



Reset, Restart, and Refocus on Communication Competence and Exploring the Role of Communication in the Inclusive Setting: A Study Based on Grade 03 Students of Southlands College, Galle

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ABSTRACT

Communication is the cornerstone of human existence and a fundamental right for all. The principles of inclusive education drive the integration of children with special needs into mainstream education, ensuring equal treatment and non-discrimination for all students. Inclusive education greatly benefits children with learning disabilities by offering equal educational opportunities, regardless of their needs, abilities, socioeconomic status, race, nationality, gender, religion, health, or location. This research paper examines the implementation of inclusive education in Grade 3 at Southlands College, Galle. It explores the perceptions of Grade 3 teachers and parents on the role of communication in integrating children with special needs. The study focuses on communication strategies, essential characteristics, and their practical application when working with these children. Grade 3 teachers and parents at Southlands College completed a self-designed questionnaire assessing their awareness of the importance of communication in children's social, emotional, and cognitive development, as well as their understanding of inclusive education for children with special needs. The questionnaire also evaluated the readiness of Grade 3 teachers to communicate effectively with special needs children and their parents in an inclusive educational environment. The data were analyzed quantitatively using Microsoft Excel, followed by qualitative analysis involving coding and indexing. The research findings indicate that Grade 3 teachers lack the necessary communication skills to work effectively with children with special needs, particularly when dealing with parents who have limited communication abilities. As a result, it is recommended to enhance communication competence and re-evaluate the role of communication within the inclusive education framework.

KEYWORDS: Communication, inclusive education, learning disabilities, mainstream education, special needs

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INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH PROBLEM

Inclusive education is crafted to accommodate students with a spectrum of abilities, ensuring equitable treatment and equal opportunities for all. Within such an environment, student diversity and individuality are acknowledged and esteemed without bias. The foremost objective of inclusive education is the eradication of prejudice and discrimination against all learners. Inclusive communication recognizes and promotes diverse modes of interaction, both verbal and non-verbal, underscoring that unspoken elements can be as crucial as spoken ones. By integrating comprehensive relational skills into everyday interactions, the potential for positive and effective engagement with all individuals is heightened. As educators, we champion equity and inclusive education for every child (Geghamyan, 2015). With classrooms becoming increasingly diverse, intercultural communication skills are indispensable. The classroom teacher is pivotal in ensuring that each student feels welcomed, comfortable, and motivated to maximize their learning potential within the classroom's environment and culture. Effective communication and inclusivity are intrinsically linked, fostering robust relationships grounded in mutual respect and trust between students and teachers. According to Piaget's constructivist learning theory (McLeod, 2020), dialogue is essential for students to assimilate new knowledge with their existing frameworks. By promoting interaction and participation, all students can develop a sense of belonging and cultivate meaningful peer relationships. Properly executed inclusion benefits everyone in the classroom, enhancing students' capacities to collaborate, appreciate diverse perspectives, think critically, and succeed academically.

In academic literature, inclusive education is described as an ideology (Allan 2014) that guides the practice of respecting every learner's right to receive a quality education. Booth (2009) highlighted that inclusive education aims to enhance participation for all learners, establish systems that equally value every individual, and promote fairness, empathy, human rights, and respect. Other critical components include increased integration into regular classrooms, ensuring equal opportunities for academic and social success, adopting inclusive teaching methods, and fostering inclusive school environments (Florian, 2011).

The research addressed a critical issue: it was uncertain whether primary teachers and parents at Southlands College comprehended the significance of communication in the social, emotional, and cognitive development of children, as well as in the implementation of inclusive education for students with special needs. Additionally, it was unclear whether Grade 3 teachers at Southlands

College were adequately prepared to effectively communicate with special needs children and their parents in an inclusive educational setting.

1.2 Background of the Research

In the Grade 03 parallel classes at Southlands College, Galle, there were several children identified with learning disabilities (LD). Each Grade 03 class accommodated at least 3 or 4 LD children. It is noteworthy that these children having special needs did not experience physical impairments akin to blindness or deafness but rather exhibited uneven development in cognitive areas, particularly in aspects such as memory.

Given these circumstances, inclusive education for students with learning disabilities assumes paramount importance. This research paper delved into the significance of communication within inclusive education for children with LD.

The efficacy of inclusive classrooms hinges significantly on the participation of parents and students with learning disabilities (LD) in the educational process. This study underscores that parental engagement in education profoundly enhances the outcomes of inclusive teaching, fostering active enthusiasm for learning among children. Therefore, maintaining regular communication with parents of LD children is essential to improving their academic performance.

Children with LD exhibit unique characteristics and requirements, with parents often possessing a deeper understanding of their children as their closest allies. Inclusive education aims to establish individualized goals for each student's growth and learning. The seamless operation of inclusive classrooms necessitates teachers' adept guidance for every student. Effective collaboration with professionals through communication enables educators to enhance their understanding of LD children, thereby facilitating well-regulated inclusive classrooms. Once established, such collaboration greatly benefits LD children, empowering them to reflect on their strengths and weaknesses and make self-improvements with the support of teachers and parents.

Together, parents and teachers can actively assist LD children in exploring their interests and realizing their full potential. This research highlights that such cooperative efforts restore self-confidence in LD children and foster a conducive learning environment where they can engage meaningfully with peers, teachers, and parents through understanding and encouragement.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

This research study aims to accomplish the following objectives:

(i) To ascertain teachers' and parents' awareness regarding the importance of communication in fostering social, emotional, and cognitive development and in implementing inclusive education for children with special needs.

(ii) To evaluate the readiness of Grade 03 teachers at Southlands College in effectively communicating with children with special needs and their parents during the execution of inclusive education.

REVIEW OF THE RELEVANT LITERATURE

Educators universally prioritize the enhancement and significance of communication in various contexts. Communication skills directly influence teaching styles and methodologies. M. Lewis, in "Communication and Education," argues that communication challenges persist within education, noting teachers often operate in isolating conditions (Lewis, 1952, p. 28). Miscommunication among teachers frequently leads to misunderstandings and ineffective student learning outcomes. Paulo Freire's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" proposes a transformative relationship among teachers, students, and society, identifying an inherent "narrative sickness" in education (Freire, 1968, p. 71). Freire critiques traditional education as dehumanizing, advocating for an approach that empowers both students and teachers.

He argues against the notion of students as passive receptacles filled with information, positing that genuine critical thinking only occurs through active communication and engagement with reality (Freire, 1968, p. 77).

Tony Lynch, in "Communication in the Language Classroom," illustrates the limitations of fixed exchange communication patterns between teachers and students, highlighting the cycle of "Initiation," "Response," and "Feedback" (Lynch, 1996). This model often reduces communication to a simplistic transactional process, masking the complexity of true communication dynamics in the classroom. The integration of pedagogy and communication is underscored by Pat Petrie in "Communication Skills for Working with Children and Young People: Introducing Social Pedagogy" (Petrie, 2011). Petrie emphasizes that effective pedagogical practices rely heavily on strong communication, particularly in establishing positive relationships with students. She asserts that nurturing these relationships fosters enthusiasm and promotes effective learning outcomes among students.

In conclusion, effective pedagogy hinges on robust communication strategies that engage students, challenge them, and foster learning success in every classroom. Teachers must therefore assume a leadership role in implementing

pedagogically sound approaches that prioritize meaningful communication and relationship-building with their students.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology described in the study is a mixed-methods approach. This approach integrates both quantitative and qualitative techniques to investigate communication competence in the context of inclusive education.

3a. Quantitative Techniques:

The study likely employed quantitative methods through the use of student questionnaires to gather data on student preferences and perceptions regarding classroom communication. These questionnaires, including both yes/no and open-ended questions, aimed to quantify aspects such as student satisfaction, preferences, and levels of engagement.

3b. Qualitative Techniques:

Qualitative methods were utilized through observations and semi-structured interviews with teachers and parents. Observations provided qualitative data on student-teacher relationships, classroom dynamics, and communication techniques used in the learning environment. Semi-structured interviews allowed for in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives on the role of communication in education, inclusive practices, and the impact on social, emotional, and cognitive development.

3.1 Research Design

The research design in this study is descriptive research, as it aimed to describe and explore communication competence in an inclusive educational context using a mixed-methods approach.

This study involves observing and describing the behavior of a subject without influencing it in any way. In this study:

The various aspects of communication competence in an inclusive education setting among Grade 3 students, teachers, and parents were observed and described.

They utilized methods such as observations, questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews to gather detailed information about student-teacher relationships, classroom dynamics, communication techniques, and participants' perceptions.

The focus was on describing the current state of communication practices and understanding participants' perspectives rather than manipulating variables or establishing cause-and-effect relationships.

The mixed methods approach in this study facilitated a thorough examination of communication competence in inclusive education by triangulating findings from different data sources and participant viewpoints.

3.2. Sampling Procedure

The sampling technique used was convenience sampling, as all Grade 3 students and a subset of their parents from Southlands College were included based on their accessibility and willingness to participate.

The research population was sourced from Southlands College, Galle Fort. The study encompassed 20 teachers, 200 all Grade 3 students, and a subset of their 80 parents. Instruction in these classes was conducted in the native language, Sinhala.

The participants in the current study included Grade 3 students, their parents, and their teachers. The total cohort comprised 300 individuals: 200 Grade 3 students, 20 teachers, and 80 parents of the Grade 3 students. The students were aged between 8 and 9 years old. Observations were conducted across six classrooms, each led by different teachers. This approach facilitated an examination of whether the teachers employed distinct teaching styles or adapted their methods to accommodate varying student groups.

3.3 Instrumentation

The study employed three main instruments: observations, student questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews. These instruments were designed to collect comprehensive data that ensured the study's reliability, validity, and depth of insights from multiple participant perspectives.

Three instruments were designed to collect relevant information for this study:

(i) **Observations:** These were conducted to gather thorough and detailed information about student-teacher relationships, the overall classroom atmosphere, interactions between teachers and students, and the communication techniques used to motivate students during the learning process. Notes were taken during the observations to identify the degree of interactivity, levels of communication, and types of communication within the classroom. A total of 18 observations were conducted across six different classrooms, with three distinct subjects observed in each class.

(ii) ***Student Questionnaires***: Designed to understand students' preferences regarding their school, classrooms, and classes, as well as to determine whether teacher-student interactions fostered their passion for school. The questionnaire included both yes/no and open-ended questions, providing insight into the students' level of learning based on classroom communication. Students were asked to rank their preferences about the school, rating factors from 1 (least preferred) to 5 (most preferred). This query aimed to discern whether students favored teachers or courses more and to gauge their enthusiasm for attending school .

(iii) ***Semi-structured Interviews with Teachers***: These interviews provided an excellent opportunity to listen to teachers' opinions and viewpoints about the importance of communication in the classroom. The interviews aimed to understand the strategies and techniques teachers use to boost student enthusiasm. The questions addressed their teaching styles, knowledge of effective communication techniques, any restrictions imposed by schools or the Ministry of Education, and more. These interviews also assessed whether primary teachers were prepared to communicate effectively with special needs children and their parents in the context of inclusive education.

Additionally, the interviews aimed to determine if teachers and parents recognize the significance of communication in the social, emotional, and cognitive development of children, as well as in the implementation of inclusive education for children with special needs.

(iv) ***Semi-structured Interviews with Parents***: These interviews were conducted to understand if parents were aware of the importance of communication in their children's social, emotional, and cognitive development.

3.4 Data Collection

The data were collected at Southlands College in Galle, as previously noted. The instrumentation encompassed a questionnaire featuring yes/no questions, alongside personal interviews and observations. Consequently, both quantitative and qualitative methods were employed to analyze the data. Initially, the data were analyzed quantitatively using Microsoft Excel, followed by a qualitative analysis involving coding and indexing.

3.5 The Management of Confidentiality and Anonymity

Maintaining the anonymity and confidentiality of participants is crucial in this social research endeavor. Furthermore, the project abstained from collecting identifying information such as names, addresses, or emails. Throughout the data collection

process, all participants were assured that their information would not be disclosed to any third party.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

This section presents the outcomes of the research examining the impact of teacher-parent and teacher-student communication on students' communication skills within an inclusive educational environment.

4a. Classroom Observations

Given the focus of this study on teacher-student communication styles and methods, observations were conducted during Social Studies and Math classes in Grade 03 at Southlands College, where instruction was conducted in the native language. Observational data were partially collected, totaling 18 observations across 6 classrooms, with 3 observations per classroom. The objective was to assess the extent of teacher-student interaction in the classroom and correlate these findings with insights from interviews and student questionnaires.

During these observations, it was noted that teachers primarily engaged with students who showed interest and participated actively in the subject matter. Typically, students seated in the front rows, numbering between four and six, were the main participants in answering teachers' questions. Conversely, the remainder of the class exhibited minimal engagement or participation. Teachers predominantly directed yes-or-no questions to students in the front rows without effectively integrating the rest of the class into the learning process, particularly the students with learning disabilities (LD)

4b. Questionnaire for Students

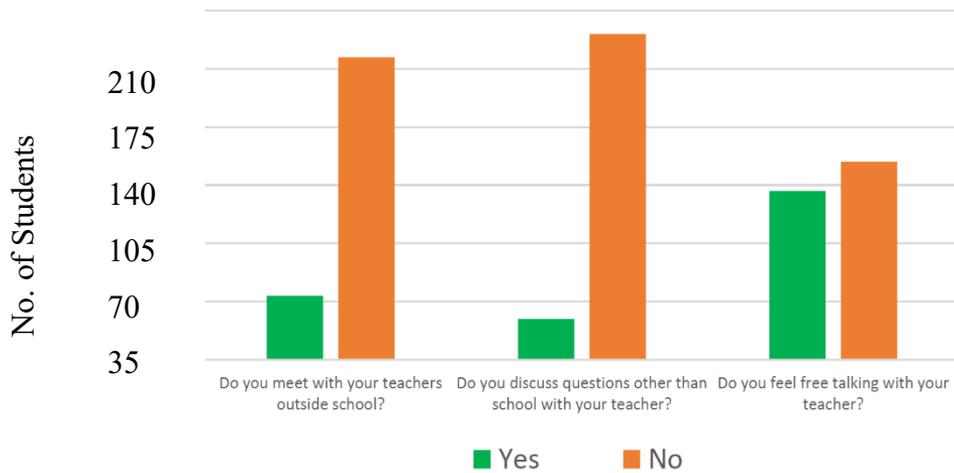
Results indicated that classmates were the primary motivator for attending class, followed by teachers, courses, the cafeteria, and counseling services. This highlights teachers as a significant but less compelling source of motivation compared to peers.

Additionally, students were invited to provide detailed feedback through open-ended questions, specifically about what they appreciate most in their teachers—whether personal traits or professional qualities. Responses ranged from communication style and professionalism to warmth, wisdom, and kindness.

The final segment focused on students' perspectives regarding teacher-student interaction, framed in yes/no questions. Across all classrooms, responses were consistent: most of the 200 students indicated they did not meet with their teacher

outside of school, discuss questions with them outside of class, or feel comfortable initiating conversations with them (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Opinion on Teacher-Student Interactions



Source: Developed by Author

4c. Interviews for Teachers

The responses from the five teachers interviewed exhibited a consistent theme. Each teacher emphasized that fostering healthy relationships and cultivating a positive classroom environment significantly enhances student performance. During classroom observations, it was noted that teachers tended to conduct traditional lectures, limiting opportunities for interactive communication.

4d. Parent Interviews

Parents interviewed highlighted additional factors that motivate student learning, such as aspirations for higher education and career advancement. One parent mentioned using engaging activities and materials as incentives, alongside nurturing positive relationships with students. Most parents emphasized the importance of student interaction, including communication within the classroom, in fostering enthusiasm for school. However, classroom observations indicated sparse student-to-student communication.

DISCUSSION

The findings from this study shed light on several crucial aspects of teacher-student and teacher-parent communication within the inclusive educational

setting of Grade 03 at Southlands College, Galle. This discussion synthesizes the results from classroom observations, student questionnaires, teacher interviews, and parent interviews to explore their implications for enhancing students' communication skills. (Dhanapala, 2009)

5.1 Teacher-Student Communication Dynamics

Classroom observations revealed a predominant pattern where teacher-student interactions were heavily skewed towards students who actively participated and sat in the front rows. This selective engagement suggests a potential limitation in inclusive practices, as students with learning disabilities (LD) or those less inclined to participate may receive less attention and interaction from teachers. The use of yes-or-no questions primarily directed at front-row students further underscores a missed opportunity for broader classroom engagement and inclusivity.

Moreover, students' responses in the questionnaire indicated that peers were a more significant motivator for attending class compared to teachers. This finding underscores the need for teachers to enhance their communication strategies to foster stronger connections with all students, not solely those who naturally engage more actively.

Interestingly, despite positive feedback on teachers' personal and professional qualities, such as communication style and warmth, a significant number of students expressed discomfort in initiating conversations with their teachers outside of class. This reluctance could impact students' overall communication development and their ability to seek academic support or guidance beyond regular class hours.

5.2 Implications for Practice

The insights gathered from both students and teachers highlight several actionable implications for improving communication competence within the classroom:

Enhancing Inclusive Practices: Teachers should adopt strategies that encourage equitable participation among all students, including those with learning disabilities. This could involve varied questioning techniques, collaborative learning activities, and differentiated instructional methods tailored to individual learning needs.

Strengthening Teacher-Student Relationships: Building on positive feedback regarding personal traits, teachers could proactively foster more accessible

channels of communication outside of formal class settings. This might include designated office hours, informal check-ins, or digital platforms for Q&A sessions aimed at enhancing students' comfort levels in seeking academic support.

Promoting peer interaction: Given the significant influence of peers on student motivation, educators should also facilitate opportunities for structured peer interactions within the classroom. This could encourage collaborative problem-solving, peer mentoring, or group projects that promote communication skills alongside academic learning.

Engaging Parents as Partners: Parental involvement emerged as a crucial factor in motivating student learning and fostering enthusiasm for school. Collaborative efforts between teachers and parents, focusing on effective communication strategies and shared educational goals, could further enhance student engagement and overall academic performance.

5.3 Limitations and Further Research

While this study provides valuable insights into communication dynamics within Grade 03 classrooms, certain limitations should be acknowledged. The sample size of observations, questionnaires, and interviews, though substantial, may not fully capture the diversity of experiences across all classrooms and student backgrounds within Southlands College. Future research could explore the longitudinal effects of improved communication strategies on students' academic outcomes and social-emotional development within inclusive educational settings.

This study underscores the pivotal role of communication competence in fostering an inclusive and supportive learning environment. By leveraging these findings to inform pedagogical practices and interpersonal interactions, educators can strive towards optimizing student engagement, communication skills, and overall academic success.

CONCLUSION

When working with children who have special needs, a communicative approach model becomes imperative due to the communication challenges they face. Teachers bear the responsibility of implementing principles of inclusive education since these students are integrated into mainstream schooling. The preparedness of teachers is crucial given their pivotal role in supporting children with special needs. This study underscores the deficiency in communicative competencies among teachers working with such students, particularly those whose parents also lack adequate communication skills.

Parents increasingly emphasize the importance of their children's ability to communicate with peers, gain acceptance, and spend time socializing where they can practice their communication skills. This paper elucidates the critical role of communication in the learning journey of children with learning disabilities (LD) within the framework of inclusive education. Effective communication between teachers and students is pivotal in cultivating an optimal inclusive classroom environment, while strong teacher-parent communication significantly enhances school-family relationships and parental involvement in inclusive education initiatives.

The specific needs of LD students must be earnestly addressed within inclusive classrooms, emphasizing the necessity for comprehensive communication among the school, teachers, and parents.

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