

Attitude of Preschool Teachers towards Special Educational Needs Students

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Abstract

Preschool education is basic education for all children, including special educational needs students (SED). Therefore, the attitude of preschool teachers is essential to assist SED in receiving quality education as early as 5-6 years old. The purpose of this study was to identify the level of preschool teachers' attitudes towards SED. A quantitative study was conducted via survey research design. The sample of this study consisted of 80 preschool teachers in Kota Tinggi district who were selected through a simple random sampling technique. This study also used a questionnaire instrument adapted from the Diversity Acceptance Checklist, and then distributed to respondents via Google Form. Data analysis was conducted utilizing the Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) software, and translated into frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation. The results of this study indicated that the level of preschool teachers' attitude towards SED was moderately high. The outcome of this study can provide information about the importance of preschool teachers' attitude towards SED. In conclusion, preschool teachers should strive to further improve their attitude level to promote the development of SED at the preschool level.

Keywords: Preschool, Special Educational Needs Students, Attitude

Introduction

World Health Organization estimates that around one billion individuals experience some type of disability, and of that number, 93 to 150 million are children (Ruwaida & Aliza, 2020). This statement indicates that many children around the world are diagnosed with special needs. In Malaysia, the Ministry of Education (MOE) has designed and provided educational opportunities for special needs children at the preschool level. Thus, preschool teachers are responsible to assist the development of these special educational needs students (SED) at the preschool level, depending on the attitude of preschool teachers towards them. Teachers are professionals with an important role in developing SED from cognitive, communication, motor and emotional aspects (Jamilah, Singh & Rogayah, 2021).

Although preschool teachers are aware of their role, their attitude towards SED is a hindering factor for good teaching and learning implementation. Previous study has found that individuals with special needs are often discriminated in the education field (Fitriatun &

Nopita, 2017). Teachers often ignore the presence of SED in their classes, causing them to drop out of effective learning sessions and also not receive comprehensive education.

Furthermore, there are few teachers who have less interest and specific training for teaching SED (Seriayuna, 2019). They have lack enthusiasm to teach and be engaged with SED, and this situation is not favorable to these students. According to Norramlah and Nurfaradilla (2021), teachers are not open and less prepared to accept SED, and consequently the students' potential in learning is not emphasized as good as normal students. The teachers may not be able to disseminate knowledge effectively due to lack of adequate preparation for learning sessions. Without substantial effort from the teachers, this attitude issue to some extent will reduce the opportunity of SED to highlight their potential and talent. It is clear that the attitude of teachers who lack interest in teaching SED will pose negative impact to the students.

Subsequently, previous study has also found that the majority of teachers lack confidence to teach SED effectively (Radojchikj & Jovanova, 2015). This attitude is also a hindering factor in promoting the development of SED. Teachers who are less confident are more likely to relinquish if the learning plan for SED could not be successfully achieved. Therefore, teachers who lack confidence in educating SED will pose a negative impact on the learning experience of the students.

In conclusion, the issue of preschool teachers' negative attitude towards SED is a hindering factor to implement an effective teaching and learning process at the preschool level. Based on the research problems, this study was conducted to identify the level of preschool teachers' attitude towards SED. Although many studies related to attitudes towards SED have been carried out, studies involving preschool teachers are still scarce in the literature. Therefore, this study provides information related to the attitude of preschool teachers towards SED.

Literature Review

Education in Malaysia is a continuous effort towards developing individual potential holistically and integrated to form a balanced and harmonious individual in intellectual, social, emotional and physical aspects (Nurul Izzah & Hazhari, 2020). In line with the national education philosophy, the MOE emphasizes the concept of education for all. According to Suzanna and Norshidah (2022), education for all aims to produce a society with knowledge and high abilities. This concept will be realized if there is no discrimination in education, but rather equality for all groups of students (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2018). All children have the right to receive a perfect education according to their ability (Seriayuna, 2019). In Malaysia, there are a total of 93,951 students with special needs who are studying in either Special Education Schools (SPK), Special Integration Programs (PPKI) or Inclusive Education Programs (PPI), and of this number, a total of 1399 are preschool students (Siti Jamilah, Singh & Rogayah, 2021). Like other countries, the MOE also offers education for SED at the preschool level.

Early education in Malaysia, especially preschool, plays an important role in the optimal development of SED before the transition phase to primary school (Saiful Azam Khoo, 2020). Preschool is the first phase of education for SED. It is a vital phase for all students, including

SED, as 80% of mental, physical and cognitive development occurs between the ages of 4 to 6 years (Sabarinah et al., 2015). In fact, this age range is also a critical period when the brain and intellectual, physical, emotional and behavioral processes develop rapidly (Zabeli & Gjelij, 2020). Although the learning acceptance level of SED is slightly different or slower compared to normal students of the same age, the preschool period is essential for their development process. Therefore, SED needs to be assisted and given adequate education at the preschool level.

Moreover, Chao (2017), stated that a positive teacher's attitude is an important element in shaping the classroom environment as well as motivating and improving SED performance. Teachers with positive attitude are able to motivate SED to engage in the learning session effectively. This is also supported by Saloviita and Consegna (2019), that effective and successful teaching for SED depend on the positive attitude of educators. In addition, teachers should also be positive towards the implementation of special education as it affects their ability to support and implement appropriate practices (Aldousari & Dunn, 2022). Therefore, it is explicit that the positive attitude of the teachers can influence the effectiveness of teaching and learning process with SED.

According to Mohammad Azman, Roslee and Muhamad Suhaimi (2019), the willingness and confidence of preschool teachers to accept SED in their preschool classes ensure their success in facing challenging task. These attitudes are essential to drive their sincerity in teaching and influence the students' willingness to learn. This is also supported by Halimah (2020), where the teacher's attitude towards students has an impact on the willingness of SED to get engaged in learning. Thus, confidence and willingness of the teachers to accept SED can support the readiness of these students to learn.

Furthermore, the teacher's attitude also influences the success of SED to follow teaching and learning in the inclusive classroom. Previous study has shown that teachers' attitudes have a significant impact on student success in inclusive classrooms (Yu, 2019). In addition, study conducted by Da Fonte and Barton-Arwood (2017), found that the teacher's responsibility towards SED can affect the performance of all students in an inclusive classroom environment. This indicates that teachers' attitude in accepting SED in the classroom can significantly improve the performance and success of the students. Therefore, teachers should always have good attitude towards SED to enable them to follow the learning process in the classroom.

Although the positive attitude of teachers towards SED is crucial, there are also negative attitudes reported. According to Mprah et al (2023), some teachers have a negative attitude towards children with disabilities and perceived children with some form of disability should be sent to special schools. Findings from the study by Mprah et al (2023), found that children with disabilities attending mainstream schools were labeled unintelligent and slow as they could not obey instructions. Through the findings of this study, we can understand that there are also teachers who have a negative attitude towards SED.

According to Ginevra et al (2021), educators are negative towards students with unusual and challenging behavior, and they are less likely to be in class. Abed and Shackelford (2021), in their study also asserted that teachers have a negative attitude towards students with severe and profound disabilities. This demonstrates that teachers will also tend to show a negative

attitude towards students with severe disabilities and challenging behavior in the classroom. Thus, we can understand that teachers can be negative towards SED, especially those with difficult to control behavior and severe disabilities.

In addition, the teacher's attitude can also affect the performance of SED (Edwards, 2023). Negative attitude makes it difficult for SED to participate in teaching and learning sessions. This is in line with the study conducted by Gupta, Singh and Parween (2018), where the negative attitude and low expectations of teachers can reduce the opportunities for students to learn. When teachers are negative, they have no enthusiasm to implement teaching and learning sessions, and as a result the opportunities and performance of SED will decrease. Therefore, it is clear that the negative attitude of teachers can adversely affect the performance and opportunities of SED.

Some teachers are not supportive in allowing SED to participate in their classroom learning session. According to Timo (2020), there are also teachers who believe that SED will learn better in special education classes. The prejudiced attitude shown by these teachers will create a gap between teachers and students, and become a hindering factor in building a united community (Yong & Ku Hasnita, 2019). This proves that teachers who are prejudiced against SED will eventually create huge gap between teachers and students. Such attitude can have a negative impact on the relationship between teachers, SED and community.

Moreover, Alnahdi (2020), claimed that teachers will be more positive towards students with disabilities in mainstream education if they are provided with practical skills and strategies instead of theoretical information that is irrelevant to real classroom situations. This means that teachers need more support in terms of skills and strategies in teaching SED, and not only theory, so that positive attitude can be nurtured in teaching and learning process. The literature review also revealed that teachers' attitudes are strongly influenced by basic needs and aspects related to the type of disability, teacher and learning environment (Mirna, 2019). We can understand that the teacher's attitude towards SED also depends on the preparation and support needed for teaching SED. If all the necessary needs and support are provided, teachers are anticipated to be more positive in teaching SED. Therefore, the support and needs of teachers must be given full attention to help improve their positive attitude towards SED.

Mata and Clipa (2020), in their study stated that teachers who interact with people with disabilities are expected to have positive attitude towards these students. The result of this interaction can also enable mainstream teachers to be friendly when communicating with SED (Lai et al., 2017). Teachers who often interact and communicate with SED have better understanding and friendly. Therefore, teachers who often interact and communicate with SED are able to nurture more positive attitude towards the students compared to those with less interaction.

According to Abdulaziz and Michael (2023), teachers' beliefs and attitudes are crucial in cultivating good attitudes in each student. Positive belief and attitude of teachers towards SED will easily cultivate good attitude in the students. Ginja and Chen (2021), suggested teachers to practice constructive skills and attitudes that lead to sustained positive outcomes in academic, social and behavioral skills of SED in meeting their unique and diverse population.

Through this study, we can understand that teachers need to adopt a good attitude towards SED to enable students to produce positive behavior. In relation to that, it is clear that a positive teacher's attitude can influence the academic, social and behavioral skills of SED.

Based on previous research on teachers' attitudes towards SED, it clearly shows that positive attitude is one of the important qualities that should be owned by teachers. In the absence of positive attitude towards SED, both teachers and students are susceptible to challenges and eventually affect the teaching and learning process. Therefore, teachers should always adopt a positive attitude so that the learning sessions will benefit both parties.

Research Methodology

The research design used in this study was a survey study. In quantitative research, a survey is conducted on samples or entire human population to describe the attitudes, opinions, behaviors or characteristics of the population (Creswell, 2012). Survey study allowed the researchers to collect detailed information about the level of preschool teachers' attitude towards SED. This approach was also selected as it satisfied the purpose and objectives of this study, and also helped to collect data and information to answer the research questions.

In addition, the population of this study involved preschool teachers in Kota Tinggi district. The study sample was selected using simple random sampling method. According to Bhardwaj (2019), samples are randomly selected in simple random sampling. This method does not affect the quality of the sample as each member has an equal chance to be selected in the sample (Bhardwaj, 2019).

Total sample selected for this study was based on Cohen's sample size determination table adopted from (Manion and Marrison, 2001). The sample was selected by taking into account the closest or higher population based on the table. Demographic analysis of the respondents is shown in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1

Respondent Demographics

	Demographic	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	10	12.5
	Female	70	87.5
Age	18 – 25 years	1	1.3
	26 – 35 years	39	48.8
	36 – 45 years	28	35.0
	46 years and above	12	15.0
School location	Urban	15	18.8
	Rural	65	81.3
Academic qualification	Diploma	3	3.8
	Bachelor's degree	74	92.5
	Others	3	3.8
Teaching experience	Less than 5 years	8	10.0
	5 to 10 years	37	46.3
	10 years and above	35	43.8
Specialization	Preschool education/ Early childhood education	72	90.0
	Others	8	10.0

Research Instrument

The questionnaire used was adapted from the Diversity Acceptance Checklist (Khalsa & Miyake, 2006). This questionnaire also has high reliability and instrument validity, where the Cronbach's alpha value of the questionnaire was 0.974. Based on the Rasch measurement model, an acceptable Cronbach's alpha value score is 0.71-0.99 (Bond & Fox, 2015). Therefore, this questionnaire was used in this study as it has high Cronbach's alpha value.

This questionnaire was used to identify the level of teachers' attitude towards SED. This questionnaire used a Likert scale score of 1 to 5: score 1 - strongly disagree (SD), score 2 - disagree (D), score 3 - not sure (NS), score 4 - agree (A) and score 5 - strongly agree (SA). In addition, the questionnaire was divided into two parts, namely A and B. Part A presented information related to the demographics of the respondents, while Part B involved items related to the attitude of preschool teachers. There were 10 items in this section encompassing affective, behavioral and cognitive aspects. For the items in part B, respondents only need to choose the appropriate answer based on the Likert scale.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Data of this study were collected using the questionnaires, which were distributed through Google Form to preschool teachers in the Kota Tinggi district upon obtaining permission from

the Kota Tinggi District Education Office. A period of two weeks was given to the respondents to complete the questionnaires. After two weeks, the questionnaires were collected, and all the data were analyzed by Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Through SPSS, descriptive analysis was used to analyze the data obtained from part A and B of the questionnaire, and translated as frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation.

Mean score interpretation of preschool teachers' attitudes towards SED was conducted in accordance with that suggested by Ghazali and Sufean (2016), as shown in Table 1.2. The findings are explained in detail in the subsequent section.

Table 1.2

Mean Score Interpretation

Mean Score	Mean Score Interpretation
1.00 – 2.00	Low
2.01 – 3.00	Moderately low
3.01 – 4.00	Moderately high
4.01 – 5.00	High

Source: Ghazali and Sufean 2016

Findings

A total of 80 respondents participated in this study by completing the given questionnaire. Analysis was conducted on the items in the questionnaire related to preschool teachers' attitude towards SED, and the results are summarized in Table 1.3. Overall mean of preschool teachers' attitude towards SED was 3.71, while standard deviation of preschool teachers' attitude towards SED was 0.596. Based on the mean interpretation, the level of preschool teachers' attitude towards SED was at moderately high.

For item B1 (Table 1.3), the majority of respondents (38.8%) disagreed, 24 respondents (30.0%) strongly disagreed, 17 respondents (21.3%) were not sure, and 7 respondents (8.8%) agreed. Only one respondent (1.3%) strongly agreed with this item. Moreover, 23 respondents (28.7%) chose not to agree with item B2. There were 20 respondents (25.0%) each who chose not sure and strongly disagreed for item B2. Meanwhile, 14 respondents (17.5%) chose to agree, and 3 respondents (3.8%) chose to strongly agree on this item. Subsequently, the findings showed that most of the respondents (n = 30; 40.0%) expressed uncertainty on item B3. There was an equal number of respondents who chose strongly agree and not sure for this item, each was 18 respondents (22.5%). A total of 7 respondents (8.8%) chose to disagree and 5 respondents (6.3%) were strongly disagreed with item B3.

Based on Table 1.3, there were 39 respondents (48.8%) agreed and 36 respondents (45.0%) strongly agreed with item B6. There were 3 respondents (3.8%) who chose not sure for this item. For strongly disagree and disagree options on this item, each recorded only one respondent (1.3%). The results also showed that 39 respondents (48.8%) chose to agree and 34 respondents (42.5%) chose to strongly agree for item B7. Only 5 respondents (6.3%) chose not sure for this item. In addition, only one respondent (1.3%) was recorded each for disagree and strongly disagree options on item B7.

Table 1.3

Preschool Teachers' Attitudes towards Special Educational Needs Students

No.	Item	n (%)				
		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Not sure	Agree	Strongly agree
B1	I support the placement of SED together with normal students in the same classroom.	24 (30.0%)	31 (38.8%)	17 (21.3%)	7 (8.8%)	1 (1.3%)
B2	I accept special educational needs students (SED), such as ADHD, autism, physical disabilities and others in my class.	20 (25.0%)	23 (28.7%)	20 (25.0%)	14 (17.5%)	3 (3.8%)
B3	I accept special educational needs students (SED) as "my" students.	5 (6.3%)	7 (8.8%)	18 (22.5%)	32 (40.0%)	18 (22.5%)
B4	I am comfortable and easy to interact with students with autism, physical problems, vision problems and so on.	4 (5.0%)	16 (20.0%)	31 (38.8%)	23 (28.7%)	6 (7.5%)
B5	I give compliment or reward as an appreciation if the student successfully completes the activity.	1 (1.3%)	1 (1.3%)	4 (5.0%)	36 (45.0%)	38 (47.5%)
B6	I show good behavior to all students including special educational needs students (SED).	1 (1.3%)	1 (1.3%)	3 (3.8%)	39 (48.8%)	36 (45.0%)
B7	I am fair in providing treatment and guidance to all students including special educational needs students (SED).	1 (1.3%)	1 (1.3%)	5 (6.3%)	39 (48.8%)	34 (42.5%)
B8	I give SED the opportunity to voice their opinions and feelings through alternative means (e.g., pictures, sign language).	1 (1.3%)	3 (3.8%)	4 (5.0%)	44 (55.0%)	28 (35.0%)
B9	I always think positively about the attitude, behavior and emotions of special educational needs students (SED).	1 (1.3%)	3 (3.8%)	5 (6.3%)	45 (56.3%)	26 (32.5%)
B10	I provide motivation to students to improve their thinking and enthusiasm to succeed	1 (1.3%)	1 (1.3%)	4 (5.0%)	38 (47.5%)	36 (45.0%)

Discussion

The results of the analysis found that the level of preschool teachers' attitude towards SED was moderately high. It indicated that the preschool teachers involved in this study have a positive attitude towards SED. Study by Noor Diyana and Mohd Mokhtar (2021), also found a moderately high level of preschool teachers' acceptance towards SED. In addition,

Mohammed, Badu and Baatimah (2022), revealed that the teachers in this study had a positive attitude towards SED.

According to Ortega and Fuentes (2021), teachers' attitude towards SED inclusiveness was moderate, and it can still be improved. This finding further strengthens the findings of this study. Indeed, teachers can create a positive attitude towards SED, and it can also be further improved with training and exposure to SED.

Based on the analysis, it was found that the majority of teachers have high positive attitude in giving compliment or rewards to appreciate students if they can successfully complete the activities. For this item, most respondents were strongly agreed. Therefore, we understand that teachers are aware of the importance of giving compliment and rewards to SED. This is supported by Mohammad Fauziddin, Maya Dwi Kusumawati and Rizki Ananda (2023), that teachers often give compliment to student who successfully answer questions or follow teacher's instructions in the learning process. This kind of attitude is essential as praise, support and persuasion can be expressed regularly to increase learning motivation (Mongudal, Batahong & Ompok, 2021). Therefore, the positive attitude of teachers in giving compliment and rewards to SED must be practiced during the teaching and learning process.

In contrast, several studies are contradicted to the findings of this study. For example, Radojichikj, Jovanova and Canevska (2016), found that preschool teachers' attitudes were more negative than positive towards inclusive SED. Tamakloe (2018), also revealed that the verbal and non-verbal behaviors of some teachers as a result of their pedagogical practices were inconsistent with their claims that they supposedly accept children with disabilities.

In fact, the majority of teachers in this study have low attitude level in supporting the placement of SED together with normal students in the same classroom. The item obtained the highest percentage of the strongly disagree option. It is possible that the preschool teachers in this study lack confidence, resources and skills in implementing the learning process with SED. Study by Jury et al (2023), stated that teachers universally and consistently have less resources to support SED placement. Teachers are also concerned about the learning process and outcomes of normal and special needs students, and most teachers have less specific knowledge and expert skills as their preparation to support SED (Leijen, Arcidiacono & Baucal, 2021). Therefore, these factors could be the reason that led to disagreement among preschool teachers in this district to support the placement of SED with normal students in the same classroom.

Furthermore, class size and a large number of students are factors that burden teachers and create difficulties for them to meet the needs of each student (Torombe, 2013). Typically, the preschool class can occupy 25 students. This number makes it difficult for teachers to focus and implement the teaching and learning process. At the age of 5 to 6 years, preschool students need more support and attention from teachers. This may encourage preschool teachers in this district to not agree with the placement of SED in the same class with normal students. Study of Muna et al. (2016), also received the same response, where the majority of teachers indicated that they were not in favor of inclusive education. Therefore, the attitude of teachers who did not support the placement of SED was influenced by the number of students in the class.

Conclusion

Overall, the attitude of preschool teachers towards SED is an essential aspect in ensuring the success of education for all concept. Therefore, preschool teachers should always strive to improve their attitude towards SED. The ministry also plays an imperative role in organizing relevant workshops and courses to further nurture positive attitudes of preschool teachers. In addition, the results of this study are also expected to provide exposure to preschool teachers in assessing the extent of their attitude towards SED. This study can also provide awareness to preschool teachers about the importance of their attitude towards SED. For future research, it is suggested to include preschool teachers from other districts as respondents, and also investigates other aspects, such as the skills and practices of preschool teachers towards SED.

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