

Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder Through Sri Lankan Primary School Teachers' Eyes

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Abstract

Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) has been identified as one of the most common behavioral disorders in childhood. The main objective of this study was analyzing the current situation of supporting children with ADHD in mainstream schools in Sri Lanka; especially how Sri Lankan primary school teachers support such children in overcoming their barriers to learning, behavior, and social relationships. A qualitative research study was conducted with ten Sri Lankan primary school teachers. The main findings of the study showed that all the primary school teachers who took part in the study did not have a satisfactory knowledge and training on educating children with ADHD traits. They currently face many difficulties when teaching children with ADHD traits in the mainstream classroom due to not having enough resources, support and guidance from relevant authorities. The finding of the study will be useful to improve or develop the education system of ADHD children in Sri Lanka, since no research study has been conducted so far regarding this topic. The research study reveals that the need for raising awareness among Sri Lankan primary school teachers on ADHD and providing enough facilities for mainstream schools so that teachers can provide a proper education for such children.

Keywords: Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, ADHD traits, Primary school teachers, mainstream schools, Sri Lanka

1. Introduction

1.1 Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and its prevalence

ADHD is one of the most widely studied neurodevelopment disorders in children and adolescents (Kring, Johnson, Davison, Neale, 2010, P.421). According to the *DSM-V*, ADHD can be seen in both children and adults; and individuals with ADHD display persistent age inappropriate symptoms of inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity that could cause impairment in their major life activities. (APA, 2013, p61) This disorder could have a negative impact on the behavioral, social, academic, emotional, and cognitive development of an individual. (Briscoe-Smith & Hinshaw, 2006; Weinstein, Staffebach & Biaggio, 2000).

The prevalence of ADHD in childhood population and adult population is 5% and 2.5% respectively. (APA, 2013, P.61) Many research studies have shown that in every mainstream classroom there will be at least one child with ADHD traits. (DuPaul & Weyandt, 2006; Goldstein, Naglieri, & DeVries, 2011) It has been found out that the prevalence of ADHD among hospital-based medical and surgical outpatient population of children in Sri Lanka is 5.1%. (Perera, Jeewandra, Jayasuriya & Dias, 2012)

1.2 The role of teachers in supporting children with ADHD traits

Mostly, behaviors related to ADHD are first observed in the classroom setting and the teacher is the first person to notice the signs and raise concerns about the child. (Sternberg & Williams, 2002) Also, the teacher is most often the first person to make a referral for assessment for ADHD. (Perold, Louw & Kleynhans, 2010; Tannock & Martinuseen, 2001) In addition, he/she plays a crucial role in working with other school personnel, psychologist or medical practitioner in the diagnostic process by providing essential information on child's academic history, performance, social relations and general everyday functioning while assisting children with ADHD to improve their academic performances and behavior, and educating parents of such children on how to effectively support the child in achieving his/her full potential by overcoming his/her barriers. (Weyandt, Fulton, Schepman, Verdi & Wilson, 2009; Anderson, Watt & Noble, 2012) Furthermore, it must be noted that teachers can highly contribute to the implementation, evaluation, and support with the treatments of children with ADHD. (Ohan, Cormier, Hepp, Visser, & Strain, 2008). Therefore, there is no doubt that teachers should have a proper knowledge of ADHD if they play such a significant role in all these tasks.

It has been found out that teacher's knowledge and beliefs on ADHD may affect the classroom practices, which in turn affect the performance of students with ADHD (West, Taylor, Houghton & Hudyma, 2005). Furthermore, according to Atkinson, Robinson, and Shute (1997) teachers' attitudes and behavior towards a student with ADHD may influence other students' perceptions of that child. According to Soroa, Gorostiaga & Balluerka, (2013, p.152-153) teachers who have false ideas and attitudes about ADHD, tend to behave

inappropriately when having children with ADHD in the classroom and teachers with more knowledge about ADHD have a more favorable conduct and attitudes towards students with this disorder. During the last few years, there has been an increase in conducting research studies on teachers' knowledge and attitudes toward ADHD. Many studies from different parts of the world have found out that teachers' knowledge is at best overall level and in many cases, insufficient, requiring intervention (Ghanizadeh, Bahredar, & Moeini, 2006; Anderson, watt & Noble,2012;Youssef, Hutchinson & Youssef, 2015; Nur & Kavakc,2010; Perold, Louw, & Kleynhans, 2010; Alkahtani,2013; West, Taylor, Houghton, & Hudyma, 2005; Guerra & Brown,2012.) Furthermore, through a recent research study which was conducted by Rodrigo, Perera, Eranga, Williams and Kuruppuarachchi (2011) with 202 Sri Lankan primary school teachers, found out that Sri Lankan primary school teachers' knowledge about symptoms and presentation of ADHD were below 50% and more than 80% of teachers believed that ADHD was a result of poor parental upbringing. In addition, the majority (56.5%) of participants had the opinion that behavioral disturbances caused by ADHD children were purposeful and malevolent. Thus, it seems that all these research stress the importance of having proper knowledge about ADHD for teachers in order to provide a great support for children with ADHD to achieve success in life by overcoming their barriers and fulfilling their psychological and all other needs.

In fact, even the most expert teachers may find it is challenging to teach students with ADHD. (Sternberg & Williams, 2002) It is typical for teachers to most often feel pessimistic about teaching children with ADHD traits due to the nature of their behavior, intelligence, and personality and frequency of the negative behaviors displayed by such students in the classroom. (Eisenberg & Schneider, 2007;Batzle, Weyandt, Janusis, & DeVietti, 2010). In addition, according to Ohan, Visser, Strain, & Allen (2008), teachers had more negative expectations of children with ADHD labeled *vignettes*, evaluating them as having more serious problems and their behavior as more disruptive to the classroom. Gardill, DuPaul, and Kyle (1996) stressed that teachers should be familiar with different behavioral strategies and methods of academic instructions appropriate for students with ADHD.

1.3 Supporting Children with ADHD traits in Sri Lankan Schools

When considering Sri Lankan context, currently, there are four educational options for pupils with disabilities: special schools, special units attached to mainstream schools, inclusive mainstream school settings, and special resource centers attached to mainstream schools offering additional support, particularly with literacy.(Hettiarachchi & Das, 2014) In addition, children have the possibility to attend special schools run by non-governmental organizations and the private sector either by preference or because they cannot fit into either of these streams. (Ministry of Social welfare, Sri Lanka, 2003) For example, Chithra Lane special school, Colombo 5 and Millennium institute, Colombo teach students with intellectual impairments and several other disabilities including ADHD. However, a very little expertise is currently available to educate children with ADHD traits. (Ministry of Social welfare, Sri Lanka,2003) Therefore, there is no well structured educational program for teachers to raise awareness and train them on how to teach and support children with ADHD in the classroom.

Valid literature and statistics about its prevalence and the current situation of supporting children with ADHD traits in Sri Lanka are inadequate. At present, no school psychologists are available in Sri Lankan schools as it is in developed countries. Instead, all schools are provided with a full-time counseling teacher. (Ministry of Education, Sri Lanka,2013) However, studies have shown that the quality of school counseling services is not in a more satisfactory level. For example, the research conducted by Chathurika (2015) has shown that 65% of students do not have much confidence about School Counselor, especially with individual counseling. Because of that reason, 52% of students are not satisfied with the current counseling services in their schools and about the place that issued as counseling room. Currently, the number of special education teachers in Sri Lanka is 756.(Ministry of Education, Sri Lanka,2013) Under this situation, it seems most of the schools in Sri Lanka do not have the possibility to provide enough support for students with ADHD traits and this is one of least known disorders in Sri Lanka yet.

Since no research study has been conducted so far regarding this topic in Sri Lanka it is useful to find out and analyze how Sri Lankan primary school teachers currently deal with and support children with ADHD traits in mainstream schools to improve or develop the education system of ADHD children.

2. Objectives of the study

Based on above considerations, the objectives of the study were

1. To Identify Sri Lankan primary school teachers have enough knowledge about ADHD
2. To explore and analyze how Sri Lankan primary school teachers currently deal with such children in the classroom (teaching strategies)
3. To identify and analyze any difficulties or barriers faced by Sri Lankan primary school teachers when teaching children with ADHD traits in the mainstream classroom and their suggestions to overcome

them

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

Ten primary school teachers in Kandy district in Sri Lanka were selected to the study using convenience sampling method. Because the first author was out of the country when the study was conducted.

3.2 Research design & Method of data collection

Qualitative research method was used in this study. Under which, semi-structured Interview method was used to collect data.

3.3 Procedure

Firstly, a pre-test was done through skype with an individual who was similar to the sample in order to assess the validity/usefulness of the apparatus. After doing the pre-test, the researcher made sure that the interview semi-structured questionnaire was accurate and useful for the study.

Afterward, ten Sri Lankan teachers who were willing to participate in the study were interviewed through Skype. All such interviews were done on a one-to-one basis after making appointments with each participant. In addition, the interviews were recorded after getting permission from the participants. The duration of a single interview was within 1-1 1/2 hours. At the beginning, an explanation was given to all the participants regarding the purpose of conducting the study, the nature of the study and how the data would be used. Moreover, a proper assurance of the anonymity of their identity was emphasized. The interviews were conducted as informally as possible while encouraging the participants to talk freely despite the presence of the MP3 recorder.

Tools used:

The semi-structured questionnaire was created based on a wide literature search on this topic. Hence, questions were raised to acquire information relating to following domains.

- Primary school teachers' level of knowledge about ADHD
- Their personal experiences with children with ADHD traits.
- Are Sri Lankan primary school teachers provided enough training on how to support children with special education needs? (especially children with ADHD traits)
- How do teachers currently deal with and support children with ADHD traits in the classroom with their learning and improving behavior and social skills?
- Whether the teachers are satisfied with the support they give for children with ADHD traits in school?
- Whether they have any barriers or challenges when teaching children with ADHD traits.? If they have any, their suggestions to overcome them.

3.4 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data.

4. Findings

The main findings of the study revealed that all the primary school teachers who took part in the study did not have a satisfactory knowledge about ADHD. Only two out of ten teachers have heard the word of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder even though they could not explain the nature of the disorder broadly. A teacher who had a five-year previous experience of working in a special unit attached to a mainstream school could slightly explain only the main symptoms of ADHD and she knew that it is a developmental disorder. All other eight teachers have not even heard the word "Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder" until the moment that this research interviewer asked from them. Except one teacher all others believed that ADHD is a result of poor parental upbringing and students' excessive stress during Grade Five Scholarship Examination (a very competitive state exam for all students in grade five in Sri Lanka).

In addition, the teachers have not been provided a proper training on how to educate children with special needs including children with ADHD traits. They mentioned that they have been informed during their in-service training and seminars only to provide more individual tasks according to the intellectual level of the child.

Eg. Participant No 3- *"No.. no.., we have not given such a broad knowledge of teaching strategies to educate such children. We were advised to give them simple individual tasks according to the level of the child. That's it.."*

Moreover, all the teachers pointed out that according to their knowledge even the teachers who work in special education units attached to mainstream schools have not been provided enough training to teach those children. The teacher who had an experience of teaching in such a special education unit in a mainstream school mentioned that she was not provided a proper training to educate not only children with ADHD traits but also

children with all other impairments.

They use only normal classroom management, academic and behavioral intervention strategies for children with ADHD traits due to not having a proper knowledge about such strategies.

Eg:

- *When a child misbehaves, asking the child not to misbehave in the class very kind way, even after repeating many times, if the child does not listen to the teachers and misbehave continuously, then talk to the child in a bit stern way in order to control the child.*
- *When conducting lessons, asking questions and calling their names frequently to make sure whether they focus their attention to the lesson.*
- *Repeat the directions for a particular task until the child understands them properly and performs well.*

They did not know how to conduct behavioral assessments, develop appropriate educational and behavioral intervention strategies and arrange classroom environment to educate them effectively by addressing their needs. That was clearly shown that three participants stated even though they never give corporal punishments to children for their misbehaviors, they just keep a stick in the classroom just to pretend them “if they misbehave, this will be used” in order to control their misbehaviors. They said that even extremely hyperactive children become calm at least for few minutes when the teacher just shows the stick to the child when he/she misbehaves.

Overcrowded classrooms without a teaching assistant, overloaded curriculum, lack of enough knowledge and training on educating children with special needs, lack of enough physical resources in classrooms to provide teachings using modern teaching methods, not having enough support from some parents, receive complaints from other children’s parents more often due to the misbehaviors of the children with ADHD traits, are the main barriers currently faced by Sri Lankan primary school teachers.

Eg; **Participant No 09** – *I have 40 students in my class. It is extremely hard to handle when we have these type of children with other students. They highly disturb other students.*

Participant No 01- *“For grade 5. we have been given a huge syllabus to cover. Not only that but also, we have been advised to cover the whole one-year syllabus before August due to grade 5 scholarship exam. So, we have to go fast. When we have these children in the class, it is very hard to teach them with other students.*

The main two suggestions presented by the participants to provide a proper education for children with ADHD traits were; firstly, the government should reduce the number of students in one classroom, at least to thirty and appoint two teachers to one classroom, then it will be able to educate children with ADHD traits in normal classrooms. Secondly, If that is not the case, children with ADHD traits must be educated in special education units attached to mainstream schools, because, having these children in overcrowded mainstream classrooms is disadvantageous for both these children and children without ADHD traits to obtain a proper education. Moreover, they suggested that school classrooms must be modernized by providing enough physical resources and technological facilities so that they can teach students using different education methods, and the workload and huge pressure given for the grade 5 scholarship exam must be reduced.

5. Discussion

The findings of the research study revealed that the need for raising awareness among Sri Lankan primary school teachers on ADHD and providing enough facilities for mainstream schools so that teachers can provide a proper education for such children by addressing their special needs. The lack of such awareness is the reason why as to teachers do not have a proper knowledge on ADHD at present and most of them are not providing enough support for children with ADHD traits to improve their academic performances, behavior, and social relationships. That clearly shows that some teachers consider keeping a stick in the classroom to control students’ misbehavior is an effective strategy because they do not know about its negative effects on children. Teachers should not use it at all even to pretend the students that they will be punished. Because, these type of strategies may temporarily change child’s behavior, but they rarely change attitudes and may actually increase the occurrence and intensity of inappropriate behavior by rewarding misbehaving students with attention. Also, children with ADHD must not be criticized or humiliated in front of other students highlighting their weaknesses, because it might negatively affect child’s self-esteem. The findings of the study show that teachers do not have this essential knowledge to work with these children.

It is true that it is extremely hard to teach children with ADHD traits in an overcrowded classroom, especially if you are the only teacher to handle the whole class without having anyone for support. Their main suggestions that the government should reduce the number of students in one classroom (at least to thirty) and appoint two teachers to one classroom or the children with ADHD traits must be educated in special education units attached to mainstream schools are valid suggestions when considering the current situation of schools with their own experiences. However, under the current economic situation of the country, it is not an easy task for the Sri Lankan government to do these essential changes in transforming all the mainstream classrooms to inclusive classrooms so soon. If the government can implement at least following strategies now, the first author

thinks it might be so helpful for children with ADHD traits and other special needs to overcome their barriers and achieve success in their life;

- Conducting well-structured pre-service and in-service teacher training programs on how to teach children with ADHD and other specific learning disabilities for school counselors and all the teachers.
- While providing proper training for teachers and school counselors, encouraging schools to conduct an individual class for a short period of time every day for students with ADHD traits and other specific learning disabilities to support their learning and behavioral issues with the guidance of school counselor.

Due to not having school psychologists in Sri Lankan schools like developed countries, school counselors must be provided proper knowledge and training in order to provide sufficient psychological guidance for such children and their parents to improve child's behavior and learning. Even though teachers do not have more time to spend with each child due to having subjects to teach, school counselors can spend more time with each child to search most appropriate intervention strategies and help with teachers to develop individual education plans and behavioral plans.

Meanwhile, it would be better if children with severe ADHD traits can be educated in special education units attached to mainstream schools by appointing well-trained teachers to educate these children until the government provides sufficient facilities to develop an inclusive environment in mainstream schools.

Further research should be carried out to discover effective ways to conduct individual education plans and behavioral plans of children with ADHD in an overcrowded classroom. In addition, it is important to conduct more research studies to find out culturally effective assessment and intervention strategies to improve learning, behavior and social relationships of children with ADHD in Sri Lanka. Moreover, conducting researches to explore Sri Lankan parents' perceptions and experiences of parenting a child with ADHD might provide in-depth information and promote greater insights into complex issues related to parenting a child with ADHD in Sri Lankan context.

One of the limitations of this study is that the research sample is not more representative because the respondents were only from Kandy district and they were selected using the convenience sampling method. However, currently, since there are only a few in-service and pre-service programs on special education available for Sri Lankan teachers, it can be assumed that the most of the findings of the study will be applicable to the other parts of the country too.

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