



New Trends and Issues Proceedings on Humanities and Social Sciences



Issue 1 (2017) 52-57

ISSN 2421-8030

www.prosoc.eu

Selected paper of 8th World Conference on Educational Sciences (WCES-2016), 4-8, February 2016, University of Alcalá, Madrid, Spain.

Parents' and professionals' perceptions towards support for children with communication disorders in preschool settings in the North West Bank in Palestine: Preliminary data from the pilot study

Hala Marwan Jarrara^a *, Department of Special Education Faculty of Education, University of Minho, University street, Nablus 7, 970, Palestine.

Suggested Citation:

Jarrara, H. M. (2017). Parents' and professionals' perceptions towards support for children with communication disorders in preschool settings in the North West Bank in Palestine: Preliminary data from the pilot study. *New Trends and Issues Proceedings on Humanities and Social Sciences*. [Online]. 01, pp 52-57. Available from: www.prosoc.eu

Selection and peer review under responsibility of Jesus Garcia Laborda, University of Alcalá, Spain
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Abstract

According to the Palestinian Centre for Statistics (2013), children with communication disorders constitute the highest percentage of special educational needs in Palestine; however, there is a lack of services to support these children. The purpose of this quantitative study is to analyze how the preschool settings in the Northern region of the West Bank, Palestine, support children with communication disorders from the parents' and professionals' perceptions. To collect data, two questionnaires were developed, (for parents, and for professionals). The participants in this study were 40 parents and 44 professionals from all these regions. The researcher aimed to clarify the type of support provided for children with communication disorders in preschool contexts in Palestine, also to find out if there is a relationship between the variables of the study and the perceptions of parents and professionals towards the support provided in preschool settings. Preliminary data from this study will be provided.

Keywords: Parents, perceptions, professionals perceptions, preschool settings, communication disorders.

* ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: **Hala Marwan Jarrara**, Department of Special Education Faculty of Education, University of Minho, University street, Nablus 7, 970, Palestine.
E-mail address: hala.jarrar80@gmail.com / Tel.: +0-541-525-74-85

1. Introduction

1.1. Relevance of the Study

This study comes at a time when important changes in the way of dealing with the issues of persons with disabilities witness a shift from dealing with their needs and services to dealing with their rights.

1.2. Problem and objectives

Children with special education needs should have all the resources they need as a matter of right, not as special pleading.

The recent trends in education calls for highlighting the importance of preschool programs and their role in the development of the children's different stages of growth in order to help them succeed, not just in schools but also outside them (Beckman, 2004). Palestine seeks, just like many other countries, to improve the situation and its requirements. To achieve this, we must take into account diversity among students and individual differences between them, and to enable the child to take advantage of these programs within the maximum limits. Specially that this category constitutes the highest percentage of disability in Palestine, and suffers from a severe lack of services provided in this aspect, based on the results of the Palestinian Center for Statistics (2013).

Therefore, the objectives of this study are:

- Studying parents' perceptions towards supporting children with communication disorders in preschool settings in the North of the west bank, Palestine according to variables of the study such as: (a) parents' age and gender; (b) child's age and gender; (c) income level; (d) level of education; (e) presence of children with communication disorders in the family; and (f) place of residence.
- Studying professionals' perceptions towards supporting children with communication disorders in preschool settings in the North of the West Bank, Palestine according to variables of the study such as: (a) age; (b) gender; (c) level of education; (d) years of teaching experience; (e) type of preschool (public or private); (f) type of occupation; (g) teaching students with CD; (h) taking a course/courses which relate to communication disorders; (i) and number of training hours.
- Comparing the differences between the parents' and professionals' perceptions. This comparison is a need to understand both sides' perceptions on the various aspects of preschool programs in Palestine, and how they support children with communication disorders.
- Providing data indicators among the community members and organizing these pieces of information to reach conclusions.

2. Methods

2.1. Research design

The purpose of this quantitative study is to analyze how preschools settings (private and public) in the Northern region of the West Bank, Palestine which contains (Nablus, Jenin, Qalqilya, Qabatia, Tulkarem, Salfet, and Tubas), support children with communication disorders according to the parents' and professionals' perceptions (preschool teachers and specialists such as physiotherapists, speech and language therapists, psychologists, etc).

2.2. Characteristics of participants

The population of this study is all the children's parents (mothers, fathers or the one who takes care of the child). This "all" contains children whom have or don't have language disorders, whom are sent to these preschools. All the preschool professionals that support these children are part of the population too.

Two simple random samples were selected according to the number of professionals and parents in the preschools in the regions (Nablus, Jenin, Qalqilya, Qabatiya, Tulkarem, Salfit, and Tubas) in both urban and rural parts of these regions. The sizes of the two samples for professionals and parents were 44 and 40 respondents respectively. The characteristics of the two samples are displayed as following:

According to the results, most of professionals were females (about 98%). Approximately 56% of them were between 32-41 years old, and 61% of the respondents hold a bachelor degree. Furthermore, 61.4% of the professionals were teachers and half of the respondents had 5-9 experience years in teaching. About 75% of the respondents have never taught students with communication disorders. Moreover, approximately 55% have never met students with communication disorders and 75% of the professionals have never taken a course/courses related to communication development/communication disorders. In addition, 88.6% of the respondents were not involved in trainings about teaching students with special education needs. However, in professionals' classrooms; about 11.4% had students with special education needs. Approximately, 88% of the professionals are working in private kindergartens and about 84% of the classrooms capacities ranged between (10- 30). In addition, about 77% of the professionals are highly and moderately expected to work with communication disorders students. At the same time, about 23% of them have never heard of any information about special education needs before the current study. However, about 30% of the respondents have parents/siblings/relatives with special education needs.

According to the results, about 58% were males (fathers) and 42% were females (mothers). Approximately 68% of them were between 37-46 years old and 58% of the parents are holding a bachelor degree. Furthermore, half of the parents don't have children in preschool age diagnosed with special education needs, while about 23% of children in preschool age were diagnosed with delay or learning impaired. On the other hand, quarter of the parents have at least one child (who is not in preschool age) with special education needs. About 38% of the families reported that there are special education needs students in their children's classes. Three quarters of the parents preferred to know about educational services and supports that are provided to them by being informed in their workplaces.

2.3 Instruments for data collection

In this study, two questionnaires were developed; one for parents "Parents' Perceptions towards Support for Children with Communication Disorders in Preschool Settings in the North West Bank in Palestine" , and a second one for professionals "Professionals' Perceptions towards Support for Children with Communication Disorders in Preschool Settings in the North West Bank in Palestine"

The professionals' questionnaires included three parts with a total of 50 items: part I included the informed consent; part II was made up of close-ended questions regarding Socio - demographic information, that consisted of 16 items; Part III about professionals' perceptions towards support for children with communication disorders that consisted of 34 items which included questions about assessment (12 items), intervention (12 items), curriculum (10 items); and policies and setting practices (13 items).

The parents' questionnaires consisted of three parts with a total of 45 items: part I included the informed consent; Part II was made up of close-ended questions regarding Socio - demographic

information about the child and the parents that consisted of 14 items; and Part III for parents' perceptions towards support for children with communication disorders, consisted of 32 items which included questions about intervention (14 items), curriculum (10 items), assessment (9 items), and policies and setting practice (12 items).

3. Results and discussion

This research study yielded three major findings.

First result: The findings that are related to the main question of the study: "What are the parents' and professionals' perceptions towards support for children with communication disorders in preschool settings in the North of the West Bank, Palestine?"

The results show that professionals' perceptions towards the support provided to the children with language and communication disorders is intermediate. It should be noted that the professionals assessed each of the fields of assessment, intervention and curriculum moderately, whereas it was noted that the policy and setting practice were low.

The present findings about the negative estimates of the professionals to the policy and setting practice could be attributed to the inclusion settings at the preschools which does not adequately take into consideration the individual needs' of students when selecting the teaching strategies. Therefore, we need to develop training programs for the workers in order to develop their capabilities and skills in taking into consideration the individual differences and how to deal with them during the process of designing teaching activities. In addition, we need to upgrade the attitudes of teachers towards the education of students with special educational needs and adjust the classroom environment to keep up with such needs.

The results of the present study agree with the one that was administered by Lewis and Doorlag (1995), which reached the findings that the teachers who had not received any training or without experience in dealing with students with special educational needs felt that they were not prepared to deal with them. Consequently, they had a negative attitude towards the practices, the preparations and the specific policy of special education.

With regards to the perceptions of the Palestinian parents, it should be noted that the parents assessed each of the fields of assessment; curriculum; and the policy and setting practices moderately while it was noted that the intervention was low.

The researcher interprets that these items received low assessments indicate that they must be taken into consideration since they indicate lack of opportunities for parents to participate in supporting their children. These findings agree with the ones of McCormick, Loeb and Schiefelbusch, (1997) study that emphasized the importance of involving and encouraging families to continually participate and inquire after their children so that they can have efficient roles in making decisions concerning the children. In addition to that, they emphasized the dimensions of identifying parents' interests, parents' attitudes to the school, their impressions about the school qualities for obtaining successful outputs, parents' satisfaction with their participation, and the time that the parents spend in school activities. In comparison with parents of normal children, the findings showed that the parents of special educational needs children perceive that their children did not have equal opportunities in the classroom. Parents believed that their input was not valued or welcomed by most professionals. Instead of being kept out of the decision making process, parents desired to be treated as equal contributors towards their children. Parents felt that they desired to take more participation in the objectives and teaching; to spend more time in meetings to satisfy the individual needs, and to spend more time in defending the needs of their children. The analysis also shows that there are low to intermediate relationships between parents conviction and participation in the context of teachers assessment for their participation, and the extent which the teacher demands for their participation

and impact on the curriculum contents of the educational program of their children (McCormick, Loeb & Schiefelbusch, 1997; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

Second result: The findings related to the study hypotheses of the professionals at preschools

The results show that the study variables did not influence the professionals' perceptions towards support for children with communication disorders in Preschool Settings in the North West Bank in Palestine. The researcher attributes these results to the fact that the special education services, support, interventions, and rehabilitation provided to the children who suffer from language and communication disorders in the Palestinian schools in general and in the preschools in particular are low. Nevertheless, we noticed that there were no differences in the professionals' perceptions that were attributed to the independent variables of the study.

Given this, it is essential to Organize training courses for all professionals at the preschool stages in order to identify the students with special educational needs at all aspects due to its significance in providing a good approach to each case. It is necessary to identify the teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of special needs children with typical students according to the teacher's specialization and providing teaching environment that facilitates the task of both the children with special needs and teachers to reach the best state of inclusion.

In addition, educational planners and policy makers should incorporate practical and effective instructional techniques that would be useful in the inclusive classroom, into teacher preparation programs and professional development programs.

Third result: The findings that are related to the study hypotheses of the parents of children in preschools.

The results show that the study variables did not influence the parents' perceptions towards support for children with communication disorders in preschool settings in the North West Bank in Palestine. The researcher attributes this finding to the fact that the special education services, support, intervention, and rehabilitation that are provided to the children who suffer from language and communication disorders in the Palestinian schools in general and in preschools in particular are low. Nevertheless, we noticed that there were no differences in the parents' perceptions that were attributed to the independent variables of the study.

This study is consistent with other studies that suggest the need for families to have a variety of supports to help them deal with the complexities related to developing and implementing effective educational services for their children with special educational needs in inclusive general education settings (Kluth, Biklen, English-Sand & Smukler, 2007; Soodak & Erwin, 2000). Parents may need to have an extended network of support such as: (a) external supports, such as professionals to assist with the negotiation of the educational system; (b) emotional supports, such as other families, and (c) information and advocacy agencies, such as sibling support project, and council and parent network.

Given this, it is essential to understand parents' perceptions of their own experiences with schools and school districts as they pursue services in inclusive general education contexts for their children who have special educational needs.

4. Conclusion

In sum, there is a practice gap in the area of support provided for children with communication disorders in Preschool Settings in the North West Bank in Palestine: Understanding the professionals and parents perceptions can provide important information about contextual influences that can be used to bridge the research to practice gap in preschool and to examine their knowledge, skills,

training experiences and training needs; their roles for supporting children's with communication disorders; and barriers to supporting communication needs in their school settings.

In addition the process of partnering between professionals and parents is a complex process driven by communications. Repeated communications between parents and teachers seems to support the development of a shared perception of individual roles. These shared roles are often complementary and can be observed in daily interactions between parents and teachers. Despite professionals and parents perceptions and the relationships between them continue to be a goal that is yet to be reached. Professionally-driven practices and parent involvement style partnerships are still revealed in preschool classrooms. As early childhood teachers struggle to establish more collaborative relationships with families the need for more pre-service and in-service programs that promote these partnerships are needed. More specifically, programs targeted at supporting the development of teacher self efficacy in this area and sensitivity to differing family perspectives is essential and to be able to create effective programs that tailor specifically toward the needs of special educational students.

Acknowledgements

This research was supported by funding from Erasmus Mundus Program.

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