

Identifying Motivation of Parental Involvement and Problems in Homework Encountered By Blind and Low Vision Students

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Abstract

This study aims to understand the motivation of parents to assist their children who are blind or with low vision with their homework and its impact on their academic achievement. Three families have been selected, all of whom have a blind or low vision child who studies at secondary level in a public school. This study employs the in-depth interview to get the views from three pairs of parents. The result leads us to look beyond the relationship between homework management strategies and grades. Therefore, the key outcome of this study leads us to identify the problems in the process of doing homework for blind and low vision students who are taught in public schools. Solutions such as the learning skill in braille, strong parents support group and close engagement among parents and teachers are needed to create the stimulating learning environment to enable blind and low vision students to read, to learn and to write their homework independently. Therefore, the implications of this study are the need to amend the policy to facilitate parental engagement and establish the systematic assessment and planning to ameliorate the barriers faced by blind and low vision students.

Keywords: *Parental involvement, students with blind or low vision, homework*

1. Introduction

Homework is the most common home-based activity. Homework is the ongoing assigned task in every grade and school-aged students (Cooper & Nye, 1994). Every student is expected to complete his or her homework accordingly. There are research papers that demonstrate the promising academic outcome with the involvement of parents to monitor and guide the homework completion (Harris & Goodall, 2008). Also, both quantity and quality contribution of parents in the homework process have the impact on the students' achievement (Harris & Goodall, 2008; Spera, 2005) despite the different level of students' abilities (Carr, 2013). Parents are expected to help, support and guide to cope with the difficulties of doing homework.

On the other hand, the active involvement of parents strengthens the emotional support for their children and enables parent and child to learn and grow together (Trahan & Lawler-Prince, 1999). The key message from the parents' involvement is to learn and understand the learning needs and useful strategies for guiding their children. All these understanding come from the experiences that gained throughout the process of engagement in the homework activity.

The main goal of this study is to identify parents' roles to guide their blind or low vision child with their homework. Despite their disability, there is no excuse for blind and low vision students not to do their homework.

2. Literature review

Students with blind and low vision face significant difficulty to do and complete their homework as their non-disabled peers (McNary, Glasgow & Hicks, 2005). Some studies have shown that they are unprepared in class, slow or fail to write down homework assignments, have difficulty understanding the course materials, do not get proper guidance from their teachers and lack sufficient time for test preparation (Meyer & Kelley, 2007). Furthermore, visual impairment is doubled by the negative social perception towards disability. Society is unable to break the traditional view of disability. Consequently, the disabled are unable to participate in school and play contributive roles.

Inevitably, this is the immense challenge especially when you start to introduce academic concepts that are not easily explained. This is because of the limitation of vision which limits the sensory ability to absorb information. Despite these limited conditions and social system that does not prioritize the special teaching and learning needs of such students. Parents are the primary socializing agents to cultivate the ability of their blind or low vision children even with limited resources and social support (Cawthon, Garberoglio, Lou, Caemmerer, Bond & Wendel, 2015). Parents are the first teachers and the most important to guide their blind or low vision child to imagine the physical world (Fraser & Maguvhe, 2008; Vartuli & Winter, 1989).

The reasonable accommodation is important to facilitate the blind and low vision children to complete their homework. Parents are the important source of information regarding the special learning needs of blind or low vision children (Campbell & Johnston, 2009). Most importantly, parents have the capacity to reflect and are aware of the feelings, experiences and intentions of their child in responding to the special needs and challenges on completion of the child's homework (Slade, 2005). It is not exaggerating to say that homework with parental involvement to assist their blind or low vision child is an important component of educational policies (Wingard & Forsberg, 2009).

3. Methodology

The researcher selected 3 families, all of whom have a blind or low vision child studying at secondary level in a public school. The selected parents have spent at least one hour or more to help their blind or low vision child to do his/her homework. All the parents agreed to participate in this study. The voices recorded were used with the agreement of the parents.

Table 1: Below is the demography of the parents involved in this study.

Name of Parents	Gender	Age	Race	Number of children	Education level	Occupation	Child's type of disability
Mr. Goh	Male	46	Chinese	1	Degree	Operator	Blind
Mrs. Goh	Female	40	Chinese	1	Diploma	Housewife	Blind
Mr. Teng	Male	53	Chinese	3	Degree	Manager	Low vision

Mrs. Teng	Female	45	Chinese	3	Diploma	Housewife	Low vision
Mr. Sia	Male	55	Chinese	1	Degree	Businessman	Low vision
Mrs. Sia	Female	43	Chinese	1	Degree	Housewife	Low vision

4. Data analysis

Parents need to not only understand the needs of differentiation, adaptation and adjustment during the process of doing homework in response to their child's needs, but they are the source of supports to motivate their child to complete his/her homework (Fishman & Nickerson, 2015). Thus, it is important to comprehend the factors that motivate parents' involvement in assisting homework activity of blind and low vision children.

4.1 Strong belief in the child's ability

In this study, parents spent time and were involved in the child's homework because the strong belief in their child's abilities. The participants mentioned,

"Losing the eyesight does not mean he cannot do anything." (Mrs. Teng);

"He has no problem. He only cannot see." (Mr. Goh).

Inevitably, the visual impairment is not an excuse to do nothing. Children with visual impairment have limitations but they still have their potential and abilities. Therefore, they have equal basic rights as the other children to enjoy the demands of education. The participants also highlighted the rights of accessing inclusive education.

"he has the rights to study like the other child in such an inclusive school. (Mr. Sia)";

"I need to help him not because I want him to score high grade but I fervently hope he has the chance to learn like other children.(Mrs. Sia)".

Children with blind or low vision should have equal opportunity to study in the accessible and inclusive school environment rather than segregated in a special school.

Thus, parental involvement their child's homework not only reflects their conviction towards their child's ability but also their expectations. As expressed by the parents:

"We are helping him with his homework because he can absorb the knowledge. He only cannot see clearly but he is a clever boy. So we must help him." (Mr. Teng).

In addition, parents realized that they need to assist their child to cope with their homework for the sake of their child's future. These parents treat their children as normal. In fact, there is no significant difference in the intelligence of blind or low vision students and sighted students (Kolk, 1977). They just need to use alternative ways to learn, to see and connect to the knowledge. As stressed by Mrs. Goh,

"Even for the child with no disabilities, if we choose not to guide him or her to learn through homework, he or she will lag far behind a child with disabilities who is making an effort."

The parents' strong belief and love towards their child motivates them to guide their child. Definitely, without a positive outlook parents will be unable to see the importance of education and the abilities of their children.

4.2 Problems of Doing Homework

Throughout the parents' positive attitude not only helps us to identify how they provide appropriate assistance. Most importantly, the studies reveal the voices of parents that describe the difficulties faced by their children in completing their homework. Below are the problems faced by students who are blind or with low vision in doing their homework.

4.2.1 Unavailability of homework in Braille

The parents highlighted their difficulty to complete homework because their child could not get the homework in Braille on the spot. The reason is that the homework is not in the Braille format yet. This poses a challenge in the process of learning for blind and low vision students. It is because they cannot do the exercise assigned by teachers on the spot to test their understanding of the lesson. They cannot do the exercises without the printed material in Braille. Therefore, the parents reported that it is very stressful for their children.

4.2.2 Slow reading impedes comprehension

Poor visual ability makes it difficult to see and read effectively. The experiment also showed that slow reading impedes comprehension (Watson & Whittaker, 1994, p. 279). As described by Mr. Teng, the biggest obstacle for his low vision son is to read the text assigned. His son needs to use the lenses to recognize the words. It takes a long time to go through a line in this way. Sometimes the gist of a sentence is lost because it has taken too long to arrive at the end of the sentence. If he forgets then he needs to start over again. Inevitably, it becomes difficult to get the meaning of the entire sentence.

In school, some teachers may not be sensitive to the needs of students with low vision. For example, it happened that the teacher left their son alone to answer the questions in the examination. Even though extra thirty minutes is allotted to students with blind and low vision during an examination, the time was insufficient because the teachers did not know how to guide the students with low vision. Teachers need to read the exam questions first and then show them the space for the answers. Without doing so, the students could not answer all the questions within the time frame.

4.2.3 Learning Braille is not mandatory

In Malaysia, learning Braille is not mandatory especially to low vision students (Pheng, 1999). There is the perception that learning Braille shows the inability of students. In contrast, learning Braille is very common for both blind and low vision students in Europe (Kooijman, 1994). Braille is the only method to facilitate their reading. Braille uses raised dots which represent letters, numbers and punctuations but not images. However, Braille is the only option and the most basic skill to transform them into literate and independent learners (Webster & Roe, 1998).

“I started to learn Braille since my son was 4 years old. I need to know it first, so that I can teach him. I can guide him if he asks me questions. Just imagine, how can I help him with his homework if I don't understand Braille?” (*Mrs. Goh*)

“It is so important for me to know Braille. If not, forever my son will not be able to follow the curriculum and cannot complete his homework.” (*Mrs. Goh*)

“...who else can help my son if both of us do not know Braille”...(*Mr. Goh*)

Inevitably, parents equip themselves with knowledge of Braille and are an encouraging support for their child. It helps the child to be ready for school and to adapt to the school environment. Parents play an important role by preparing the homework in Braille when the teachers do not do so. It is not exaggerating to say that parents are the “resource teachers” who are available to provide assistance to their disabled child.

Mr. Teng highlighted that the teachers requested his son to learn Braille. They realized that it is challenging for his son to accept and learn Braille. At the beginning, his son resisted. There is the perception that learning Braille is only for those who are blind. His condition is limited vision. In other words, it means he can see and so why does he need to use Braille.

But, he and his wife do not know how to use Braille.

“I saw the dots (Braille). I had totally no idea what it was ...so I asked him (her son)..but he replied that there is no point to explaining it to me because even if he did so, I will not understand. I was shocked.” (*Mrs. Teng*)

Therefore, the support from the parents is necessary. In order to guide his son effectively, he and his wife decided to learn Braille.

4.2.4 Limited Early Childhood Intervention or Kindergarten

There is limited early childhood intervention and kindergarten for children with disabilities. We cannot deny that there is the restricted learning environment which enables and empowers the learning outcome of students who are blind or with low vision. However, the current environment is not supportive to the self-development of children with disabilities. It is difficult to find programmes and services to assist and provide constructive advice to the parents. This situation makes the adjustment and adaptation to the needs of their child difficult.

4.2.5 Lack of communication between teachers and parents

The parents revealed that the school does not initiate productive discussions with the parents regarding the homework problem. This situation implies that there is lack of communication between teachers and parents in order to share the homework strategy which is useful and helpful for the blind or low vision students.

In fact, some teachers also lack the skill and experience to tutor students. There are no “one-size fits all” solutions to accommodate the different needs among blind or low vision students due to their different degree of vision loss (Epstein, 2001). Furthermore, Parents resisted getting involved in the school governance because they noticed reluctance of teachers for their involvement (Lau, Li & Rao, 2011).

5. Conclusion and Discussion

In a nutshell, the skill of using Braille is the practical way to enable both blind and low vision students to learn proactively. Learning Braille is the effective practice to facilitate fast reading to help the students' comprehension. The most important is that the students can do their homework independently. Just imagine. Who will be able to guide children with low vision if their parents are working or illiterate? Therefore, learning Braille is the first thing that must be made compulsory for both blind and low vision students.

The advocacy and parental support group play an important role to support each other and reclaim the education rights of their blind or low vision children. This is not only for emotional support but figure out the appropriate channels to help their blind or low vision child. The united voices of parents to advocate for getting proper learning equipment and resources that are the basic teaching and learning needs can improve the inclusive education for students who are blind or with low vision.

Schools should establish systematic assessment and planning to identify the actual needs of blind or low vision students (Erwin, Perkins, Ayala, Fine & Rubin, 2001). Parents are the important sources who can provide information for school assessment. Systematic assessment enhances the understanding towards the learning needs of blind and low vision students. This can easily recognize, plan and execute the relevant pedagogies approach to facilitate the learning process (Jayanthi, Sawyer, Nelson, Bursuck, & Epstein, 1995). Likewise, policies that facilitate the communication, engagement and corporation among teachers and between teachers and parents are the effective ways to improve the homework completing process (Epstein, 2001; Roderique, Polloway, Cumblad, Epstein, & Bursuck, 1994).

6. Implication of this study

In Malaysia, there is no policy that engages parental involvement in the education practice for helping students who are blind or with low vision. Parents spending time and effort to engage in the homework of their blind or low vision child are necessary and important in the education policy. Policy makers should make policies that are effective to systematically identify both the common and distinct needs among blind and low vision students. Learning and mastering the skill of Braille for both blind and low vision students can empower them to be independent learners.

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