

Teacher Trainees' Strategies for Managing the Behaviours of Students with Special Needs

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Received: July 22, 2014 Accepted: November 5, 2014 Online Published: December 22, 2014

doi:10.5539/ies.v7n13p271

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/ies.v7n13p271>

Abstract

This study aimed to determine how a group of teacher trainees handled challenging behaviour by students during teaching practice. A total of 35 teacher trainees from the special education programme of a local university were chosen as respondents. A questionnaire based on a 5-point Likert-type scale was administered in this study. The data were analysed descriptively involving frequencies and percentages, mean scores and standard deviations. The results showed that the most frequent types of challenging behaviours shown by the students were joking and chatting with friends, as well as making noise, while the teacher was teaching. The most frequent action taken by the respondents to prevent the negative behaviours was to immediately reprimand the students and advise them. The respondents reported that the challenges they faced in managing behaviours in the classroom included limited time to manage behaviours, lack of skills and knowledge regarding behaviour management and heavy teaching workloads. The findings of this study imply that future teachers and teacher trainees should be exposed to knowledge and skills regarding behaviour management of students with special needs in real settings before they begin their teaching practice.

Keywords: teacher trainees, challenging behaviour, managing behaviour, special education programme

1. Introduction

A behaviour problem is defined as an action that a student should not demonstrate while in the classroom. These actions if done consistently and continuously over time will bring negative effects on students' learning progress and prevent their social acceptance both in and outside of the classroom. Among the specific characteristics used to describe students with challenging behaviours listed by Zirpoli (2013) are disruptive, non-compliant; impulsive; does not pay attention; or demonstrates hyperactivity, aggression, temper tantrums, stereotypes and depression. Duchame and Adamo (2005) stated that the number of behaviour problems in children with disabilities is higher than in children who are typically developed. In addition, behaviour problems bring enormous challenges to the classroom, especially in terms of behaviour and classroom management.

The main goal of behaviour management in special education class is to increase appropriate behaviour and decrease inappropriate behaviour among students with special needs. The success of teachers in terms of behaviour management is one of the indicators of good classroom management. Thus, the earlier the behaviour management programmes or interventions are started, the more effective they will be in preventing children from directly facing the possibility that their negative behaviour that will affect academic performance. Therefore, it is important that special education teachers develop skills in managing the diversity of negative behaviours among special needs students in the teaching and learning process.

For special education teacher trainees, working with students with special needs who have a variety of individual behaviours is a new experience. Amerrudin (2005) asserted that the requirement to educate students with special needs is not as easy as might be expected and usually requires patience and commitment. Thus, it is important for future teachers to equip themselves with the knowledge and skills related to behaviour management in preparation to face these situations. Knowledge of typical types of behaviours shown by children with special needs, the actions taken and the common challenges faced in managing the behaviour of these students provide preliminary information to teachers about the actual classroom climate.

Ali and Salleh (2008) states that teachers must have specific training to work with students with special needs.

The lack of knowledge and experience in handling students with behaviour problems in the classroom also reduces the effectiveness of the teaching and learning process. Ho (2005) reported that nearly half (41.3%) of a sample study of special education teachers of students with learning problems say they have difficulty in implementing behaviour management programmes in the classroom. This finding may be caused by a lack of exposure to such students or of experiences in managing students with special needs. In particular, few studies have described the exposure of teachers to behaviour problems by students (Hastings, 2005). Therefore, early exposure to negative behaviours of students in the classroom is critical, and this is one important aspect of this study.

Accordingly, teachers need to have extensive knowledge about the unique characteristics of students so that they can design and implement educational programmes that emphasise the strengths and needs of individual students (Salend & Sylvestre, 2005). In addition, Smith et al. (2003) asserted that teachers need to identify the reasons for students' behaviour problems and help them improve their behaviour. Students with special needs should be viewed individually in terms of strengths and weaknesses because of the unique characteristics of each student.

In addition, various strategies can be used to manage the negative behaviours of students. All children, especially disruptive children, generally respond better to positive reinforcement and rewards for good behaviour than to scolding or punishment for negative behaviour. This is because negative attention can lead to more negative behaviour (Cook, 2005). In addition, Cook (2005) suggested that teachers are encouraged to ignore negative behaviour that remains at a low level. This means that they should focus more on praise or reinforcement of positive behaviour. However, negative behaviours that create an unsafe situation should be given special attention, even if the behaviour is infrequent. This approach will prevent the behaviour from continuing and having an adverse effect on the students showing the behaviour and on other students.

In conclusion, behaviour management in the classroom should be given special attention. Students who are less interested in learning, usually behaved aggressively, had cognitive disabilities, such as the inability to focus, did not understand concepts and quickly forgot what they had been taught. These students also displayed negative social behaviours, such as making noise, breaking the rules and talking with friends during lessons. This suggests the need for all parties to cooperate to address these behaviour problems so that the educational potential of the students is not affected (Jelas et al., 2012). Therefore, this study aimed to investigate a variety of negative behaviours shown by students with special needs and to identify the types of actions taken and the challenges faced by teachers in handling those behaviours.

2. Methods

This study adopted a survey research design in which questionnaires were used to gather data. A total of 35 special education teacher trainees at a local university were selected specifically as samples for this study. These teacher trainees had just finished going through their teaching practice for 10 weeks in schools. The questionnaire used in this study was adapted from the questionnaire developed by the Zuria et al. (1999). This questionnaire consists of 4 parts with items covering respondents' demography (Part A), the type of negative behaviour most frequently shown by students with special needs (Part B), the most common action taken by teacher trainees (Part C) and the challenges faced by teacher trainees in handling negative behaviour among students with special needs (Part D). A Likert-type scale consisting of five items was used for the responses. Part A consists of seven questions, Part B consists of 30 questions, part C consists of 21 questions and part D consists of 10 questions. Data were analysed descriptively using mean scores and standard deviations.

3. Results and Discussion

Discussion of the study was based on three main aspects: the most frequent behaviour shown by children with special needs in the classroom, the most frequent action taken by teachers to prevent the negative behaviours shown by these children in the classroom and the most frequent challenges faced by teacher trainees in handling negative behaviour among special needs students. Means and standard deviations were used to analyse the data.

3.1 The Most Frequent Types of Negative Behaviours Shown by Students with Special Needs in the Classroom

Table 1. The most frequent types of negative behaviours shown by students with special needs in the classroom

Item	Statement	Mean (m)	Standard Deviation (sd)
2)	Joking with friends while the teacher teaches.	3.49	0.78
4)	Talking while the teacher teaches.	3.43	0.95
6)	Making noise.	3.37	1.17
1)	Not paying attention while the teacher teaches.	3.34	0.76
8)	Daydreaming while the teacher teaches.	3.17	0.86
7)	Coming late to class.	3.11	0.99
9)	Making faces and showing no interest in learning.	2.94	0.10
14)	Copying homework from a friend.	2.94	1.03
15)	Screaming.	2.94	1.03
17)	Making nonsense jokes that affect teaching and learning sessions.	2.91	0.89

The most frequent type of negative behaviour shown by students with special needs based on the experience of teacher trainees is off-task behaviour. This type of behaviour is indicated in the items that recorded the highest mean values, which are joking with friends while the teacher teaches ($M=3.49$), talking while the teacher teaches ($M=3.43$), making noise ($M=3.37$), not paying attention while the teacher teaches ($M=3.34$), and daydreaming while the teacher teaches ($M=3.17$).

Although the study did not examine the cause for such behaviours, certain assumptions can be made regarding the environment of teaching and the classroom environment. Students may become bored and be unable to focus on teaching, which makes them consider other activities to be more enjoyable. These findings are supported by Jelas et al. (2012), who claimed that children who have difficulty in learning are more likely to not pay attention and are more easily distracted than other children. In addition, Poulou and Norwich (2000) reported that lack of concentration is a behaviour with high frequency among children with special needs who have emotional and behavioural problems.

One situation in which students show negative behaviours occurs when their needs or requirements are not met. This effect can be attributed to the Maslow hierarchy of needs, which is based on the notion that every human need should be met according to specific levels of physiological needs, safety, love, self-efficacy and self-actualisation. Thus, negative behaviours displayed by students may be caused by their perception that one of these requirements is not being met. For example, if students sense that they are not loved or are being ignored, they may exhibit certain behaviours to attract the attention of teachers or friends in the classroom.

The diversity of behaviour problems that exist in the classroom is multi-dimensional in nature and is a form of disclosure of the problems faced by students. In any case, teachers must be able to distinguish between students with behaviour problems and without problems, and the most important aspect of this is that teachers should be alert to the implications of behaviours shown by students so that the behaviours do not worsen to the point that they negatively influence learning. The following section will discuss the types of actions taken by teachers in handling negative behaviours displayed by children with special needs in the classroom.

3.2 The Most Frequent Actions Taken by Teacher Trainees to Prevent Negative Behaviours Shown by Special Needs Students in the Classroom

Table 2 presents the seven most frequent actions taken by teacher trainees to prevent negative behaviours by students in the classroom.

Table 2. The most frequent actions taken by teacher trainees to prevent negative behaviours by students in the classroom

Item	Statement	Min (m)	Sisihan Piawai (sp)
1)	Reprimanding students immediately.	3.94	0.73
2)	Advising students.	3.91	0.66
12)	Praising students who show good behaviour.	3.80	0.96
19)	Requiring all students in the class to do light exercises immediately (deep breathing, jumping jacks, etc.)	2.77	1.19
17)	Ignoring the students.	2.74	1.31
3)	Asking the students to stand up.	2.51	0.95
10)	Using metaphors to explain the disadvantages of negative behaviour.	2.34	1.10

Behaviour management is a skill that requires practice and patience. This is because a change in behaviour among students requires a certain amount of time. Behaviour management refers to a variety of techniques designed to modify and eliminate undesirable behaviours and increase desired behaviours through reinforcement, skills training and modifying the environment (Ho 2005). For this purpose, various strategies or actions can be taken to ensure the effectiveness of the behaviour management programme. In the meantime, Fetter-Harrot et al. (2009) stressed that to initiate a strategy for dealing with negative behaviour, it is important for administrators to take into account the causes and the purpose of the behaviour shown before trying to determine the appropriate behaviour to be replaced.

This study demonstrates that many teachers still believe that reprimanding students immediately ($M=3.94$) and advising them ($M=3.91$) are suitable practices for handling the negative behaviours of students. Both actions are often used because they may take less time and can verbally demonstrate a clear error on the part of students immediately after the undesirable behaviour occurs. This will ensure that students are able to learn what behaviours are discouraged and to not repeat them. Giving advice is a common action taken by teachers in handling discipline problems in the classroom. However, the method used should be tailored to the situation and the students themselves because if the action is too frequently used, students may become desensitised to it, which can decrease the effectiveness of the action.

In addition, praising students ($M = 3.80$) who show good behaviour is among the most frequent actions taken by the teacher trainees. This is the most commonly used form of positive reinforcement. However, there are many forms of positive reinforcement. Positive social reinforcements such as offering praise and appreciation are easy to apply and provide a spontaneous response in which the action can give immediate feedback for good behaviour. Meanwhile, teachers also can use other approaches, such as time out, not paying attention to the students and separating the students' seats. However, these actions should be done with the correct techniques so that students do not feel neglected or feel free to do anything they please when they are ignored by teachers.

Overall, teachers have taken various actions they deem appropriate to prevent negative behaviours among students, including actions in the form of positive reinforcement, negative reinforcement and penalties. Almg and Sheckman (2007) found that in reality, most teachers use limited responses more often than responses to help the students. Naturally, limited responses usually consist of judging students and include threats, advice, fines and denying special rights to the students. Such approaches create distance between the teacher and the students, which limits communication and interaction and thus does not contribute to the successful integration of students who exhibit challenging behaviours in the classroom. Therefore, the selection of appropriate actions or strategies is critical to ensure that the objectives of the behaviour management strategy are achieved.

Thus, teachers and prospective teachers should remember that any action taken should be commensurate with the situation. The action chosen may not be suitable for all teachers or students, and there is no action that could be called the best action. Rather, the best action depends on the individual characteristics of behavioural diversity that exist in each student. The following section will discuss matters that are considered as challenges or obstacles faced by teachers in handling negative behaviours displayed by children with special needs in the classroom.

3.3 The Most Frequent Challenges Faced by Teacher Trainees in Managing Negative Behaviours among Students with Special Needs

Table 3 presents the five the most frequent challenges faced by teachers in managing negative behaviours among students with special needs.

Table 3. The most frequent challenges faced by teachers in managing negative behaviours among students

Item	Statement	Mean (m)	Standard Deviation (sd)
6)	I have a limited amount of time to plan for a behaviour management programme and to provide lesson plans and teaching aids every day.	3.37	0.84
3)	I have doubts about my level of knowledge and skills to deal with negative behaviour shown by students during the teaching and learning session.	3.29	0.92
4)	I fear that the teaching and learning session will be affected, and as a result, learning objectives will be not achieved when behaviour management programmes are being conducted.	3.20	0.90
7)	I am burdened with many school tasks that prevent me from planning and implementing behaviour management programmes.	3.17	0.92
10)	I cannot determine the suitable behaviour management methods to be implemented for each student when students show such a variety of behaviours.	3.00	0.91

There are many challenges faced by teachers in managing negative behaviours shown by students with special needs in the classroom. Those challenges may originate from the teacher trainees themselves, the school or the students with special needs. Jennings and Greenberg (2009) stated that challenging behaviours among children put pressure on teachers, who reported feeling frustrated, angry, tired, sad and lost, and all of these feelings occurred at a high rate. This is consistent with Amerrudin (2005), who reported that the root cause of stress among special education teachers is the task of managing children with various modes and capabilities. Therefore, it is important for teachers to have knowledge about the forms of challenges they face in handling negative behaviour by students.

In this study, the most significant challenge for teachers is related to the time constraints they experience in planning a behaviour management programme and in providing lesson plans and teaching aids every day. In addition, teachers fear that the teaching and learning session will be affected, and as a result, learning objectives will not be achieved when behaviour management programmes are being conducted. In this case, it can be concluded that the aspect of time management is essential in performing any task. Therefore, teachers should manage their time wisely to ensure that the plan is conducted smoothly, and they should always have a positive attitude about the application of a behaviour management programme.

Furthermore, teachers should not label students or come to an initial conclusion that a student's behaviour cannot be changed. This attitude can actually destroy a student's motivation to learn. Rather, teachers should be confident that a student's behaviour can be modified, allowing for the possibility that the behaviour is consistent with the concept of behaviour management described by many participants in previous behavioural studies.

Hence, the best step to be taken by the teacher is to determine the problem that led to the student's challenges or obstacles and to find appropriate solutions. Teachers, and especially future teachers, must have a positive attitude and a sense of responsibility regarding behavioural problems among students with special needs so that this behaviour does not impact negatively on students' futures.

4. Conclusion

Knowledge about student behaviour and its management is an important element in the field of special education. Teachers should understand that every behaviour exhibited by students is caused by specific factors that influence the situation. Based on the literature review done in this study, most teachers lack the skills and confidence to implement behaviour management programmes for students with special needs. Therefore, this

study will help provide information for future teachers as they face real situations regarding the behaviour of special needs students in the classroom and the actions taken and challenges faced by teacher trainees to handle those behaviours.

The results of this study indicate that the most frequent negative behaviour exhibited by students with special needs is in the form of off-task behaviour, including joking and talking with friends and making noises while the teacher is teaching. Teacher trainees have taken various actions that are considered appropriate to prevent the negative behaviours exhibited by students, of which the most frequent are reprimanding students immediately and advising them. However, future teachers also face particular challenges in handling students' negative behaviour, including time constraints, lack of knowledge and skills related to behaviour management and a heavy teaching workload. In general, the exposure provided in this paper related to real situations regarding students' behaviour in the classroom can be used as a guide and stimulus for future teachers to enhance their knowledge and skills before entering the working world.

This study provides an overview of the types of negative behaviours shown by students with special needs in the classroom, the types of actions frequently taken by teachers and the challenges teachers face in managing those behaviours. Therefore, the improved readiness of future teachers achieved by equipping them with knowledge and skills related to behaviour management will have a positive impact on the field of education. In addition, the implication of this study is that the responsible parties need to be sensitive to aspects of diagnostic assessments for students with special needs. At the same time, a student-focused approach should be given special attention in the preparation of Individual Education Plans (IEP), which should be prepared to meet the individual needs of students with special needs, particularly in terms of behaviour management.

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