improving the performance of EPPs. In order to enhance the knowledge and skills of educators, EPPs need to become established as a fundamental part of the curriculum, enabling access to financial support to allow educators to acquire the necessary skills needed for the successful implementation of the programme. In summary, the issues of lack of knowledge and skills among the educators can be overcome by preparing them with necessary qualifications and support. Another obstacle affecting successful implementation of EPPs is its exclusion from the curriculum, which means typically means that there is a lack of financial support allocated to either the programme itself, or to the teachers who require the necessary skills.

Next Phase

The researcher will repeat the process of analysing and interpreting the findings in order to finalise the themes.

About the Author

Kumudthaa Muniandy is a PhD candidate and researcher at Liverpool John Moores University under the supervision of Prof. Philip Vickerman, Dr. Amy Whitehead and Prof. Mark Brundrett. The researcher has 12 years teaching experience in the field of Special Education in the Special Education Integrated Programme in Malaysia. Currently, she is working part-time in a vocational support service in Liverpool, United Kingdom. Her research interests are vocational education and training in Special Education.

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