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Teaching approach for autism students: a case in Malaysia

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Abstract

Children with Autism are isolated in their own nature, not because they are visually or hearing impaired but because of the difficulty of understanding what is happening around them. Pupils’ background of Autism disorders as expressed in terms of delayed language development, communication, social interaction and behavior have created problems for teachers when implementing the teaching and learning process in the classroom. This paper presents the findings of a case study conducted in Malaysia to identify teaching approaches applied by the teachers during the process of teaching pupils with Autism. This study was carried out by interviews with two teachers who teach Autism students in Special Education classes and a teacher who teaches Autism students in an Inclusive classroom. All respondents were selected based on criteria of already having more than five years teaching experience and a history of outstanding teacher awards over their service. Verbatim interview data are further supported by the observation data and document analysis. This study has demonstrated impressive results in which teachers are always trying to reach out and attract the attention of students with autism to focus on the classroom teaching by using the elements of love and profound concern. The study also found that patience was apparent in the teachers and exhibited at a high level on a continuous basis during teaching sessions; this was seen to alter some Autism students' negative behavior to a more positive behavior.

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INTRODUCTION

This article is a summary of the findings of a study conducted in Malaysia on teaching approaches for Autism students. Teaching for Autism children in Malaysia has provided a challenge for the teachers to implement instructional approaches that are appropriate to the needs of students. Children with Autism present a series of unique problems that create confusion for all parties involved because of the discrepancy in the understanding of their behavior compared to normal children (Fong Chew Hoon, 2003). Children with Autism are said to have problems caused by differences in social skills, communication, interpersonal relationships and behavior compared with normal children.

Additionally, Norfishah Mat Rabi (2009) also states that students with Autism disorders have problems of language development and communication, social interaction and behavior. These caused problems for teachers in implementing the teaching and learning for them. Every autism child is also said to have different characteristics. Therefore, teaching special education for students with learning disabilities such as autism requires a teacher who is knowledgeable about special needs students, always ready with rigorous lesson plans and adapting their teaching in accordance with the achievement of individual pupils (Rosidah Jemain, 2006).

Ab. Halim Tamuri and Nik Mohd Rahimi Nik Yusof (2010) state that the effectiveness of teaching and learning in schools depends on the capacity and role of the teacher in the classroom. This statement is also supported by Md. Isa Bin Hassan (1993) who pointed to the failure or the success of an educational system depends on the approach or teaching and
learning methods used. If the approach and methods are used well, then, the whole education system will run smoothly and successfully. According to al-Syaibani Omar Mohammed al-Toumy (1991), Abdullah Ishak (1989) and Mohd. Azam Mahat (2009), improved methods and approaches are important to help students to acquire knowledge, skills, attitude and behavior change, and to instill the desired values.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study tried to Identify teaching approaches used by teachers when implementing the teaching process to pupils with Autism.

PARTICIPANTS

This study focused on the methods of teaching to three autism students in an inclusive classroom at secondary school, a student in special education class at secondary school and a student in special class at a primary school. The main participants of this study are three teachers who teach Islamic education in those classes. All teachers selected for this study had several criteria such as having more than five years of teaching experience in Islamic education subject, had been awarded as an excellent teacher over their service, had at least a Bachelor's degree, willing to cooperate and to give commitment to this study and voluntarily agreed to be participants.
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is a qualitative research case study conducted through semi structured interviews, observations and documents analysis. The interviews were conducted on two Islamic Education teachers in special education classes and a teacher of Islamic education in an inclusive classroom. To support the data, observation in the teaching and learning process was implemented. The document analysis, field notes and diaries were also used to strengthen the findings.

DISCUSSION

The study found that the approach of loving and caring was implemented by the respondents. This was stated by a respondent named Norli, who said ...

"... I try to educate my students with love and affection. I am confident that with love, they will grow up to be an outstanding generation, creative, and confident. They will see the world in a positive way, stepping with confidence, find happiness in life, intelligent face.. trials in the best way ... " (Norli, 2012)

This finding is supported by the view of Ahmad Zawawi (1990) which states that Islam emphasizes compassion in education. Based on interviews and observations, researchers
have identified that teachers need to express affection for autism students through five key elements of love, that is, intercommunion, touch, praise, gift giving, and nurture a deep concern for all the problems and needs of students with autism.

**Intercommunion**

Intercommunion approach or friendly interaction that is often shown by participants was shaking hands, holding students’ hand when they to go to the toilet and canteen, rub students’ back when they sulk, hold their hands for writing, rub students’ shoulders, joked pinch, swipe the head, touching foreheads and cheeks to track student body temperature during fever, wipe the tears, wipe the mucus of the nose, tidy students’ shirt and pants, and clean up leftover food in the mouth. This finding is also seen to coincide with the views of Zuri and Aznan Mohd Che Ahmad (2011), which state that teachers should always care for and love their students. This finding is also supported by Abdul Ghani Abdullah and Abd. Rahman Abd. Aziz (2009) who stated that the advice that contains polite words accompanied by gentle touch is very meaningful compared to advice without action.

**Praise**

The participants also had shown their attention and behavior through praises by using positive words and motivation encourage learning. Norli (Participant 1) often called her students … ‘handsome’ … This was to motivate her students to keep taking care of their hygiene. Fatimah often used a word … ‘clever’… as a compliment when a student
successfully completed the task earlier than other students. To Fatimah (Participant 2), she often followed by using persuading skills. Similarly, Mr. Adri (Participant 3) always praised his autism students.

**Appreciation and Gift Giving**

The approach of appreciation and gift giving as practiced by the three respondents in the study are intended to persuade and attract the attention of students in the process of teaching and learning, to entertain their heart, to strengthen the relationship, as on the basis of sympathy and as appreciation for their success. The gift giving in this study also refers to a form of feeding in the school cafeteria, daily spending money for their students’ needs, such as for school shoes, pens and notebooks. The participants also gave greeting cards and congratulated their students during the birthday party by giving away colored pencils, candy, chocolate and crackers and key chains. This approach used by teachers are stated as follows:

"...... I also held a birthday celebration and gave some gifts to students. I feel happy seeing my autism students having fun”.

**Care and Concern**

Participants also showed their love and care for the students through their concern for them. They gave their attention, concern, met the needs of pupils, acting as a protector, and emotional control to soothe the hearts of students. These were expressed by Norli as in the
following passage: "He's an orphan. If he's not healthy, I really would visit him at the hostel. Bought his favorite food to amuse his heart ... " (Norli, 2012)

The findings of this study indicated that teachers not only carry out their duties of teaching, but also had shown the capacity to love very deeply. The respondents had shown affection not only when delivering lessons in the classroom, but they had shown concern to take care of the students’ welfare outside the classrooms. They had been willing to lend their money for daily expenses and the purchase of essential items for the students’ schooling.

Teachers caring, compassionate and being gentle toward the students should be emphasized in the teaching of students with autism. Teaching can be done well if the teacher has the patience, sincere feelings of deep affection for children. No matter how great a single approach used in a lesson, it will not guarantee the success in educating if it was implemented without sincere affection from a teacher to his students. In addition, teachers should avoid from the action of insulting their autistic student in front of other students. Teachers’ anger will not bring any benefit to students but will lead to boredom in teaching, creating confusion, resentment, and even emotional stress to children with autism. Researchers concluded that the nature of love, compassion and sincerity are very important implanted in the soul of every teacher involved in teaching and learning, particularly involving students with special needs. Based on these findings, the researchers have developed a teaching approach model for autism students known as the Caring Approach in Teaching Autism Students, as illustrated in Figure 1.
Figure 1: Caring Approach in Teaching Autism Students

REFERENCES


