

Chapter 1

Introduction

In 1981, only 17 percent of all preschool aged Malaysian children had received instruction in classroom settings before enrolling for formal primary education (UNESCO, 2000). Since then, Malaysia has been actively engaged in increasing this percentage, noticeable through the increase in the number of ministries involved in providing this service as well as the allocation set aside by the government in its annual budget. This dramatically improved the provision of formal classroom instruction to 41.5 percent in 1995 (UNESCO, 2000), and leaped to 67 percent in 2009, a tribute to the efforts of the government (Prime Minister's Department, 2010). A milestone was achieved for preschool education when it was officially included as part of the formal education system in the Education Act 1996. In the Malaysian context, providing instruction in formal classroom setting forms the core of preschool education, including preschool special education.

Preschool education, being a key factor in ensuring a successful, formal school-life, the government is aware that it needs to further accelerate its efforts, in order to ensure that all Malaysian children have this privilege. The Education Development Master Plan (Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, 2006) had outlined extending preschool education to all National Schools, and in the process ensuring that children with special needs also obtained the opportunity, and also ensuring provision of sufficient qualified teachers and teacher assistants as part of its action plan to achieve this objective. The importance of preschool education was further highlighted in 2009 when the prime minister launched six National Key Results Areas in which efficient and immediate action was advocated to bring about

improvements in the country. Preschool education was listed as a sub-area under Widening Access to Quality and Affordable Education, the third of the National Key Result Areas (Prime Minister's Department, 2010).

This brought to the forefront the importance of preschool education. It also emphasises the vigour with which the government is working to improve the quality of preschool education in the long run.

The education minister says the ministry hopes to increase the number of preschool-educated children from 67 percent to 87 percent by 2012 (Prime Minister's Department, 2010).

Preschool education, for children with and without disabilities, is handled by several ministries and agencies, such as the Ministry of Education (MOE), the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of National Unity and Social Development, and the related state departments. It is currently provided by the government, non-governmental organizations (NGO), private social organizations and individuals (Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, 2003).

The government's current focus is on addressing the accessibility of preschool education to all children so as to increase the percentage of children receiving formal instruction in classrooms. Small scale studies have identified problems related to classroom instruction provided in these preschools (Ng Soo Boon, 2008) but few studies have looked into how instruction is actually carried out by the teachers, especially in the preschools for Children with Special Needs (CSN).

Classroom Instruction for Preschool Children with Special Needs

Formal instruction in the classroom is the foundation of preschool education provided for CSN in Malaysia and they are frequently referred to as special education programmes.

In 1981, the Selangor and Federal Territory Association for Retarded Children, based in Wisma Harapan, Brickfields, Kuala Lumpur, started a home-based, early intervention programme for infants and toddlers with mental retardation, with the help of some volunteers, professionals and parents. This programme was discontinued in 1983 due to a lack of volunteers (Sebastian, 1993).

Four years later, Malaysian CARE, another NGO, invited Robert Deller, a clinical psychologist from Britain to revive the interest in early intervention. He was instrumental in starting the first centre-based, early intervention programme for CSN in Malaysia. Referred to as the Early Intervention Programme for children with Learning Disability, the programme began with 25 children aged four and below, in Wisma Harapan, in 1988 (Sebastian, 1993; Wong, 2005). These children were referred to as being in the Early Intervention Programme by some NGO-operated centres in Malaysia, even though they went beyond the prescribed age, that is, zero to three years (Wong, 2005).

Consequently, more programmes for CSN were started by established special education schools run by NGOs such as the Bethany Home in Teluk Intan, Perak and the National Autism Society of Malaysia (NASOM). New centres opened, providing classroom instruction only for preschool aged CSN, such as the Kiwanis Down Syndrome Foundation and Persatuan Kanak-kanak Istimewa Hulu Langat (Hulu Langat Association for Special Children). They referred to their programme as Preschool Special Education for children with Learning Disability, or for specific conditions such as autism or Down syndrome with classroom instruction as the core of the programme.

Being the pioneers, Malaysian CARE and the Selangor and Federal Territory Association for Retarded Children became advisors to some of these centres (Wong, 2005). Private individuals also began setting up similar centres, providing early

intervention and/or preschool special education for this category of children, due to the growing awareness and demand for such education.

While supporting the endeavours of the NGOs, the Government of Malaysia, also, provided Early Intervention Programmes through the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Women and Family Development and Ministry of Education (Habsah Ismail, Mohd. Majid Konting, Abu Bakar Nordin & Kamarulzaman Kamaruddin, 2005). The Ministry of Health provides early detection and intervention through its health centres. The Ministry of Women and Family Development provides services for severely disabled children through its Community Based Rehabilitation Programmes.

The MOE, which was already providing primary and secondary education for CSN, started to look into their early educational requirements. Here again, the first recipients of formal instruction in preschool classrooms were children with sensory impairment. In 1999, the MOE established 19 preschools for children, aged four to six, with visual and hearing impairment (Mohamad Rashid, 2003). Currently there are 28 such preschools in the country (Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, 2007).

The success of these preschools prompted the MOE to look into the preschool education needs of children with developmental delays. In 2005, MOE established 32 preschools nation-wide to provide classroom instruction for children with developmental delays, calling it Preschool Special Education for the Children with Learning Disabilities (PSECLD). In 2006 another 12 and in 2007 another 49 preschools were set up. Currently, there are 60 NGO and privately-run preschools (Wong, 2005) and 94 government preschools following the MOE's programmes for children with developmental delays (Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, 2007).

The aim of preschool education for children with developmental delays, as provided by both the NGOs and the MOE, is to prepare these children for formal

primary or primary special education (Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, 2006). Therefore instruction provided in the preschool classroom must help the children enhance their potential in all aspects of development, master basic skills, inculcate positive attitudes and behaviour, and enable them to adjust to a school environment.

Teachers providing classroom instruction for preschool children with developmental delays are from varied academic background. Some had a Certificate in Education for Primary Education, a Degree in Early Childhood Education and various other disciplines or a Masters in Special Education. Degree holders in disciplines not related to education undergo a nine month course and could be selected to provide preschool special education. So it would not only be interesting to discover how these varied groups of teachers provide instruction but it would also be necessary in order to improve the quality of the instruction.

Even though formal instruction in classrooms for preschool children with developmental delays in Malaysia is almost two decades old, very few in-depth studies have been carried out to investigate how it is actually provided. Although referring to primary and secondary levels of schooling in Malaysia, Kamarulzaman Kamarudin , Abu Bakar Nordin, Mohd. Majid Konting and Habsah Ismail (2005) opine that it is necessary to examine if the policies implemented through the curriculum which is guided by the national Philosophy of Education had addressed the needs of the CSN in the country, which the current study aims to do.

Information about what is happening in the preschool classrooms is usually passed through word of mouth by parents and teachers, either commending the effects of the instruction or deprecating the lack of its results on the students.

Detailed empirical evidence about how instruction is actually planned and implemented for this group of children in the local preschools is still in its infant stage.

Rationale of the Study

Preschool Special Education (PSE) programmes, whether home-based or centre-based, are important for CSN. In Malaysia, NGOs and the MOE offer centre-based preschool education, whereas private individuals provide both centre-based and home-based education, according to the needs of the parents. All these preschool programmes vary in terms of contact hours, curriculum, types of services offered and amount of fee charged.

Centre-based preschool education is provided over a specific number of hours and days depending on the centre's management and its resources. Some preschools only have the students twice a week, for about two hours per visit. Home-based visits are usually paid by the hours the teachers spend with the children at their respective homes.

A number of the NGO preschools, use the curriculum developed by Robert Deller, *A Curriculum Guide for Teaching Young Children with Developmental Delays*, or the Carolina Curriculum for Preschools with Special Needs developed by Nancy M. Johnson Martin, Susan M. Attermeier, Bonnie Hacker. Sometimes the preschools use adaptations of the curriculum designed in the developed countries. Some of the NGO operated preschools offer services such as speech therapy, physiotherapy, and occupational therapy besides the instruction provided in the classroom. The NGO and the private individuals charge a wide range of fees depending on the type of service offered, the qualification of teachers and the equipment used to provide instruction in the classroom at the preschools. Despite the exorbitant fees charged in some cases, these preschools are inundated with requests for admission to their programmes, because parents have become aware of its importance.

On the other hand, the MOE provides free education. The PSECLD programme for preschoolers provides only classroom instruction. Any speech or occupational therapy received by the students is incidental since the teachers are not trained therapists. The children get these additional services from government clinics during their scheduled visits to the clinics. Children spend three and a half hours a day with the teacher in the classroom, for five days a week. The MOE has developed its own curriculum, based on the curriculum for Special Education for primary schools and secondary schools, and the curriculum for typically developing preschoolers (Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, 2006). It is the only curriculum used in all the preschools for children with developmental delays.

To date there have been very few studies on how classroom instruction is carried out for preschool children by the various service providers. Hence it is not surprising to note that the Malaysian government is apprehensive about the inadequacies in its preschool programmes (UNESCO, 2000). Realizing the need for, and the lack of, preschool education for children who have deviated from the norm, the MOE has been actively engaged in gradually increasing the number of preschools throughout the nation. Much money has been spent on renovating existing classrooms, teaching materials, capital costs and equipment and food subsidies. Even though efforts are concentrated on expanding the number of preschools, monitoring and enhancing the quality of the programmes has always been a concern (UNESCO, 2000). Providing relevant training for the teachers is also high on the list of priorities since the quality of the programmes is directly proportionate to the quality of the instruction teachers provided in the classroom.

Preschool teachers have been carrying out classroom instruction in ways they perceive to be correct, while still complying with the requirements imposed by the MOE, such as carrying out assessments, planning and implementing lessons and

preparing relevant documents. While it is imperative to monitor teachers to discover how they provide classroom instruction, it does not always happen in the local context due to the focus on expanding the service rather than gauging its success. As a consequence, there is a lack of awareness of how the classroom instruction under the PSECLD programme was actually being carried out. The lack of such empirical evidence cried out for the need for this study which aims to carry out an in-depth investigation on how the teachers have been teaching in the MOE preschools to discover if the quality of instruction was commensurate with the expansion efforts.

Extensive research in preschool education in developed countries has brought forth various effective strategies, collectively known as recommended practices (Sandal, McLean, & Smith, 2000). In addition, rigorous studies by Guralnick (1991), Odom and Wolery (1993) have ascertained that these practices have optimum impact on CSN. Local preschool teachers for CSN are sent for training courses where they are introduced to the recommended practices and taught how to use them in the classroom. Little research, however, has investigated how these teachers put that theoretical knowledge into practice.

Research related to the use of recommended practices in the local PSE classroom instruction is important in exposing issues that can help iron out problems related to it because quality of instruction depended on the use of recommended practices. Experts in the field have identified a need for such studies, to reduce the gap between research and practice, so that the quality of instruction is not compromised (Guralnick, 1991).

The study intends to add to the research base, especially in the Malaysian context, in classroom instruction for preschool CSN. This qualitative case study will assist in developing an understanding of how teachers provide instruction in the preschool classroom in accordance with the recommended practices.

Statement of Problem

The first six years of a child's life are crucial to laying the foundation of learning (Bowe, 2000; Chiam, 1991; Dunlap, 1997; Lerner, 2003). The education provided during these years is vital for children who have deviated from the norm in terms of physical, cognitive, social, emotional and adaptive developments (Lerner, Mardel-Czudnowski & Goldenberg, 1981; Lerner, 2003). It could reduce declines in development for children with developmental delays (Gable, 2004; Gholam Kibria, 1994; Gray & McCormick, 2005; Guralnick, 1991, 1993); enable them to attend mainstream education classes and at the same time require fewer, or less intensive, special education classes (Bailey & Wolery, 1992). It has also been identified as one of the reasons for the enhanced quality of life experienced by adults with special needs in developed countries (Sharifah Zainiyah, 2005).

Extensive research in PSE in the United Kingdom and America has produced empirical and value-based practices, which have proved effective in bringing about optimum results, when used on preschool CSN. (Dunlap, 1997; Guralnick, 1991, 1993, 2000, 2001; Odom & McLean, 1993; Odom, Teferra & Sudha Kaul, 2004; Odom & Wolery, 2003; Sandall, McLean & Smith, 2000). However, the onus is on the preschool teacher to use these practices in classroom instruction.

Classroom instruction plays an important part in early education. In some countries like Malaysia, it may be the only form of education the child receives; and most of the times, with only the preschool teacher providing it. According to Heward (2003), the teacher's primary responsibilities are to plan, implement, and to evaluate instruction that will help the preschoolers to acquire, generalise and maintain knowledge and skills to improve the quality of their lives in the school, home and community. Heward adds that state-of-the-art curriculum and recommended practices are useless if the teacher does not use them in the classroom.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to fully implement the curriculum and recommended practices developed in the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada in the local context, because the environment and working conditions are different. The programmes must fit into the context of the country so preschool teachers need to adopt and adapt the recommended practices to the Malaysian environment.

Studies are consistently carried out in the United States, to learn what is happening during classroom instruction in the preschools (Heward, 2003; Odom, Brantlinger, Gersten, Horner, Thompson, & Harris, 2005; Strain, 2004). Scrutinising classroom instruction is an integral part of evaluation exercises, in developed countries. In *Best Practices: Evaluating Early Childhood Special Education Programs*, DeStefano, Howe, Horn and Smith have included setting, organisation of instruction, and monitoring child progress as items of evaluation in programmes (Bondurant-Utz & Luciano, 1994). The Preschool Programme Quality Assessment (PQA) is a rating instrument, devised by High/Scope, to evaluate the quality of preschool programmes. The PQA looks at seven major areas of programme quality, of which five are assessed in the classroom (in Bondurant-Utz & Luciano, 1994). Epstein (2003) also maintains that learning environment is one of the areas appraised in the classroom.

According to Schweinhart (2002), studies on the effectiveness of the programme in the early 60s, established the value of high quality preschool education for CSN. During an evaluation of the High/Scope Perry Preschools, it was ascertained that preschool attendance did reduce the need for special services in elementary schools (Gable, 2004). The success of programmes, such as Head Start, in the USA was attributed to various factors, of which one was, continuous research on how instruction was provided (Gable, 2004). Data obtained from such studies,

without doubt, helped improve instruction specifically, and the programme in general.

Although student learning depended directly on what a teacher does during classroom instruction, how teachers actually teach is still a mystery (Cuban, 2006). Incorrect use or use of ineffective strategies has caused a gap between research and practice, an intense topic of discussion between researchers and practitioners in the developed countries (Guralnick, 2000). Implementing well-researched effective practices in the classroom, was the responsibility of the teacher. If PSE teachers have problems with classroom instruction such as those discovered by Wong (2005) in the NGO-operated centres, then it was imperative to study how they provide instruction in the classroom. Young (1998) says, that studies in classroom instruction gave researchers new insights into it, and helped to identify its' strengths and weaknesses.

Hambleton, Swaminathan and Cook (1982) emphasised that sophisticated goals and designs are inept, if the instruction in the classroom was unable to provide appropriate learning experiences to meet the needs of the participants. Agreeing with Hambleton (1982), Meese (1994) also stressed that quality of instruction was more important than the setting, or the curriculum for children with mild disabilities. However, some professionals who disagree with Meese, feel that the classroom setting was also an important aspect (Dunlap, 1997; Moore, 2001). Providing a quality, learning experience for the child was an extremely important responsibility of preschool education (Epstein, 2003) to ensure long-term increases in achievement (Barnett, 2005).

The central person responsible for all instructional activities in the classroom is, the teacher. According to Wan Zah (1997), the teacher is the key player in a child's education because the method of teaching directly influenced learning.

Moore (2001) and Heward (2003), added that the most significant role of the teacher, among the many roles they play to help students achieve their maximum potential in all aspects of development, was that of an “instructional expert: the person who plans, guides, and evaluates learning” (p. 3). Another role of importance was to arrange the learning environment.

These two roles are pertinent to classroom instruction in PSE because they help children with disabilities acquire, generalise and retain what they have learnt, in order to improve the quality of the child’s life in school, and in later years (Heward, 2003). Azar Hadadian and Studnicky (1996) conducted a study among 245 early childhood special education teachers to identify perceptions of their training needs. The findings of this study showed that teaching methods were singled out as the highest priority area of the teachers’ training requirements.

Small scale studies conducted in Malaysia, to assess the overall effectiveness of the PSE services offered by the NGOs, discovered problems associated with classroom instruction such as the use of the curriculum and materials; and the teachers’ ability (John, 1996; Sebastian, 1993; Wong, 2005). Preschool teachers were introduced to the curriculum, received training in the teaching methods, and in the use of the teaching aids, in situ (John, 1996). The studies discovered that some teachers were not able to understand the curriculum used for these children (Sebastian, 1993; John, 1996) due to their lack of fluency in English. It also inhibited them from learning about the latest developments in teaching methods and materials in the field (Wong, 2005), and also prevented them from choosing approaches and teaching methods which are appropriate for certain types of disabilities (Meese, 1994). This problem was precipitated because in the local context, there are two types of preschool, one that caters to a specific disability, and the other that does not show any such preference. The National Autism Society of

Malaysia (NASOM) and the Kiwanis Down Syndrome Foundation, which provide education for children with autism and Down syndrome respectively, are examples of the former, and preschools at Bethany Home in Teluk Intan, Perak, and the MOE are examples of the latter. Differences in the definition of the term Learning Disability between the literature and the local context also hindered the teachers, who already had problems understanding related literature due to their lack of proficiency in English (Wong, 2005). Teachers unable to interpret the literature might use incorrect methods and strategies in classroom instruction, thus affecting its quality. Very few studies have been carried out to determine how teachers use the information they have gained about teaching methods and strategies during in-house training and seminars, in their preschool classrooms.

Research on PSE is an ongoing phenomenon, conducted to determine the effectiveness of special education (Carrol, 1990; Kolucki, 2000); to identify factors which influence, or are associated with it (Guralnick, 1991); to discover teachers' perceptions on issues related to special education (Haniz Ibrahim, 1998; Manisah Mohd. Ali, Ramlee Mustapha & Zalizan Mohd. Jelas, 2006); to develop materials to support the teaching and learning processes; to identify teaching methods and strategies that will promote classroom instruction (Dunlap, 1997; Sandall, McLean & Smith, 2000), and to determine if recommended practices were being used.

Unfortunately, the sustainability of these practices in the classrooms, has been found to be lacking, leaving a gap between research and practice that could eventually threaten the quality of intervention received by these children. There is evidence in the western countries to show that recommended practices were not used, or infrequently used, in classroom instruction (Odom, 2005; Guralnick, 2000). Teachers either rejected the research practices totally (Campbell & Halbert, 2002; Heward (2003), or they did not maintain them over time, even though they were

aware of their effectiveness and knew how to carry them out (Cannon, 2006). Gelzheiser, McLane, Meyers and Pruzek (1998), discovered discrepancies between the Individualised Education Plan developed for the child and actual instructional practices. Hume, Bellini and Pratt (2005) discovered that parents and interventionists alike were not using the recommended practices provided for their children, aged between 2-8 years old, with autism, pervasive developmental disorder, and Asperger syndrome. This gap between research and practice, discovered in the developed countries, has slowed the progress to high levels of individualisation (Guralnick, 2000), which is among the most important criteria of PSE.

Nevertheless, research has also shed light on the reasons why this gap occurs. According to Campbell and Halbert (2002), personal perspectives of the practitioners play a role in creating this gap. In a study involving 241 multiple-discipline, early intervention practitioners, they discovered that practitioners would reject recommended practices that did not match their beliefs, or would filter the ways in which these practices were interpreted and implemented, based on their personal perspectives.

In the Malaysian scenario, lack of knowledge in special education strategies was a contributory factor to this gap because, as Abdul Rahim (2000) discovered, 80 percent of the teachers involved in special education did not have formal training. He stated that some parents who opted for the MOE's Special Education programme had complained about the lack of trained teachers for children with special needs, which has resulted in behaviour deterioration and poor self-esteem among the children. Supiah Saad (2008) an officer with the MOE also commented on the lack of trained teachers as one of the issues in special education.

Baseline information gathered from forty PSE teachers, from the first batch of MOE preschools for CSN who attended a seminar conducted by the Special Education Division, MOE, revealed that half of them had no training in special education or early childhood education. They had only attended a short intensive, training course, before they began providing instruction in PSE classrooms. More than half had problems writing the Individualised Education Plan (IEP), preparing the daily lesson plans for individual students and incorporating the individual lesson plans while carrying out classroom instruction for the whole group, in addition to problems related to preparing relevant written material and teaching aids. The Special Education Department (2006) had also discovered that some preschool teachers were unable to understand and use learning through play as an instructional strategy in the classroom.

PSE teachers' shortcomings are reflected in the students' performance in primary schools. Initial control information, gathered from primary special education teachers, revealed that CSN who attended preschool still had problems in primary school. They did not come equipped with the skills to learn the higher order skills taught in primary education. Hence, the teachers were unable to teach the higher order skills.

However, teachers at the NGO centres, in spite of no empirical evidence to show that they provided effective classroom instruction to preschool CSN, claimed that the primary schools were not well equipped in terms of teacher quality, teacher qualification and administration (Aminah Ayob, Lee, Susie See & Halim Ahmad, 2004). They asserted that the special children who enrolled in year one in primary special education school, returned to their respective NGO centres because they were not taught anything. Teachers from the NGO centres also claimed that teachers in the government schools were unable to handle children with different disabilities

in the same class (Aminah Ayob, Lee, Susie See & Halim Ahmad, 2004). Thus, fingers have been pointed at various people for the lack of quality in PSE in Malaysia, although the government has spent, and is still spending, millions of ringgit providing it.

The money spent on PSE would be justified if the preschoolers were able to enrol into mainstream education, which can help the country save much money. But few CSN are selected for the inclusion programme which offered them a realistic introduction into mainstream society, and is the ultimate aim of the disability policies and programmes (Mohamad Rashid, 2003). This is because children who spend two or three years in the local PSE programme had not acquired the skills needed for primary special education, let alone for an inclusive setting (Haniz, 1998). Nevertheless, research says that it should (Bowe, 2000; Lerner, 2003; Ramey & Ramey, 1998; Wilson, 1998). So, what is happening in the preschools for CSN?

Lack of concern in relating research to practice is another reason for the gap. Researchers must realise that their role as generators of knowledge is not relevant unless the knowledge-to-practice gulf is bridged (Cannon, 2006). Cannon adds that researchers should be more responsive to the needs of teachers. So, while researchers' literature states that in order to achieve maximum result, teachers should use recommended practices, teachers themselves prefer to use practices they believe in (Campbell & Halbert, 2002). Teachers will not be interested in interventions that concentrate only on one child or are based on a narrow conception of teaching, because they are not practical (Cannon, 2006).

Interestingly, studies have discovered that teachers in the developed countries also have problems using the recommended practices. Therefore it is pertinent to investigate how instruction is carried out in the local PSE classrooms.

This is an area for immediate, in-depth investigation because the instruction children receive has an immense effect on their quality of life as adults.

Purpose of the Study

Education for preschool CSN in Malaysia, in operation since the early '90s, is based on the curriculum, materials, teaching methods and strategies evolved from research carried out in the United States, Britain or Australia (Sebastian, 1993; Wong, 2005). Teachers from varied academic background are selected to provide instruction for preschool CSN after undergoing various instructional courses. But how they use the knowledge gained to teach in the real situation, has not been investigated. During the educational courses, they are provided with the theory and know-how, and are expected to put into practice what they have learnt with students in the real classroom. The teachers in the government preschools are also required to assess the students, and plan and implement lessons. In order to gain a better understanding of the instruction provided in a preschool classroom it is prudent to study how the teachers carry out the three inter-related stages involved in classroom instruction, in other words, relating research to practice.

Hence, the first and foremost purpose of this study is to discover the manner in which the three stages of instruction, assessment, planning and implementation for preschool CSN are carried out in the classroom. The second purpose is to find out how the recommended practices are incorporated into local classroom instruction.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are based on the rationale and the problem statement. The main objective is to investigate how classroom instruction,

specifically the three stages: assessment, planning and implementation are carried out in the PSECLD programme. The second objective is to find out how the recommended practices are incorporated into the three stages of classroom instruction.

- 1 To describe how students are assessed.
- 2 To describe how classroom instruction is planned.
- 3 To describe how classroom instruction is implemented.
- 4 To discover how recommended practices in the field are used in classroom instruction.

Research Questions

Since this research aims to investigate the three stages of classroom instruction provided in the PSE classrooms, the following research questions guided this study.

1. How are students assessed?
2. How is classroom instruction planned?
3. How is classroom instruction implemented?
4. How are recommended practices in the field used in classroom instruction?

Significance of the Study

A study that examined classroom instruction would provide invaluable information to all those involved in providing special education. In addition, if the researcher used qualitative methodology and involved teachers as co-researchers, it would provide in-depth understanding of how assessment of students as well as planning and implementation of instruction is actually carried out in the preschool classroom and could greatly assist in bringing about improvements in classroom

instruction. The thorough discussion of how the three stages of classroom instruction are actually carried out in the three preschool classrooms would be a revelation to the MOE, Malaysia, because very few studies have been carried out in this area and there is a great lack of an ‘overall view’ or ‘the big picture’ regarding classroom instruction in the local PSE programmes. The information could be used by MOE and its various divisions to make the essential difference to preschool special education. The findings could also prove useful for preschool special education teachers and parents.

The Special Education Division provides training and educational courses on the use of various research-based instructional practices for preschool special education, to newly recruited as well as in-service teachers. The findings of this study would inform them on how these teachers interpret and implement such learned practices in the actual classroom. The Special Education Department could use the information knowledge to improve the shortcomings of these training methods where necessary. They could take the findings into consideration when designing future courses and training sessions for PSE teachers.

Similarly the Division for Teacher Education in MOE could use the results to modify training modules. The value teachers placed on a specific strategy will determine its usage in the classroom. This information would help the MOE and teachers’ training colleges when planning training programmes, to focus either on changing the participants’ values, or the strategies to bring about more positive results. Teacher training colleges, could use the findings to further direct and refine their training sessions, to better equip teachers who will eventually be sent to teach in preschools for CSN. The NGO centres could also make use of the findings to help improve the instruction provided by their teachers. The findings could also be used

to help determine the types of instructional materials that are relevant and useful to the teachers in the preschool classroom.

Classroom instruction is and will continue to be used to provide child-focused PSE. So, continuous in-depth studies on classroom practices will provide more precise answers to desperate parents whose questions regarding PSE have grown over the years. Studies such as these would also assist teachers answer these questions and apply the relevant instructional practices with fluency (Wolery & Gast, 2000).

It is also noted that most of the current literature on PSE classroom instruction gave a western view of the phenomenon, and very little is known of the Malaysian perspective. The detailed descriptions of how instruction, is provided in the classrooms, obtained from this study would provide substantial data for building a knowledge base on classroom instruction in local special education preschools.

The exhaustive descriptions in the study of the instruction provide a rich tapestry of information and knowledge that could function as the springboard for extrapolating the findings to other special education preschools. This is because it focuses on a specific component of a programme, in this case classroom instruction, whether provided by an NGO, MOE or private individuals. The descriptive and interpretive information about the activities used to teach the components of the curriculum, could reduce the uncertainties that surface during the MOE discussions on changes to the structure of the programme. This comprehensive data would also provide the 'big picture', hitherto lacking, that would collate all the disparate pieces of information on classroom instruction for CSN, from the few studies, done so far.

The strategies and methods used during classroom instruction are generally based on western culture. With these findings, teachers could explore how they could actually be interpreted in the local context. They will be able to use the

information to bring about variations and improvements in their teaching methods. Providing instruction to a diversified group of children at the same time is an important concern in the PSE classroom. Information that addresses this concern would help other teachers who experience similar problems.

The efforts of the MOE to provide quality preschool education for CSN will not become a reality if recommended practices are not included in classroom instruction that prepares them for primary education. The researcher will work with the teachers in presenting evidence on how classroom instruction is provided in the three MOE preschools, and formulate a framework for further improvements of classroom instruction in the Malaysian context.

Limitations

Although the current study presents important information pertaining to the three stages, assessment, planning and implementation in classroom instruction, it has some limitations that need mention.

First, there is a difference between the definitions of the term Learning Disability between the local context and available literature. The local definition encompassed a wide variety of disabilities such as autism, Down syndrome, mental retardation, Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder and specific learning disabilities, whereas the western definition included only children with specific learning disabilities into this group. Since the researcher used the literature and studies prepared and carried out in the developed countries, much caution had to be practiced when choosing relevant material.

Second, the focus was on the three stages of classroom instruction. So any behavioural management strategies described was in relation to the implementation stage only. Due to the scope of the study, behaviour management strategies were not

included in the study; they are discussed when only they impinge during the implementation stage.

Third, this study used the three main techniques of the qualitative methodology, observation, interview and document analysis to collect data. The research depended on the cooperation provided by the three participants of the study; and their willingness to being observed and interviewed besides sharing with the researcher the documents that they used in classroom instruction. The researcher, being the main instrument, spent seven weeks in each of the three preschools to collect data. The duration was planned to be divided into two phases, five weeks in the first and two weeks in the second phase. However, the exact number of weeks during the two phases could not be maintained at two sites due to the unavailability of the teachers when they were away attending courses and due to school holidays. Sometimes data could not be collected on consecutive days of the week due to the same reasons.

The three preschools were situated far from each other as well as from the researcher's base, so it was not possible to observe the teachers' planning and implementing lessons based on the same themes due to the time factor, school holidays and in-service courses that the teachers had to attend. Comparing how the teachers carried out classroom instruction based on the same themes and learning outcomes would have further enriched the contrast between the cases.

Operational Definitions of Terms

The key terms used in this study are: Preschool Special Education (PSE), Children with Special Needs (CSN), Recommended Practices, Classroom Instruction and Preschool Special Education for Children with Learning Disability (PSECLD) programme. The local definition of some of these terms varies from the

definitions used in the international field, so for the purpose of this study, the meanings of the terms will be as given below.

Preschool Special Education (PSE)

Preschool Special Education and Early Intervention are subsets of the umbrella term Early Childhood Special Education used to refer to services provided for children with disabilities or developmental delays from birth to six years, and their families (Bowe, 2000). Preschool special education refers to specially designed instruction and related services, such as transportation, therapy, and counselling, for children aged between three and five (Bowe, 2000). Early Intervention refers to the delivery of coordinated and comprehensive services, for infants and toddlers with disabilities, from birth to two years (Gargiulo & Kilgo, 2000). However, Guralnick (1991) refers to early intervention as education provided for children with disabilities from birth till the age of five.

Guralnick's definition of early intervention is often applied by local non-governmental organisations when referring to educational services provided for young children with disabilities, from birth till the age of six. On the other hand, preschool special education is also used by some of them to denote education offered for children aged between four and six.

For the purpose of this study, the definition of Preschool Special Education is the one used by the MOE. It refers to education provided for children aged between four and a half and six, for durations of one year or more, before they enrol in the Special Education for the children with special needs in the primary schools (Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, 2006). Related services, such as transport, counselling and therapy are not provided in MOE preschools so the term refers only to instruction provided in the classroom.

The authors referred to in the review of literature have used the terms Early Childhood Special Education, Preschool Special Education and Early Intervention for instructional strategies used in the education provided for children aged between four and six; but for the purpose of this study only Preschool Special Education or its acronym PSE is used throughout even though the original text stated Early Childhood Special Education or Early Intervention for the same category of children.

Children with Special Needs (CSN)

Gargiulo and Kilgo (2000) state that children with special needs (CSN) is a general term used to describe infants, toddlers and preschoolers with disabilities. They have included a list of 13 disabilities according to the Individuals with Disabilities Act (PL 101-476). The disabilities are autism, deafness, deaf-blindness, hearing impairment, mental retardation, multiple disabilities, orthopaedic impairment, other health impairment, emotional disturbance, specific learning disability, speech or language impairment, traumatic brain injury and visual impairment.

For the purpose of this study, the term CSN refers to children with Down syndrome, mild forms of autism, developmental delay, cerebral palsy, mental retardation, hyperactive, hypoactive, behavioural and/or emotional problems attention deficit disorder, and other mild forms of learning disabilities.

However, Learning Disabilities is used to denote this group of children in the local context. This terminology was used to refer to the group of young children with Down syndrome and other disabilities, when the Selangor and Federal Territory Association for Retarded Children with the help of Robert Deller started the first centre-based, early intervention in 1987 (Sebastian, 1993). The same terminology

was used when the Special Education Department in the Ministry of Education started a special educational programme for children with Down syndrome and other disabilities related to cognition, in the mainstream primary schools in 1995 (Sharifah Zainiyah, 2005).

Recommended Practices

Extensive research in Preschool Special Education has discovered many value-based and empirical-based practices that have proven effective in providing education to this group of children. According to Sandall, McLean and Smith (2000) the Division for Early Childhood (DEC) of the Council for Exceptional Children identified and validated 240 research-based practices through rigorous methods. These practices were then divided into five direct services strands. The strand that is related to this study is Child-Focused Interventions together with its three messages: “(1) Adults design environments to promote children’s safety, active engagement, learning, participation and membership; (2) Adults individualise and adapt practices for each child based on ongoing data to meet children’s changing needs; (3) Adults use systematic procedures within and across environments, activities and routines to promote children’s learning and participation” (Sandall, McLean & Smith, 2000 p. 47).” Each of these messages has a number of recommended practices listed under them which are closely linked to the three stages of classroom instruction.

Classroom Instruction

Preschool education for children with special needs in Malaysia concentrates on providing instruction in formal classroom setting. Provision of other related services, such as speech and occupational therapy as well as physiotherapy is at the discretion of the service providers.

Wolery (1991) relates instruction provided in the classroom for preschool children with special needs to making three decisions: first, assessment; second, planning consecutive instruction based on the assessment; and third, executing the planned instruction in the class. Therefore this study looked at how the three stages of classroom instruction assessment, planning and implementation were carried out in the preschool classrooms. Since the focus was on instructional strategies, behaviour management strategies were not discussed in detail but provided in the context of classroom implementation.

The findings were corroborated with the recommended practices stated in the DEC recommended practices (Sandal, McLean & Smith, 2000). Attention was given to how the recommended practices were used in each of the three stages of classroom instruction.

Preschool Special Education for Children with Learning Disability (PSECLD)

This is an educational programme established by the Ministry of Education, Malaysia, for CSN between four and half and six, with developmental delays. This programme was first implemented in 32 preschools throughout the country in 2005. 12 preschools were established in 2006 and another 49 in 2007. The number of preschools offering this programme is expected to be increased annually. Each of these preschools is annexed to a mainstream primary school which also provides primary education for children with special needs.

Teachers from various disciplines including special education and early childhood education had volunteered or had been selected to teach these preschool children with special needs. These teachers participated in short training sessions to gain information about the curriculum and some of the teaching strategies that can be used in the preschool classroom. They are also invited to attend various other in-

service courses for more information on teaching strategies from time-to-time. The MOE also provides teaching material and a special allocation of funds based on the number of students in the classroom, for these teachers to buy food and teaching materials. Together with the help of an assistant, these teachers provide classroom instruction for a maximum of ten students in a classroom.