Educator Attitudes of Strength-Based Education for Persons with Special Needs

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Abstract

Special need educators are frequently called upon to author educational and transitional support plans for their clients, contributary towards a positive difference on the learning outcomes and quality of life of their clients. Rather the dominant deficit-based driven supports, this paper aims to review the perceived attitudes of experienced special needs educators on strength-based approaches. Secondly, it seeks to understand the perception in the process of implementing such approaches. These findings can serve to provide insights to better support implementing strength-based approaches, creating a supported environment for the special needs educator.

Keywords: perceptions of educators, implementing strength-based curriculum, student engagement, student learning outcomes.

Introduction

The customised special needs (SPED) curriculum in Singapore runs separately from the mainstream curriculum and is designed to support students with special educational needs (SSEN) (MOE, 2023). These students with special needs often present learning disabilities and are placed in condition specific special education schools. Besides curricula disparities, subtle learning barriers exists both internally (individual medical diagnoses) and externally (environmental access to learning) present in unique ways. Thus, special needs schools aim to provide additional and differentiated accommodations to support SSEN in their learning of functional academia and daily living skills. An important part of the driving force are special needs educators, who can forge an indelible impression on the students' lives, influencing how the students view themselves and how it enables them to lead meaningful and independent lives. The general thrust in educational research primarily focuses on improving student assessments and achievement scores, often omitting the impact of educator perception and approaches have on learning outcomes. The exploration of the efficacy of educator perceptions and how this can impact student performance present certain gaps in literature. The present literature review seeks to explore how educators' perception of implementing strength-based approaches can vary in different school wide policies and its impact on the relationships of educators and students in terms of engagement, task motivation and positive learning outcomes in both groups.

Literature Review

The following sections describes the research on current practices on the perceptions in the SPED educational environment. It will identify the importance of educators' attitudes and instructional practices in implementing strength-based curriculum, the impact it may have on student engagement, motivation,

and learning outcomes in special education settings. The following study will seek to be guided by the following questions.

Guiding Questions

The broad purpose of the proposed study is to identify SPED educators' perception and describe the challenges and distinctions of strength-based approaches that they experience differently between schools with strength-based curricula and those without. The study is designed with a survey and an interview constructed based on two broad research questions: one, what are SPED educators' perception of strength-based approaches based on their individual levels and two, how are the perceived student motivation, engagement and learning outcomes different in their respective school environments?

The study will attempt to examine how educator perceptions influence implementation of strength-based approaches in Special Needs schools that have mandated and in schools which have not. It is the primary thrust of the present authors to understand how student motivation and engagement are impacted with strength-based approaches and the association of educators' attitudes in schools with and without mandated implemented strength-based approaches. To seek a better understanding of how educators' perceptions set the stage for the implementation of strength-based approaches in the classroom, the researchers aim to enquire about the current perceptions of educators from a self-reported survey as a baseline and how confident they feel toward either implementing or supporting strength-based approaches in the current teaching and learning domains respectively.

In the qualitative part of the proposed study, the discussion will touch on challenges SPED educators encounter and how such challenges may or may not affect confidence levels. With the baseline of educator perceptions, the researchers seek to examine the values that strongly correlate with educators' attitudes in the implementation or maintenance of strength-based approaches. The data collected can serve to illustrate the differing patterns of educator attitudes associated of compulsory school implementation and how these mandates have affected the observable responses of student engagement, task motivation and positive learning outcomes through the lens of the educator.

Scope of Teaching Approaches

The special education pathway supports SSEN for whom standardized assessments serve that a special education school placement is more appropriate. SSEN require to be stretched in multiple supported opportunities in order reach their full potential and SPED educational environments are the optimum settings to develop and the use as many strengths of the child as possible (Peterson, 2006). This has in turn led the shifting of educational perspectives of schools as environments to apply such practices because of their role in developing and nurturing well-being in children (Seligman et al., 2009). However, there is a constant struggle during the enhancement of the sped education curriculum, to render schooling more supportive of inclusive learning experiences for all SSEN. This may be in part due to that SSEN require educators with backgrounds in special education with condition specific pedagogical approaches, often requiring the identification of individual limitations and therefore the implementation of differentiated instruction, tailored to the individual required needs.

However, the identified learning barriers that affect the accessibility of SSEN' learning have traditionally been based off deficits rather than strengths. An example could be a student's challenge to apply the daily use of money skills due to mild intellectual disability, the student's goal then be the ability to calculate change and apply money skills, which illustrates deficit driven. This narrative could be due in part to the

original assessment of criteria that placed the SSEN in the special education setting taking precedence over other learning domains, such as learning impairment due to mild intellectual disability and other acute medical diagnoses. The onus on individual schools is then how do each differ in differentiating instructional accommodations and practices for their cohorts? This can be challenging for many SPED educators to address and to better meet the objectives of learning outcomes. SPED educators may lower assignment difficulty and managed academic /daily living expectations. This can be accomplished by simplifying an assignment to an extent where the intended learning outcomes could become distant, with the objective for students with SSEN and achieve preset success rather than actual learning, like using visuals of money in smaller denominations to count. With respect to the individualised nature of learning plans in the SPED school environment, while the above-described scenario may achieve short term success, it normally does not consider the interests of the student but rather prescribed curricular goals which is the use of 'money', and as a result of that, may not actively promote the latent strengths of the student. In this way, the application of differentiated instruction based on deficits to address learning gaps may support regression rather than progression of the student's developmental path (Lloyd & Fernyhough, 1999). While this may meet the short-term goals of learning, it could be seen as only serving part of the principle of supporting SSEN holistically.

Perceptions of Educators Matter

Educators' expectations can affect SSEN instructional behaviours and quality of life. Due to high standards set by the teaching profession and public expectations, SPED educators may not openly express their real emotions, attitudes, and feelings about their pedagogical work (Zhang et al., 2020). Past research has shown that the prevalence of lower mental health in special education teachers due to a diminished sense of achievement, which can be further aggravated under work pressure, resulting in various psychological problems; that more need to be done to not only enhance special education and rehabilitation but also value the training of mental health (Li, 2017). To report work related psychological problems may be construed as counter intuitive to the SPED educator personal career and success if a platform for such opinions is not established for such matters. These SPED educators face a group of learners with a myriad of physical and mental challenges and may require intensive group/ individual teaching services frequently. In addition to their daily teaching, most SPED educators are required to customise, based on their students age group, individualized education plans (IEP) or individualized transition plans (ITP) and deal with not only academic matters but in addition, assess ecological inventories and monitor progress, social wellbeing, and other administrative concurrent businesses of schools such as weekly cocurricular management, annual festive celebrations, and level camp planning. These responsibilities may summarily contribute towards a toil on the psychological and mental well-being of these SPED educators, affecting not only the quality of life but could also the quality of special education services (Fu et al., 2020).

Past research in the special education sector has found educators' attitudes and beliefs about their students seem to predict the performance of learning outcomes and note that students perform in accordance with their educators' expectations (Klehm 2014). Brehm and Kassin, (1996), put forth the Pygmalion effect, that one's expectations of person can eventually lead that person to achieve that conform to those prior expectations. It has been studied that educators' expectations can predict changes in student achievement scores beyond the effects of motivation (Jussim & Eccles, 1992). These studies noted that educators' beliefs created a lasting impact on learning environments (Fives & Buehl 2012). Recent research has

supported the understanding that happy educators can support effective learning environments that support well-being in students who can achieve better (Collie et al., 2015, Gu, 2014).

However, though educators usually strive for the best to support learning, the presenting challenge of implementing systemic change into curriculum requires the appreciation of perception of the educators to whom the change is applied and practiced. Failure to include the teachers' input into change efforts might distort the intent of the original initiative and ultimately result in failure to achieve sustainable change (Weatherly, 1979). In addition, they have been observed to assess these students based on neurotypical norms, thus assessing them based on a point in time according to abstract notions of intelligence (Ruppar, et al., 2015). This lack of consideration for SSEN needs is perhaps demonstrated in Schumm and Vaughn's survey that showed little difference between in planning for neurotypicals and SSEN other than spontaneous adaptations in tasks. (Schumm & Vaughn, 1992).

Lingard and Ladwig (2001), noted there were more differences in the pedagogy of individual educators than there were differences between schools, and this contributed to better understanding of the effectiveness of school wide initiatives. Whilst literature on the implementation of strengths-based approaches within special needs school has been researched, little has been done to examine the perceptions of special needs educators related to implementing and sustaining a strengths-based approach. Among the few primary concerns were the effects of such practices on the practicality of the approaches and the ability to for SSEN to apply the content to their daily living skills. These serve to highlight the importance of understanding the perceptions of education practitioners for the successful implementation and application of strength-based approaches, since additional resources may be needed to sustainably implement the approaches, the views of the educators may be of value in contributing to the success of present and future enhancement in SPED curriculum.

Links to student engagement

Apart from understanding the perceptions, it is hoped that the application of strength-based approaches in the classroom environment will help the students with SSEN to learn, retain upon more permanently by leveraging on their engagement and motivation levels. MacIntyre, (2002) described that learners are more engaged when motivated and they are more motivated when they are engaged in their strengths. Kuh et al., (2007) defined student engagement as the participation of effective academic practices leading to a range of measurable outcomes. Student engagement has always primarily an issue with education in the discourse of teaching conditions that are linked to high quality learning.

The increasing interests in student engagement research has found that higher levels of student engagement correlate to significant positive influence on student learning and outcomes (Carini, Kuh, & Klein, 2006). This engagement has been described in different degrees, of physical and psychological energy that the student invests over a continuum to the learning experience and the outcome is directly related to the quality and quantity of the input-environment-outcome (I-E-O) model of student involvement (Astin, 1984). Bloom (1956) described three facets to student engagement, behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement. Behavioural engagement includes the persons' compliance/attendance and the absence of maladaptive behaviours. Emotional engagement is the affections of interests and enjoyment. Cognitive engagements consist of being invested and motivated to learn. While these studies were on neurotypicals, college attending students, it is not less applicable to SSEN. Research has also shown that intellectual development requires various levels of active

participation, (Brown & Campione, 1994) and engagement can be a reliable predictor of academic outcomes (Moreira et al., 2015).

Such positive influence on student learning and outcomes as a correlation of higher engagement levels have been found in a number of studies, a result of an increasing interest in student engagement research. Kuh (2003) noted prior research on college students showed that student engagement is the single best predictor of learning and personal development. Besides higher achievement, there is improved self-efficacy and concept, and students cultivate a more favourable attitudes towards learning and schooling (Herrington, Oliver & Reeves, 2002). The key towards successful engagement is to focus on what students 'do" rather than what has been done to and for them. While students are themselves partly responsible for constructing their own knowledge, the onus to the learning of SSEN's is seen as school dependent, due to that each local SPED school caters to a specific medical diagnosis, e.g., students with mild intellectual disability, autism spectrum and cerebral palsy attend altogether different SPED schools. Thus, unlike mainstream where an educator may be able to tap on the expertise of many institutions, a SPED educator may not have that same level of resources to synergise of both curriculum and present level of knowledge, to generate generous conditions which is able to stimulate authentic student engagement.

Implementing authentic and sustainable engagement across all students in spite of their individual needs in a lesson can be challenging for both educators and also SSEN alike. The strength-based approach, identifies and supports SSEN' strengths by establishing positive expectations on the attributes rather than the deficits previously identified, which could allow the student with SSEN to be more motivated to be engaged than focusing on improving their deficits. Due to the various differentiated academic content, these engagement opportunities require the challenge for SPED educators to "extend" their students above the zone of proximal development. This resource intensive pedagogical work, respecting the diversity in strengths, talent, and ways of learning, which sets itself apart from excessive and repetitive practices can be reasonably understood to need some degree of educator buy-in.

The other perspective of engagement is the time engaged versus time spent at task on the achievement scores showing an increase of academic delay (Greenwood, 1991). Lee and Erdogan (2007) described the perceived attitudes of SSEN generally lean towards the negative when attempting to assess expository academic content and highlighted the difficulty for them to access these curriculums. These preset curriculums therefore could form an addressable learning barrier for students with SSEN. While encouraging the engagement on the strengths, an important aspect is for the educator to foster a positive relationship with the students, their families, and caregivers and this can set the set a positive tone which can last throughout till graduation and often transit into working adulthood life (Rawana & Brownlee, 2009). Thus, the consensus of improving student engagement can be more influenced by educators and the methods they use to engage and tap on students' strength and interests towards learning.

The other concept of the energy and drive to achieve besides engagement is motivation. Richmond (1990) noted student motivation is a critical factor for the development of life-long learning in the classrooms. Past research has shown that a large proportion of student achievement and engagement can be explained and predicted by teacher and classroom variables (Hill & Rowe, 1996). Motivation plays an important role in student achievement and conceivably, the educators' satisfaction in their role is likely to be linked to their students' motivation and engagement.

Mutually positive relationships

While motivation and engaged perspective highlights the students' point of view, the other less proposed

point of view is from the educators. It has been purposed that educators' confidence and enjoyment of teaching impacts the level of motivation and engagement of students. This emotion of enjoyment and confidence is positively correlated to the relationship and interaction with the students.

A special needs educator is one of the most highly demanding professions, and one that is universally associated with high levels of stress and reported to be to particularly susceptible burnout (Lee et al., 2011). It has been observed these burnouts that educators experience gradually develops over an extended period, becoming chronic and worse (Fernet et al., 2012). The experience of burnout evokes an overall sense of diminishment in the view of an educator's achievement and is often related to student motivation, and student motivation can be altered by their perception of acceptance by their teachers. Flink, Boggiano and Barrett, (1990)., described students' whose autonomy were supported were observed to exhibit greater curiosity and a motivation for challenge while students exposed to controlling methods displayed performance impairment. These data seem to support that the motivation and engagement of students are linked to their educator's satisfaction in teaching and interactional relationships in the classroom. It is therefore pertinent to consider the role that pedagogy that motivates students can affect their teacher's attitudes to teaching. This mutually linked cycle presents a conundrum, and thus the literature review seeks to examine the link between the attitudes to teaching strength-based approaches, which supports students' motivation by encouraging their interests and the attitudes of their educators who schools have implemented strength-based approaches in the general curricular and students/educators whose school have yet to implement these approaches.

It would hence be important to better understand the perceptions of the people who are tasked to apply for strength-based approaches as it can create values that support their permeance in the job. Despite this, there is little insight of on how perceptions of educators can be critical in the classroom and those ideal elements to promote student motivation.

Conclusions and Needs for Additional Research

The literature review underlines that the important relationship between teachers' beliefs and practices in the classroom. If SSEN are to successfully participate in school programs and work towards meaningful and contributing members of society, special educators must be convinced that practices such as strength-based approaches should be implemented and be proactively directed support by the schools. Cimbricz's (2002) notes that this relationship is complex which requires further elucidation. The proposed study hopes to shed further light on the relationship SPED educators have towards strength based approached and its related content set by their schools (or not) in Singapore. Appropriate education for SSEN is simply not a one size fits all and much of the past research has been focused on the students, without much regard for the view of the educators. Although broad interpretation of future findings should be gleaned within the local context, the survey, and interviews of sped educators, will add to the limited understanding of how school wide SPED policies is perceived and their attitudes in the scope of special education and in terms of their 'buy-in' in relation to the usefulness of strength-based approaches and school directive efforts. One can question how SSEN will ever fully develop their strengths given that the struggles of educators with finding meaningfulness of strength-based approaches.

Proposed study

The purpose of the proposed study comprises of two phases, the first is to examine SPED teachers' perceptions and use of strength-based approaches and practices from a questionnaire survey to estimate

the trend of perceptions. The second phase is a face-to-face interview. In addition, six individual education plans from each participating school; three different levels of students with SSEN will be analysed. This is to have a wide scope to understand the processes in which students' strengths have been taken into account for the formation of academic goals, and if these goals can be reasonably in line with the SPED framework as outline by their respective schools, otherwise, how can these educators be better supported. The assessment of key differences in which these perceptions differ between schools that have formally implemented strength-based approaches versus schools that have not formally implemented these approaches will be studied. The face-to-face interviews aim to focus on uncovering information of the strength-based approaches in the present climate of the classroom. In addition to the baseline level, it is with hope that these interviews provide possible insights to the challenges and/or successes of strength based infused curriculum, of which can be applied to future research that sped curriculum planners to consider when evaluating the appropriateness and sustainability of such practices in their respective school environments.

Thus, it is envisioned that the anticipated findings can encourage more efforts on the implementation or continued support of strength-based approaches in special school settings. Much more work needs to be done in the areas of strength-based approaches with the support and buy in of SPED educators. We hope that any mandated strength-based curriculum in the respective schools takes into consideration the valuable input and buy in of their experienced and enthusiastic staff, as the success of each school and the quality of learning of students with SSEN can very much depend on that individual educator.
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