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Intervention Program for Early Readers: The Teething Problems

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Abstract: The greatest challenge faced by schools is how to deal with at risk pupils especially those who are unable to read. Hence Reading Recovery Program that supplements daily reading and writing instructions seems to be the logical answer. In Malaysia an intervention program (KIA2M) was launched in 2006 to address the reading problems among Year 1 pupils. The specific aim is to enable these pupils to acquire the basic reading and writing skills. A preliminary qualitative study was carried out on four schools in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor to examine the progress and implementation of the program, Fourteen teachers from these schools were interviewed. Their responses were recorded and transcribed. Like any new program, the findings reveal that there are several teething problems. Among them are: 1. Lack of trained teachers assigned to the program. 2. Courses for diagnosis of children are not carried out. 3. Lack of support and cooperation from teachers and parents. 3. Pupil-teacher ratio is not realistic. More than 30 pupils per teacher. 4. There is no follow up programs after the pupils have gone through Year 1. 5. Literacy is not the focus. Pupils are taught correct pronunciations, spelling and writing. 6. There is no networking with teachers from other schools and experts for the programs. Eleven of the teachers reported that the program has not fully achieved its aim. Suggestions for improvements from teachers' perspectives are discussed in this paper.

Keywords: Intervention Program, Early Readers, Teething Problems

Background

THE GREATEST CHALLENGE faced by schools is how to deal with at risk pupils especially those who are unable to read. Therefore, having all pupils to read independently and well should be made a national goal. In the United States for instance, it was reported by the National Center for Educational Statistics that 38% of fourth graders and 26% of the eighth graders failed to meet basic reading standards on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (Bursuck, Munk, & Nelson, 2002). In Malaysia, it was reported that 80,000 primary school children had problems in the acquisition of basic skills which include reading (Rahil & Habibah, 2008). One of the factors cited was teaching effectiveness. The teaching scope was too wide and the teachers did not give specific attention to pupils' weaknesses in particular areas especially in reading.

Reading proficiency is crucial to academic success in schools and is also essential for economic survival in this technological oriented world (Palincsar & Perry, 1995). Most children learn to read without any difficulty, yet 25% of all children experience reading problems in schools (Kaestel & Stedman, 1987). Without assistance, these children face almost

school failure (Badian, 1998). Longitudinal studies have indicated that children with reading difficulties in the early years continue to demonstrate difficulties in later years (Stanovich & Siegel, 1994). They identified that 74% of children with reading difficulties in the early years still find it difficult to read even in the ninth grade. Children who initially decode well are more likely to read to become better readers. On the other hand, children who do not succeed initially in the decoding phase of reading do not improve because they do not engage in adequate reading practice (Gough, 1996). Studies of adults with a history of reading difficulties further support the notion that these difficulties continue across the life span (Korhonen, 1995).

Many of these reading problems can be prevented or minimised through early intervention programmes (EIP). The purpose of EIP is to help pupils to acquire the basic skills through specialised instructional resources suitable to the needs of the pupils. For example, these programmes should give attention to phonemic awareness or understanding of sounds in oral language, alphabetic principles or knowledge of sounds in written letters, word recognition and identification and comprehension (Chard & Dickenson, 1999; Lyon, 1998). These are basic skills that if not given due attention, children who read below their grade levels will continue to be poor readers well into high school (Francis, et. Al, 1996). Hence according to Siegel (1993), reading disability for many children lies in the phonological processing inefficiencies that interfere among others phoneme segmentation.

Annammal (2009) studied on the effect of EIP using the explicit reading approach on children who had difficulties in reading. The children were presented with fables. They underwent reading, comprehension and memorising the narrative text exercises. Each teaching session (12 weeks) lasted 30 minutes. Findings showed that there was a significant improvement in reading and the children did better than others who did not undergo the EIP. This is one success story of the EIP. An earlier study by Bursuck, et.al (2002) mentioned that through explicit reading approach there were significant improvement in reading among children with reading disabilities particularly in phonic awareness, word identification skills which eventually led to accurate, fluent reading and comprehension. This study also included the teacher variable i.e. positive attitude.

Other than the content knowledge of EIP, attention should also be given to other factors which are equally important for its effectiveness. Among others is the class size. According to the Georgian Department of Education (2007 -2008), the Self – Contained and Pull-out Models specify the maximum class size for Year Grades 1 -3 is 14 and the Augmented Class Model specifies the maximum size for the same grades at 21. The Reading Recovery Programme can also be used as a model for EIP where the prescribed maximum class size is 14. Besides the class size, the teaching staff also plays an important role. Teachers must be trained and certified for EIP. Trained teachers in a way can also help in reducing the class size.

In Malaysia, there is grave concern from various quarters (educators, parents, the public and the ministry of education) on the inability of children not acquiring the basic skills (reading writing and arithmetic). Evidence (Samsilah, Abd Rahman, Sharifah, 2005) showed that there were grade seven students who still could not read nor write and it was also found that 30 students in the same grade were illiterate (STAR, 1997). Some did not even know how to write their own names. Based on these concerns, an intervention program focusing on reading and writing (KIA 2M) was launched in 2006. This is an early intervention programme designed to help year 1 pupils to read and write. It is carried out full time (one year

duration) and pupils have to sit for the screening test. Only those who scored less than 45% based on the scoring system of the screening instrument will qualify for this programme. For those pupils who scored between 0 – 9 will be referred to the medical department for further tests to determine other abnormalities while those found to have learning difficulties will be sent to special education classes. During the intervention programme, the acquisition level of the pupils is tested twice using the Passing Test 1 in August and Passing Test 2 in November. For the pupils who scored between 10 - 44 will be sent to special remedial classes and for those who obtained a score between 45 – 60 will be absorbed in the main stream. The tests are standardised and developed by the Malaysian Ministry of Education. The Curriculum Development Centre (CDC) is responsible in spearheading this programme especially in setting the modules and syllabus. In 2007, after a year of undergoing the intervention programme, 43.5% of the pupils still failed to acquire the basic skills. So what went wrong? Therefore the aim of this preliminary study is to find out the factors that account for the failure of year 1 pupils to master the skills in reading and writing.

Background Theory

The KIA2M intervention programme (Early Intervention Class in Reading and Writing) is designed based on the Behaviorism and Constructivism theories. The behaviorists perceived that language can be acquired through the six principles of stimulus – response association and reinforcement. Firstly, oral language should be given priority over written language. Teachers should ensure that pupils acquire the language system and structure first before reading and writing. Secondly, they perceived that language is a form of habit. To form this habit there should be drilling where repetition is emphasised and conversation is encouraged. Thirdly, reinforcement is a very important aspect in learning. Teachers should give reinforcement for each correct response and the possibility of that response to be repeated by the pupils is great. Fourthly, the repetition exercises should be carried out in a meaningful situation. This is to avoid boredom. Fifthly, models are important. Teachers are models and hence they should practise the correct language for pupils to follow. Lastly, language is a product stimulus – response association, hence such situation should be created to enhance pupils' interests and motivation.

Basically constructivism propounded that learning is a mental process which involves the organisation of knowledge. Teachers need to know the pupils' cognitive readiness in order to assist them in the acquisition and formation of concepts. New information has to be assimilated and accommodated to expand the schema. Other constructivists mentioned that meaningful learning starts with previous knowledge and experience. Dewey (1910) stated that an efficient teacher would find that teaching and leaning as an organised process of continuous experiences focusing on pupils' active participation in the learning activities. Constructivism in KIA2M happens when pupils integrate all skills to create new and meaningful skills,.

Methodology

This is a preliminary study utilising the qualitative design. The purpose of this study is to gauge the situation and to find out how the KIA2M (EIP) was implemented. An interview schedule was utilised by the researchers to obtain information pertaining to the implementation

of KIA2M. The interview was recorded and transcribed and the result was to be used to determine the design, variables to be studied and procedures to be undertaken as well as to build items for the questionnaire for the subsequent research on the intervention programme. The study was carried out on four schools in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor to examine not only on the progress and implementation of the program but also the problems encountered during the implementation. The primary schools were purposively selected and they shared the same characteristics of the schools that will become the sample of the subsequent real research. Fourteen teachers from these schools were interviewed. Hence the qualitative analysis is based on the interview results of the fourteen teachers.

Findings and Discussion

General Information

From the questionnaire, it was found that the teachers who were involved in the KIA2M programme were those who taught Language, Health and physical Exercise, Music Education and Art Education classes. Most of them underwent KIA2M short courses for a duration of one week. There were also in-house training and briefings by the KIA2M coordinators. The frequency of the courses was very much dependent on the district education department. The courses were conducted by CDC.

Within three months of the programme, the pupils were taught to recognise, identify, pronounce, write letters and words, spell and read single sentence. The pupils were given 19 hours per week to learn the language which is the national language, the Bahasa Melayu. Twelve were allotted to the language class, 3 hours for the health and physical exercise class and 2 hours each for the music education and art education classes. Each session lasted for 30 minutes. The modules utilised were prepared by the CDC. However the teachers were at liberty to modify and add on activities according to the suitability and ability of the pupils. To facilitate the acquisition of the basic skills, a variety of teaching aids were prepared in order to make the teaching and learning process more attractive and effective.

Within the KIA2M programme, the listed skills are divided into two: the basic skills and the advance skills. The basic skills are compulsory that should be taught to pupils in order for them to master the most basic in reading and writing. The skills include recognition, reading and writing the alphabets from A to Z, forming and differentiating consonant phonemes, forming, reading and writing words. After mastering these basic skills, the pupils will be taught the advance skills which will enable them to read and write more effectively. This approach is in line with the behaviorism theory as well as the suggestion put forward by Chard & Dickenson (1999); and Lyon (1998) who stated that intervention programmes should give attention to phonemic awareness or understanding of sounds in oral language, alphabetic principles or knowledge of sounds in written letters, word recognition and identification. In the KIA2M programme, Respondent (R): 2 from school A, stated that she paid particular attention to pronunciation, word recognition and identification, spelling phoneme, reading and writing. when teaching. There were a lot of drilling exercises and literacy was not stressed.

The monitoring of this intervention programme is done by the administrative staff (headmasters and the evening coordinators) and the officers from the district education department. A report on every level of the pupils' achievement are sent to the school authorities and a

report on the achievement of each school of the KIA2M programme is sent to the district education department.

Teething Problems

KIA2M had been implemented for three years now. The main aim is that all pupils who have problems with reading and writing would 'recover' after undergoing the intervention programme. However as R:4 and R:9 reported from school A and C respectively, 20% of the pupils failed, R: 6 from school B stated that the programme was not that successful, while R:10 from school D reported that 50% of the pupils still were unable to read and write properly. Why was the aim not met? What are the teething problems?

One of the current problems, is the teacher- pupil ratio. According to R: 3, school A, there were 24 pupils to 1 teacher and R:5 from school B, there were 30 pupils to 1 teacher. The teachers complained that it was difficult for them to give attention to the very weak pupils. This ratio is definitely not according to the Models (Augmented, Pull-out and Self-Contained) as shown by the guidelines given by the Georgian Department of Education (2007 -2008). And according to the teachers, since the size of the class was big they did not carry out courses for diagnosis and literacy was certainly not the focus. Pupils were mainly taught on correct pronunciations, spelling and writing Hence the effectiveness of KIA2M is of concern. Related to class size is the qualification of the teaching staff. R:6 of school B reported that she had not gone for any courses on KIA2M. She took over the task from the former coordinator and she learned to conduct the class through discussion with other KIA2M teachers. On the other hand R:3 from School A, R: 10 from school C and R: 13 from school D mentioned that they had gone for short courses, in-house training and workshops organised by the District Education Department. Most of the teachers involved were given courses on how to implement KIA2M, the teaching strategies, methods and approaches as well as the preparation of teaching aids. In terms of training, the short courses were definitely inadequate and as the guidelines given by the Georgian Department of Education (2007 -2008) the teaching staff has to be fully trained and certified and if need be, there should be full-time paraprofessionals to assist. For the KIA2M programme, most of the respondents from the four schools stated that they need professional or experts in reading to train the teachers as well as sound monitoring system by the school administrators and the officials from the Ministry of Education.

Another factor that accounts for 20% failure rate and 50% not being able to read and write is the constructivism approach was not practised. This perhaps is due to the class size where teachers concentrated more on recognition, identification, pronunciation, writing letters and words, spelling and reading single sentence. (the behaviorism approach) rather than on literacy and meaningful reading and writing where pupils should integrate all skills to create new and meaningful skills. Besides follow-up programmes should be planned and organised However, in schools C and D, R:9 and R:12 said " ...there is no follow-up programme to monitor the pupils' performance...no initiatives to meet the pupils who had undergone the intervention programme....". Yet for schools A and B, R: 1, R:3 and R :7 mentioned " ...we just find out the pupils' performances from the special remedial classes.....we meet the pupils' parents so that they can teach the children at home.....we did meet the pupils just to ask their progress...". This type of just asking the pupils and parents on the progress of the pupils is not enough. There should be a concrete programme to monitor and assist these

pupils to be part of the main stream once they finish the KIA2M intervention program. The class teachers where these pupils are placed should also be part of the follow-up programme so that they are more aware of these pupils and give them due attention when needed. This follow-up programme is crucial otherwise the skills learned from the EIP would be forgotten when the pupils join the main stream and teachers go on teaching without paying specific attention to these pupils.

From the transcribed interviews, R:3, from school A, R:5 from school B, R:11 from School C and R:14 from school D, mentioned that most parents did not give support or attention to the KIA2A programme. They are not interested and left everything to the school. Hence there was no continuity at home in terms of learning for these weak children. As stated by R:5, some parents could not accept the fact that their children could not read and write and needed guidance. Some became indignant when told that their children were placed in classes for the intervention programme. This is because some of these parents were highly educated with good occupations and therefore could not understand why their children needed that academic intervention.

All respondents said that they had the full backing and support from the principals of their schools. In fact the principals did a lot of monitoring. However, some of the other teachers in the main stream are not interested and did not give support. From the pupils' perspectives, they had no problems being placed in classes for the intervention programme. They were not aware that they were weak and lagged behind the other children academically

From the teachers' perspectives, R: 13 and R:14 from school D stated that KIA2M programme is successful. They managed to see that the children could read and write and 12 of them had been placed in the main stream. They thought that it's a relevant and effective programme to help the weak pupils. However, 11 other respondents from schools A, B and C stated that the programme had not fully achieved its aim. This is the 100% target where all pupils could read and write after undergoing the intervention programme had not been achieved. Besides those who passed the tests and joined the main stream were not monitored and there was no follow-up programme to determine their progress. The main problems according to the respondents were, there was no networking with other KIA2M teachers from other schools nor the experts in the reading field. The only networking was with the teachers teaching other subjects from the same school. Some respondents went further by saying that the programme was not that successful because some teachers who were made to teach were not trained, some had not attended courses while others who were trained were promoted to other divisions and hence no longer involved in the intervention programme. For an intervention programme to be successful and effective, the teaching factor teachers must be trained and certified for EIP. Trained teachers in a way can also help in reducing the class size (Based on the reading recovery programme).

Conclusion

The EIP in Malaysia, known as KIA2M was formulated based on the concern that a reasonably large percentage of school going children did not master the basic skills of reading and writing. Designed on the Behaviorism and Constructivism theories it was launched in 2006. The main aim was that all pupils who had problems with reading and writing would 'recover' after undergoing the intervention programme. However after three years of implementation, the expected 100% target where all pupils should be able to read and write was not fulfilled.

There were teething problems which were expected and these were mainly due to the class size, expert advice and teacher factors. The pedagogical approach was mainly based on the behaviorism theory and not much on constructivism. However in terms of knowledge and pedagogical content, the EIP was a success and had shown progress. Given the time, KIA2M will be an effective EIP for children who are weak in the basic skills, particularly in reading and writing.

Suggestions

The aim of KIA2M is to ensure 100% of the pupils acquire the reading and writing skills besides building their confidence and interest in learning. Despite the teachers' efforts and earnest endeavor to help the pupils, KIA2M still fell short of its target. Hence the respondents suggested that the KIA2M programme syllabus should be incorporated in the teacher training curriculum in the colleges and universities. In this no practicing is left out of EIP and teachers need not be sent for long duration courses for this will disrupt the teaching and learning process of the pupils in general. At the moment the urgent need must be met, that is, experts in reading should be sent to schools with EIP to redress the short coming.

Despite of the respondents suggestions, it is also suggested that teachers should be more proactive. They must not totally depend on what had been prepared for them by the Ministry ebut take the initiatives to read and apply current research and practice knowledge when making decisions that best fit the different pupils under their charge. Perhaps they have to plan individualised instruction for pupils with varied patterns of strengths, weaknesses and needs.

Teachers should also establish intervention targets and plan activities using innovative techniques in collaboration with other teachers in EIP, parents and experts in the reading programme. In this way, the pupils are given the opportunities to enhance their reading and writing skills and indirectly improve their listening and speaking skills.

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