

Against All Odds: Factors Contributing to the Success of Students with Special Needs

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ABSTRACT

In the Malaysian education system, students with special needs, such as the deaf, blind and those with learning difficulties, who follow the national curriculum are given the opportunity to sit for the Malaysian Standardized examinations at the end of Year 6, Form 3, and Form 5. The objective of this paper is to discuss factors contributing to the academic achievement of deaf and blind students based on the reports by their teachers, students and school administrators. More specifically, the paper highlights the psycho-social profiles of the students who excel in the examinations in terms of their motivations and the influence of their peers, parents, and teachers towards their performance, as reported by themselves and their teachers. This is a descriptive study which employed both the quantitative and qualitative approaches. Quantitative data were analysed to examine the special needs students' performance in their examinations and the administrators' perspectives on the factors relating to their performances. In general, most of the deaf and blind students scored grades E and D for the standardized exams. However, a small number did well in the standardized exams by obtaining As and Bs, indicating that they have the potentials to succeed academically. The factors which influence the achievements are internal factors (self-motivation, diligence and hard work, as well as possessing good memory) and external factors (peer influence, parental involvement, teacher encouragement, and school support).

Keywords: Specials needs students, academic achievement

INTRODUCTION

In the Malaysian education system, students with special needs, such as the deaf, blind and those with learning difficulties, who follow the national curriculum, are given the opportunity to sit for the Malaysian Standardized examinations at the end of Year 6, Form 3, and Form 5. It is hoped that these students can be at par with the typical students and become productive members of the society. This is in line with the government's quest to achieve equality of educational opportunities. It is however not easy for these students to prepare themselves

for the examinations and this is mainly due to their disabilities such as blindness and deafness. It is conceivable that their performance in these examinations is generally poor. Nonetheless, these students are allowed to pursue their studies in the secondary and upper secondary levels and sit for examinations at these levels even though they lack the basic skills crucial to perform well in these examinations. The challenges faced by their teachers are equally great. However, there are some students who have performed well in these examinations. Thus, an examination of the factors contributing to the success of these

students will shed some light on efforts which can be expanded by all those responsible for the education of students with special needs so as to help them to prepare well for these examinations. In an examination-oriented system such as ours, this is important as the students' future in terms of further education and jobs rely heavily on their examination performance.

In this paper, the focus is on the academic performance of the deaf and blind students. Vygotsky's theory of Cognitive Development (1978) was utilized as a basis of discussion. According to Omrod (2006), Vygotsky believed that adults in a society foster children's cognitive development in an intentional and systematic way. In more specific, adults continually engage children in meaningful and challenging activities and help them perform the activities successfully. Vygotsky (1978) also emphasized on the importance of society and culture in promoting cognitive growth. One of the major assumptions of this theory is that adults in every culture will pass down not only physical tools to help their children survive, but also cognitive tools such as strategies, maps, systems, and so on. These physical and cognitive tools will assist and enhance the development of children in the particular culture. Another important assumption is that children as adaptive individuals are able to accomplish more challenging tasks when they are assisted and guided by someone more advanced.

Studies have shown that there are several factors which contribute to the academic success of these students; these include parental involvement, teachers' and peer's influences, and the students themselves. The student factor can be seen as pivotal for as Vygotsky (cited in Daniels, 2001; Scheetz, 2001) had stated, the personal psychological process of the individual depends to a great extent upon the individual's exposure to social interactions which are shaped by the culture where the individual lives. Vygotsky went on to say that the social environment has been proven to be the foundation in concept attainment, thinking,

attitude, and the acquisition of skills. Therefore, the socio-cultural environment is the catalyst that forms the individual's awareness which later directs his or her attention to the stimuli.

Parents, teachers, and peer groups form the socio-cultural environment of the individuals. According to Vygotsky (cited in Daniels, 2001; Scheetz, 2001), the key to academic development is to be aware of the child's intellectual development and guide him or her to reach a more complex intellectual level. This aspect of Vygotsky's theory has been highlighted by several findings, particularly by the studies related to disabled children. Among other, Luckner and Muir (2001) and Luckner and Stewart (2003) found that deaf children had shown academic success when parents involved themselves in the children's learning. In addition, Ngeow (1999), Schargel and Smink (2001) stated that parental involvement is a major predictor of children's academic achievement in school. This is because parents provide a conducive learning environment, determine their children's ability levels with reasonable expectations and actively involve themselves in their children's learning in and out of schools (Stewart and Kluwin, 2001). Meanwhile, studies by Sandra (2000) and Miedel and Reynolds (2000) have proven that parental involvement imposes great effects on their children's academic success. They found that children performed better in their school tests, attend school regularly and complete their school works. Moreover, the children also showed positive behaviour and attitudes. Shargel and Smink (2001) also found that when parents involved themselves in their children's learning, they were more successful, achieved better grades, have good school attendance, consistently completed their school work, showed good behaviour and positive attitudes, with teachers' and parents' good expectations of them, and fewer instances of anti-social behaviour among the children. Similarly, a study by Antia, Jones, Reed and Kreimeyer (2009) on 197 deaf students also showed that parental

participation in school is significantly related to academic outcomes. In this study, the deaf children mentioned that their self-motivation was influenced much by their parents and families.

For optimum learning for the deaf and blind children, another important element in the socio-cultural environment is the support services. Teachers play a very significant role in helping these students realize their potentials. According to Cosby (1998), a true test for a healer is to heal people who need it most. Children could be altered by simple motivational factors like direct role models and forming emotional bonds with them. In other words, a teacher has to teach from the heart, and the children's biggest needs seem to be a teacher who cares about them and their individual needs. Therefore, the measure of a great teacher is working with the most raw, unrefined students and making a change. In support of Cosby's statement, Kritzer (2009) postulated that high quality mediation on deaf children could help improve Mathematical abilities, and teachers could make a big difference by encouraging these children to think and engaging them in cognitively challenging questions.

Peer support is another important influence to students' learning. There are three commonly cited benefits of peer influence on students' learning, namely, learning of academic skills, the development of social behaviours, and classroom discipline. Many young people with disabilities (deaf and blind particularly) have few friends and limited support from peers (Gottlieb and Leyser, 1981). In fact, they often report feelings of rejection and isolation. The impact of social isolation is far-reaching, affecting not only friendships, but also academic success (Hawken, Duran and Kelly, 1991). Benefits from positive relationships with others exist for everyone, including students with disabilities. Many types of relationships are important to development. One approach is to successfully integrate isolated students into academic environments so as to help create informal peer support groups and friendships. Peers can serve some of the same important functions which are

generally associated with adult mentors. Peers can act as role models, offer friendship, advice and information, promote a sense of belonging, and empower one another (Byers-Lang and McCall, 1993; Kram and Isabella, 1985; Stainback, Stainback and Wilkinson, 1992). Moreover, students can discover their potential to participate in academic opportunities and careers by interacting with others with similar interests and concerns.

OBJECTIVE

The objective of this paper is to discuss the factors which contribute to the academic achievement of deaf and blind students based on the reports by the teachers, students, and school administrators. In more specific, the paper highlights the psycho-social profiles of the students who have excelled in their examinations, in terms of their motivations and the influence of their peers, parents and teachers towards their performance, as reported by themselves and their teachers. In addition, insights from school administrators and teachers regarding ways to help students with special needs prepare for the examinations are also highlighted.

METHODOLOGY

This is a descriptive study which employs both the quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative data were analysed to examine the special needs students' performance in the examinations and administrators' perspectives on factors relating to students' performance. Special needs students are those with specific learning needs. In this study, they include students who are blind and deaf. Retrospective qualitative data were analysed from the interviews with the teachers of the students who did well in the examinations as well as with the students themselves. The teachers of these students were asked to recall their experiences with them while they were preparing for the respective examinations. Likewise, students were also asked to highlight the factors which contribute to their success in the examinations.

In this study, excellent students refer to the blind and deaf students who have scored at least 1A in the standardized examinations (UPSR/PMR/SPM). Fifty teachers and 35 excellent students were interviewed from two types of schools, the Special Education School (SKPK and SMPK) and the normal schools with special classes (Integrated) (Table 1).

The teachers were interviewed using the focused group interview technique, while the students were interviewed individually, guided by open-ended questions. These interviews were done to obtain information from various sources and to ensure validity through triangulation. Triangulation is one of the strategies to enhance internal validity by using multiple investigators, multiple sources of data or combining multiple methods to strengthen and confirm the findings (Merriam, 1998). In this study, source triangulation was applied. The data collected and generated from students were confirmed and verified with other source, involving teachers.

Schools involved in the study were Special Schools and Integrated Schools where students with special needs are integrated with students in the main stream. Students who were interviewed obtained at least one A in the respective examinations. The quantitative data were analysed using SPSS to compute descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations. The qualitative data were analysed using NVivo software. The interviews were first transcribed and converted into RTF files. The files were then used as the source data for NVivo. This software helps manage

and organize themes which were formed from the excerpts of the interview data. Using open coding, the themes were categorized accordingly.

FINDINGS

Achievement of Students with Special Needs in Examinations

The findings of this study show that the overall mean score for every subject in the UPSR (Primary School Assessment Test) taken at grade six between the years 2000 and 2005 was between Grade E (1) and Grade D (2). This is very low considering there are five grades altogether ranging from Grade A (5) to Grade E (1). This pattern also indicates that the blind and deaf students have problems in all the subjects. Science seems to be the most difficult subject to score for them with the mean scores falling between 1.31 and 1.85. This means that in the overall, the students can barely score D for the subject. The same is also true for their performance in the examinations taken in the secondary level. Majority of these students obtained Es for each subject taken in the Lower Secondary School Assessment (PMR) and the Malaysian Certificate of Education (SPM). However, there were some students who did well in these examinations and obtained As and Bs for some of the papers they sat for. Although the number is small, it indicates that students with special needs have the potential to succeed academically when given the support and care they need.

TABLE 1
The number of the teachers and students interviewed according to their schools

	Number of teachers and students interviewed					
	Primary (UPSR)		Total	Secondary (PMR & SPM)		Total
	SKPK	Integrated		SMPK	Integrated	
Teachers interviewed	12	19	31	6	13	50
Students interviewed	-	-	-	15	20	35

Psychosocial Profile of the Students who Excel in the Examinations

This study utilized the interview method to gather information on the psychosocial profile and the characteristics of the students who excelled. The psychosocial profile refers to the internal and surrounding external characteristics of these students, to which their success can be attributed. The characteristics were compiled from the interviews conducted with the teachers and the students themselves. The findings show that there are several internal and external factors influencing their learning and achievement. All the factors individually and collectively influence the motivation and effort of the students to learn and excel in their studies.

Theme 1: Internal Factors

Self-motivation

Students with special needs who excelled in the examinations were able to self-motivate themselves towards achieving their academic goals. This was clearly stated by R1, who said;

“If there’s effort, you can succeed. I try to motivate (myself), work harder”. (R1 Form 4 is a visually impaired student from the integrated school)

Another respondent, R16 (Form 4 is a visually impaired student from the integrated school) had her own strategies for self-motivation;

“I like to write, sometimes I wrote letters to myself, and then I read them back to motivate myself. At home, I keep a lot of motivational posters”. (R16)

In addition, they are also aware of the importance of education for their future and continuously use this to tell themselves to work harder;

“I normally (when I learn) think of what I want to become in the future.

Are there (for people with disability) job opportunities? So I have to study harder to get a better job. Put more effort. God willing, (I have) a better future if I put more effort...” (R12 Form 6 is a visually impaired student from the integrated school).

Another respondent, R11 (a Form 1 learning disabled student from the integrated school) also admitted that thinking about the future helped motivate himself. He wants “bright future and a not difficult life”, and because of that he was “enthusiastic and hardworking” in his studies. Some respondents used the success of others, especially family members to increase their motivation. For example, R15 (a Form 4 visually impaired student from the integrated school) said that;

“One more thing....all my brothers are in the university. I’m the only daughter. If I don’t make it to the university, I will really feel ashamed of myself. If people see the only daughter does not succeed (in going to the university), I feel like (I am) no use. I want to be like them (the brothers). My eldest brother has gone overseas. My father also used to say that if I want people (to look up to) for motivation, I don’t have to search far, I have my own brothers.”(R15)

Hardworking and diligent

Many of the teachers interviewed said that the excellent students possess a high level of diligence and perseverance. According to T1;

“.....He is very disciplined in studying.....although he doesn’t know, (he answer sheet was torn away from the exercise book), he will do himself. Then he will check his answers. If he is not satisfied, he will ask, why is his answer like this...and not like this?” (T1)

The teachers interviewed used the expressions such as, “put all his effort”, “wants to really understand”, “can apply”, “very hardworking” and “very obedient” to describe the students. The excellent students were also perceived as;

“always want (to know) more...I teach them in like 80%...but their effort is more than 100%.” (T12)

These positive attributes were also highlighted by the other teachers. Among other, T5 said that;

“She puts a lot of effort and works hard. That’s important. She’ll never give up. She’ll always want additional information. What is taught in the class is never sufficient for her. She wants more. More than other students.” (T5)

T5 also added in two terms “*active and proactive*” in describing the excellent students.

Strong memory

Among the special characteristic of the excellent students, especially those who are visually impaired was having “strong memory”. These teachers repeatedly highlighted the attributes among the students, which apparently helped them relate and transfer previous knowledge to new situations. The teachers mentioned the ability to “get very quickly (what was taught)” and “can apply”. According to T12;

“...can remember...what was thought in March (months before), they can still remember. Their memory is strong”. (T12)

Theme 2: External Factors

Peer influence and help

The respondents also said that friends greatly influenced their achievement in the examinations.

According to R1 (a Form 4, visually impaired student from the integrated school);

“I like to study with friends. Because they have (knowledge) that we don’t know, we can ask and share experience.” (R1)

Studying with friends apparently created a healthy competition among the students to excel in their academic tasks. This was found to be a strong motivator for the students in their learning. According to R13 (a Form 6 visually impaired student from the integrated school);

“I compete a lot with my friends. If my friends score high, I normally will try to get the same. My friends gave me a lot of encouragement”. (R13)

Family encouragement and support

Many teachers and students interviewed mentioned “*supportive family*” as one of the most important factors influencing their academic achievements. For instance, R15 (a visually impaired Form 4 student from the integrated school) elaborated on how his family had helped him;

“When I come back (from the hostel) father prepared timetable for me.... asked me to learn in the morning. He said to study hard...so that I can get a good job. Mama is also like him....like to tell stories of how it was when she was poor. My brother...he likes to challenge me ... if I get (what he challenged me), he gives me (a present)”. (R15)

Families were also reported to have given continuous encouragement to avoid them from giving up. R16 (a visually impaired Form 4 student from the integrated school) elaborated on how his father had motivated him;

"I am close to my dad; I have a younger brother who is blind. Dad says study hard be a teacher to students like me..." (R16)

The teachers cited the same thing, including parents communicating and working with the school "no matter what time it is". Parents of excellent students also "teach and guide them at home", "do exercises with them" and "shower them with love". The parents also give reinforcements to the students when they manage to achieve something. For example, T10 (UPSR teacher for the blind, integrated school) observed that;

"Their parents are highly committed and work well with teachers..." (T10)

Two teachers (T12 and T11, UPSR teachers for the deaf) reported that the parents of one of their excellent students hired tutors for their child during the weekends, and the mother of this child would do exercises meant for her child first and checked her answers with the teachers so that she could understand the concepts properly to be able to help her child with her home work.

Teacher encouragement and support

Among the influential surrounding factors which have contributed to the success of these students are the teachers' encouragement and support. The students reported that their teachers have always told them to;

"not stop learning. Must prove ...must move forward" (R4, a Form 1, visually impaired student from integration school).

This is supported by R12 (a visually impaired Form 6 student from the integrated school) who said that;

"Teachers help me by giving me tuition classes and (exercises with) past years questions".

Overall, many of the respondents who had been interviewed attributed their success to helpful and supportive teachers. Furthermore, the teachers also reported that they had gone the extra mile to help their students prepare well for the examinations. Giving extra classes, having drills in answering past examination questions, teaching them using various approaches, giving continuous motivations, and monitoring their progress carefully were some of their efforts to help their students do well in the examinations. In addition, the teachers are also sensitive to the fact that their students need to work extra hard and the stress that they are facing. Humour and fun were often imbued in their teaching to encourage students who are tired or bored. Commenting on one of their excellent students, T1 (UPSR teacher for the deaf, Special Elementary School) said that;

"we know her too well, just like our own child, she is too focused and does not know how to have fun, when we put some humour to our teaching she seems surprised and responded well....." (T1)

Other factors

The teachers and the administrators from the special and integrated schools also suggested some crucial factors to increase the achievement of students with special needs in the examinations. Among them are the quality of teachers' skills, workshops and programmes for the students to increase their motivation and learning skills, improvement of the infrastructure, and strengthening teaching and learning efforts. The teachers added that the awareness and sensitivity of the school administration of the special needs of the students contributed significantly towards the success of these students. This is because the

school administrators will be more focused to the special programmes conducted in the school and become actively involved in the planning, monitoring, and evaluating the progress of the programmes. As financial constraint could be a limiting factor for the programmes and the students themselves, the school administrators play a great role in ensuring that a substantial amount of fund is allocated for the programmes and the students.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In general, most of the deaf and blind students scored grades E and D for the standardized exams. However, a small number did well in the standardized exams by obtaining As and Bs, and this indicates that they have potentials to succeed academically. The factors influencing their achievement include internal factors (self-motivation, diligence and hard work as well as possessing good memory) and external factors (peer influence, parental involvement, teacher encouragement, and school support).

As compared with typical students, the students with special needs who have excelled in their studies show that they have characteristics which can lead to academic excellence. Nevertheless, they need more support from the significant others to succeed. If the significant people around them (family, friends, teachers, and school administrators) give them good support, these students can actually perform well despite all their limitations. As this study has found out, the deaf and blind students perform well when they compete with other students. In fact, they become self-driven towards achievement and strive to achieve the goal they have set. Therefore, parents, teachers, and school administrators should support them by giving corresponding encouragement. This view is supported by the studies such as Miedel and Reynolds (2000) who have concluded that parental involvement has a positive effect on special needs students' success in school, and the Strathclyde Research Centre regarding

teachers' roles in helping these students achieve their potentials.

Meanwhile, climate of the school and classrooms must be conducive enough to offer productive and enjoyable learning, along with extra efforts at teaching these students, go a long way in helping more deaf and blind students to succeed academically. These students need their schools to help their parents to be more involved in their education and ensure a conducive environment for their learning. They need the relevant authorities to be more sensitive to their needs in terms of the format of the examination questions as well as the implementation of the examinations. This is important as these students should not face problems which are not due to their cognitive handicap during the examinations, but rather to their physical handicap. They also need teachers who are well-trained to understand their needs and act accordingly.

This study has shown that Vygotsky's Cognitive Development Theory is also applicable to children with physical disabilities. The role of supportive adults, as well as the cognitive and non-physical tools provided by the culture (such as Braille writing and sign language) have been proven to help these children achieve their maximum potentials.

It is therefore crucial that all those responsible for the education of students with special needs, namely the parents, teachers, schools, and the Ministry of Education, recognize the fact that although these students are mentally retarded and have multiple handicaps, they have the potentials to succeed academically. Hence, teaching them to excel academically is not a 'lost cause', provided that contributory factors discussed above are creatively enhanced.

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