

Autism Spectrum in Classroom and Special Educationist: A Panorama of Challenges in Facilitating Teaching-Learning Process

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Abstract

Autism spectrum disorders are lifelong developmental disabilities that can impact how students understand, what they see, hear and otherwise sense. This can result in difficulties with learning, communication, and behavior in their classroom. To execute this phenomenological research study in private schools of autism, the researchers were keen to dig out and try to listen to the perspectives of the special educationists regarding challenges in facilitating the teaching-learning process. Through semi-structured interviews, data were collected from twenty (20) special educationists working with children diagnosed on the spectrum of autism disorder. The majority of the special educationists reported that during teaching, they must execute various intervention strategies by incorporating different tools provided by the school. Their one major issue was time management because they have to handle every kind of issues arouse by the child and environment, alone during teaching. It was reported that the general education curriculum is also difficult to teach alone because they have not received any kind of specialized curriculum for such kids.

Key Words:

Perspective, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Applied Behavior Analyst, Individual Education Plan, Training

Introduction

Autistic learners require a different kind of needs which make it difficult for the special educationists and caregivers to handle such learners. Special educationists and researchers must exercise a thorough study to provide the effective tools and fruitful strategies that are required to teach learners with autism spectrum disorder efficiently. There are several variables that affect the way disorder influences children, i.e. age of commencement, the way disabilities co-occur, and the required level of treatment (Mandell and Lecavalier, 2014). Learners with ASD can be educated in Special Education Setup as well as inclusive education Setup. However, in the inclusive education setup, an adaptive curriculum must be followed (Banda, Hart, and Liu-Gitz, 2010). Special educationists must be skilled and well trained to teach learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder to meet the learners' needs in an effective manner. The National Research Council suggested the provision of professional training of special educationists, which will be helpful to the special educationists for better assessment of children with ASD and help them to design instructions according to the needs of ASD children in 2001. In the present era, the number of learners with ASD and their needs are growing day by day, and the professionally trained special educationists are getting short in special education as well as in inclusive setup (Simpson, de Boer-Ott, and Smith-Myles, 2003). There is no planned training being provided to pre-service special educationists (Banda, Hart, and Liu-Gitz, 2010; Simpson, de Boer-Ott, and Smith-Myles, 2003). Professional training of high quality should be provided to special educationists (Billingsley, Fall, and Williams Jr, 2006). Special educationists must also be given practical exposure along with the academic portion of studies in both setups. The burnout Ratio of special educationists has increased due to the demanding nature of this job (B. Billingsley, Carlson, and Klein, 2004). For ASD diagnosis, physicians consult the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition (DSM-IV) to decide if a kid meets the criteria-based determination for autism spectrum disorder (Aleman and Jones, 1997). The research of Cohen and Volkmar (1997) expressed that a few individuals with ASD may take part in discussions that flash their attention while ignoring the views of others. Conversely, other individuals with ASD may seldom start the discussion, abstain from Different researches have explored the adequacy of visual timetables with various levels of direction for learners with ASD (Bryan and Gast, 2000); Dooley, Wilczenski, and Torem, 2001). The outcomes showed that learners with changing levels of ASD immediately learned and comprehended the visual timetable with the help, which was later decreased connecting with others, and utilize the insignificant eye to eye connection. Zanolli, Daggett, and Adams (1996) stressed the importance of priming in preparing an inclusive setup, as it relates

individual guidance to entire class instructions and can expand social skills for learners with ASD, as they can be instructed to effectively start discussions with their peers with marginal educator support in inclusive setup. According to the researchers, it can be helpful for learners with ASD, as it offers them the chance to present their strengths and what they appreciate performing.

Humphrey (2008) explained that it makes them feel increasingly good and experience less tension in the school environment since they know ahead of time what occasions will happen. Different researchers have tried the adequacy of visual timetables for learners with ASD. Similarly, researchers have recommended that visual schedules are helpful to the day by day schedule. The paraprofessional works as an assistant and provides very meaningful support to special educationists; however, over 34% of the beginning special educationists find it difficult to collaborate with the paraprofessionals (White and Mason, 2006). It is difficult for them to supervise those paraprofessionals who are more familiar with the school environment and are very much experienced than them, which leads to a professional rift. Beginner special educationists found it difficult to specify the duties and responsibilities of the paraprofessionals, setting a schedule of tasks for paraprofessionals and finding time to collaborate and managing the ill attitude of the paraprofessionals toward learners (Vakil, Welton, O'Connor, and Kline, 2009).

The availability of instructional material was a major concern for the special educationists who experienced difficulties at the beginning of their careers. And the same concern has been highlighted by the special educationists in various studies that they don't have adequate and sufficient materials for teaching their students (B. Billingsley, Carlson, and Klein, 2004). The biggest problem faced by the beginning special educationists is the challenging and problematic behaviors of their students (Griffin et al., 2009). Special educationists find it extremely difficult to control the behaviors while trying to teach them at the same time. The challenging behaviors of the students range from mild to severe, which might include damaging the school property, making suicidal threats, elopement and running away, verbal and sexual abuse, physical aggression or carrying weapons (Carter and Scruggs, 2001).

Special educationists are not adequately trained and equipped to address the diverse learning needs of their students across the wide range of curricular domains, which include academic skills, communication skills, social skills, practical life skills etc. And they don't have enough expertise in implementing differentiated teaching and learning strategies, use of technology, formal and informal assessment procedures, lesson planning and preparing materials according to the grade level of their students (Mastropieri, 2001). This study will help to examine the challenges faced by special educationists in teaching learners with an autism spectrum disorder. The study will help to identify the behavioral pattern leading to burnout and address them in a timely manner to avoid dissatisfaction from the job and giving up. Furthermore, it will also help the administration and mentors to identify the required level of support to the special educationists and identify the stressful factors that lead to affect special educationists' performance and formulate a remedial plan to overcome these challenges. This study will also add to the limited database regarding the identification of challenges faced by special educationists of learners with an autism spectrum disorder. This study will help the special educationists to utilize the teaching approaches, resources and material. This study will help to identify the importance of collaboration between special educationists, professionals, parents and paraprofessionals. This study will provide guidance to manage the learners' behavior and to fix the time regarding issues faced by special educationists. The purpose of this study is to add the voice of special educationists of learners with Autism Spectrum disorder in existing research and to explore what support novice special educationists require while moving from pre-service to in-service so that the school administrators, ministry of education, regional and national governing bodies and respective stakeholders can ensure the effective provision of successful support of special educationists' career. The objectives of this study were to explore the teaching approaches/resources and materials used by school special educationists of learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder and to investigate the difficulties faced by special educationists in structuring curriculum for autistic learners.

Research Methodology

This study was based on the phenomenological method under the umbrella of a qualitative approach to explore the challenges faced by special educationists when teaching learners with spectrum disorder and how they manage to intervene in the problems. The target population of the study was private special education institutes and inclusive schools in the vicinity of Lahore. Data collected from the school special educationists who were dealing with autistic learners. The aim was to explore their problems during the teaching process. The sample consisted of 20 special educationists by using purposive sampling techniques, and these special educationists having a minimum master's degree but most of the special educationists did M Phil in special education. To fulfil the criteria of research, design the researchers established a semi-structured interview guide for data collection. A qualitative approach can describe how people experience different things and how they perceive them. The interview questions were grouped into

two categories. The first group of questions requires the respondents to provide their demographic information along with their age, years of working experience and educational levels. The second category sought to explore the perceived challenges of beginner special educationists in teaching children with autism according to the conceptual framework. The semi-structured interview was validated by the three field experts and declared sound and suitable to collect detailed information from special educationists about what kind of challenges are faced by them and how they teach autistic students.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Thematic analysis technique was used to analyze the collected data.

Special Educationists' Approaches

According to data, special educationists are fully resourced with the materials and applying different teaching strategies like IEP (Individual Education Plan), ABA (Applied Behavior Analyst), Group activities, greeting activities.

One special educationist said that *"Teaching approaches vary from person to person according to their behavior. On the spot, a decision is made according to the needs, severity and response of the child"*.

Five special educationists reported that most Autistic children have a lack of eye contact, poor socialization and poor speech and have different levels from mild to severe. For lack of eye contact, attention-seeking strategies are used; for poor socialization, group activities, greeting activities, turn-taking activities are planned, and for poor speech, vocabulary recognition and then generalization is taught. Special educationists disclosed various teaching resources that are used during teaching, i.e., puzzles, reading books, scissor cutting, different boards for writing, pencil holders, flashcards for speech, problem-solving puzzles, jigsaw puzzles and worksheets. All special educationists were agreed to use puzzles, flashcards, learning toys, jumping gym balls, sand therapy, color books, activity books, paperwork and social activities.

Special educationists revealed that sometimes they devise their own teaching material as per the requirement. They have also keen to get training for developing instructional material as it was highlighted by them that in Pakistan, none of the training institutes is offering training for making low budget teaching gadgets.

Most of the special educationists used the ABA approach with a continuous reinforcement strategy as they claimed that most autistic children have behavior issues. After taking care of behavior issues, the child can learn more things, and it is easy for autistic children to follow that. Some special educationists claimed that group activities are a more effective teaching style. Autistic children are more comfortable with group activity techniques. The children are happier and more motivated in this teaching style.

Reason for Choosing Particular Approach

A particular approach and method will be chosen after looking for the needs of the child for an effective outcome. A specific strategy is used depending upon the issues and problems diagnosed in an autistic child so that after resolving that issue, that child can proceed with further learning. Special educationists cannot use any particular approach for all autistic children. They use different teaching approaches according to the needs and goals set for any particular autistic child. The approach can be selected which suits the children most, and they feel more comfortable and are more interested. Most of the special educationists used ABA. Most special educationists use the ABA approach as their evidence-based practice. We share daily and weekly videos with the parents and BCBA's (Board Certified Behavior Analysts). We carry out data recording of every single trial of autistic children, and the graphs are being monitored by BCBA's. The special educationists are guided about the incoming and ongoing issues. Some special educationists stated that we use the Continuous Reinforcement technique. One of them reported that

"Autistic children learn more and improve more rapidly as the child gets his favorite thing as a re-enforcer and puts more effort and completes his task in a short time".

Difficulties in Managing Behavior

Autistic children keep showing different moods. It is very difficult to teach the autistic child according to the goals set; special educationists always try to teach according to the mood of the autistic children. They get stuck on things and needed to be kept relaxed to get the required results. Most of the participants said that special educationists face a lot of behavior issues related to autistic children, and there is no contribution regarding working out the behavior issues from parents. Children are repeating the same mistakes the next day. Parents' contribution plays a key role in the improvement of autistic children.

One interviewee stated that *"We face a lot of behavior issues related to autistic children, and I used the ABC data sheet for understanding the behavior"*.

Some interviewees talk about that special educationists have enough training to handle behavioral issues of autistic children with patience and try finding the best possible solution for the autistic child.

One of them said that

"We know the behavior issues of all the children and manage the activities accordingly for all the children. Initially, I had been aggressive towards children because of their behaviour; however, by virtue of my six years of experience, I have learned to stay calm and patient while dealing with autistic children and find out the root cause of that behavior as this helps in helping to calm down the children behavior more effectively".

Many special educationists were facing many issues about time management. If the child has bad behavior, the child gets stuck, special educationists don't get sufficient time to achieve the particular goal and all the time is wasted addressing the behavior issue. Goals and session timings must be designed according to the learning level of children.

Discussion

All special educationist showed their interest in getting training to tackle the students in the class. According to the data, special educationists expressed that institutes should arrange refresher courses to update the knowledge of the special educationists. The findings of the study show that pre-service and in-service practices affected the special educationists' performance and had a positive impact on the students. The National Research Council suggested the provision of professional training to the special educationists, which will be helpful to the special educationists for better assessment of children with ASD and help them to design instructions according to the needs of ASD, in 2001. Nowadays, the number of learners with ASD has increased, and the professionally trained special educationists are getting short. There is no training being provided to pre-service special educationists (Simpson, de Boer-Ott, and Smith-Myles, 2003).

According to the study, special educationists were simultaneously applying different strategies to manage with diverse characteristics of their learners on the autism spectrum, like developing group learning, hands-on training, role-playing and modelling. The behavior of autistic children are very challenging and problematic (Otis-Wilborn, Winn, Griffin, and Kilgore, 2005). Furthermore, the majority of special educationists reported that they need more training and behaviour management courses to handle the behavior problems of the children and also arrange some counselling sessions for the parents as well because the child needs more drill practices of behavior modification.

Participants showed a positive attitude towards the children in the mainstream. Special educationists expressed that the inclusion of ASD learners is good practice. They learn more and get their social skills improved. On the other hand, only 01 teachers stated that these students should be taught in a separate setup for escaping the rest of the students from disturbance as Parker-Katz and Bay (2008) stated that the special educationists play a very important role in students; success and failure, as it is stated by Zarafshan, Mohammadi, Ahmadi, and Arsalani (2013) that expectations become higher in the mainstream setup. But it has a positive effect on the ASD students' growth. When ASD learners are placed in the mainstream, they tried to access the opportunities to learn new things as the general education curriculum makes them attentive about learning. The learners being taught in mainstream give a better outcome in academic performance rather than the learners studying in special education.

Time management is a difficult task for special educationists. The special educationists indicated that for time management, they require help and coordination of staff. Special educationists need to deliver the learners according to their level of learning capacity and handle the rest of the issues occurring during the session. According to the findings, special educationists claim that ASD learners have different learning speeds; sometimes, they are not ready to listen to special educationists. So, special educationists are unable to achieve the particular goal, and all the time is wasted addressing the behavior issues of ASD learners.

Conclusion

This study revealed special educationists' perceived challenges in teaching learners with ASD. Precisely, it adds data about the problem faced by special educationists and what kind of corrective measures should be taken to overcome these problems. This study is qualitative in nature. In this study, the researcher used semi-structured interviews as an instrument for data collection. This study highlights the challenges faced by special educationists. Data collected from special educationists who work with ASD students. After analyzing the data of the study, the researcher concluded that pre-service and in-service training is very important for special educationists' professional development and for better outcomes. Special educationists applying different kinds of teaching strategies according to the needs of learners, and all kinds of resources and materials are provided by the institution. Sometimes, special educationists develop their own material according to the needs. The special educationists reported that structuring the curriculum is a difficult task. They face many difficulties because the learners do not go through the proper

procedure of assessment. So, it is a difficult and time taking procedure to structure a curriculum. Few special educationists claim that they have a separate teacher for structuring the curriculum. They just tell them about the students' behavior, observations and few required questions by special educationists. Generally, the findings indicate that administration and mentors' support is very important. All special educationists claim that the school administration and mentors are very cooperative and supportive. On the other hand, special educationists highlighted a few areas in which they require more support and training by the school administration. The results show that the collaboration of special educationists, parents and paraprofessionals is very necessary. Parents' non-cooperative and unsupportive behavior of paraprofessionals creates problems for the special educationists in teaching with learners with ASD. Special educationists expressed that it is a good practice to include learners with ASD in the mainstream. Only one teacher claimed that they should be taught in a separate special education setup. Special educationists highlighted different challenges that can be encountered in inclusive setup like; classroom management, more requirement of more resources, more training of special educationists and special educationists are required to put more effort. Time management is a very challenging task for the teacher. They face many problems regarding time management. So, special educationists show interest in getting training sessions and support from school management to handle the time management related issues. They gave different suggestions like; break after two sessions to get relaxed etc.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are proposed for future research by reviewing the conclusion of the study. It is recommended to provide professional development and training sessions to the special educationists, so they gain knowledge and skills which is required in teaching learners with ASD. Institutes should make sure the provision of human and material resources to the special educationists and also provide the training about updated strategies, material and resources. Another recommendation is that the school administration should provide adequate support to the special educationists to handle the issues and problems they faced regarding students. Behavior management workshops and seminars should be arranged for better knowledge to handle the behavior issues of the children.

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