A Professional Learning Intervention In Education. A Case Study Of Developing Strategies That Will Enhance The Learning Of Slow Learners In Higher Education

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Abstract

Slow learners are those children who are very poor at achieving academic qualifications when compared with a normal child in a classroom. This research was set to develop strategies to enhance slow learners' learning in one of the prominent schools in Labasa, Fiji Islands. The strategies were developed through a professional learning intervention that was carried out in one of the professional development sessions in the school. An action research approach was used to collect the data. At the end of the intervention activity, an administration official was interviewed to get his reflections on the strategies that were going to be used by the teachers to enhance the learning of slow learners. The research carried out was very important for the teachers because they will use the developed strategies from the professional learning intervention to improve the results of the slow learners in their classroom.

Introduction

Every individual in this universe has the right to education, whether they are normal children or they are special needs, children. Everybody has the privilege to build up the capability of mankind to be completely human through education (Hartini, Widyaningtyas, & Mashluhah, 2017). To achieve education for all it is very important to focus on the students who are weak in academic performance and tagged as slow learners. The slow learners are the students who have the competency to attain academic achievement but work at a rate below the average level of grade. These kinds of students will commonly score lower on IQ tests or in external examinations, however not all that low as special education students are diagnosed (Dasaradhi, Rajeswari, & Badarinath, 2016). According to Sebastian (2016), "Slow learners are the learners who do not show any outward interest in the learning activities conducted in the school. They may be psychologically de-motivated students and need a little push from the teachers as these

students may or may not have a below-average IQ and may require help, to realize their potential" (p. 125). Teachers need to develop strategies to enhance their learning abilities to help improve IQ levels.

To improve the results of slow learners the teachers need to figure out concepts that make sense to the slow learners to learn better. This can be done by developing strategies that will improve their results. The learning strategies are the footprints taken by the students who want to improve the learning experience. The more learning strategies a student utilizes, the more the student feels positive, inspired, and self-effective. Therefore teachers in schools are urged to develop suitable learning strategies for students who are slow learners and show them how to comprehend learning strategies to improve their academic performance. Research done by Shaw (2010) highlighted that " Slow learners benefit from several general strategies that help build their academic resilience, including concrete or active instruction, generalization activities, advance organization

strategies, increased instructional efficiency, and motivational strategies" (p. 14). When teachers use appropriate learning strategies on their students then these students tend to take responsibility for their learning through self-direction learning (Oxford & Nyikos, 2011). This paper aims to develop a set of learning strategies through a professional learning intervention that can be used to enhance the learning abilities of slow learners in higher education.

Background & Significance

It has been a growing interest for researchers around the globe for the past few decades on the objections of analyzing and identifying slow learners in a classroom (Khan, 2005; Shaw, 2003; Sing, 2004). The students who are achieving a minimum pass rate requirement of 50 percent when compared with a normal child who scores above 50 percent are categorized as slow learners. According to Sebastian (2016) "Teachers must know their attitude towards slow learners. Sometimes the efforts and behaviour are affected by an individual's attitude" (p. 127). These attitudes can come in the form of strategies. A set of strategies needs to be designed by the teachers to enhance the learning of the slow learners in the classroom. To improve the results of all the schools in our country teachers need to focus on the slow learners. This is because slow learners are the ones who fail their external exams. According to statistics by the Ministry of Education (2016) in 2015, the National percentage pass rate for Fiji Year 10 Certificate Examination was 41.92% and in 2016 it moved to 44.56%. For Fiji Year 12 Certificate Examination in 2015, it was 59.56% and in 2016 it moved to 60.87%. For the Fiji Year 13 Certificate Examination in 2015, it was 54.90%; in 2016, it moved to 64.63% (Ministry of Education, 2016). The results showed that none of the examinations had a pass rate of 100%. The students who have failed are slow learners. To improve the results of these students we need to develop effective strategies that can be adopted by the students to improve their learning. In this research, an intervention program was carried out by the school teachers to develop strategies that could enhance the learning of slow learners in higher education.

Literature Review

Slow Learners

A slow learner in schools is a child who is very poor in achieving academic qualifications when compared with a normal child in a classroom. Children in schools with knowledge levels in the lower normal or marginal IQ range can be gathered as slow-learning students. These kids do not get adequate consideration in the standard education for all (Shrivastava, Shrivastava, & Pandey, 2017). According to Borah (2013) " slow learners are students with below-average cognitive abilities whom we cannot term as a disabled child as these types of students struggle to cope with the traditional academic demands of the regular classroom" (p. 139). In other words, these students are normal but they do not have any interest in the learning process like other students have. In a classroom, each child's achievements are not the same therefore they depend on each other as each child can learn. There could be many factors that can lead a child to become a slow learner in academic work. According to Vasudevan (2017) "The contributing factors are cultural, poverty, family inadequacy, parental disharmony and in a few cases, unfavorable school conditions, school absences" (p. 308). Another scholar Kirk (1962) explained that slow-learning children in school are not viewed as rationally hindered because he/she is fit for accomplishing a moderate level of academic achievement even though at a more slow rate than the normal child in a classroom. These students face lots of difficulties when they are told to perform like how a normal child performs in the academic work in the classroom. For teachers, it is a very simple and easy task to identify all the slow learners in their classroom as the slow learners share a common characteristic. The characteristics of slow learners will be discussed next.

Characterized by Slow Learners

Slow Learners in schools may not have issues only with literacy and numeracy but as well as with coordination, for example, with art & craft, sports, and dressing. Regularly they are silent and hesitant, and they also experience difficulty in making good companions. They may have poor self-spirit as well (Borah, 2013). These slow learners may find difficulty in abstract thinking and may have very little attention time. All of these problems and disorders lead them a have very low self-esteem hence these students are tagged as slow learners. Another characteristic of slow learners according to Mumpuniarti (2007) is that a slow learner is a child who composes an IQ level between 79 and 89. Sugihartono (2007) claimed that from the Wechsler intelligence scale, the IQ level of children between 70 -89 including those on the borderline of 70-79 as well as IQ level of 80-89 is low average and dull children. Therefore Hartini, Widyaningtyas, & Mashluhah (2017) agrees that "the level of intelligence or IQ test results slow learner child is closely related to the intellectual development of children" (p. 32). It can be concluded that the cognitive development delays in a child result in the ability of a child in learning as their IQ level is just below the normal child has in a classroom. Reddy, Ramar, & Kusuma (2006) highlighted the following characteristics of slower learners; lack of cognitive ability in children, they have a very low memory to remember due to their ability in paying attention for a longer period, they have lack of concentration in the academic work and the last one is that they do not have the ability or finding difficulty in expressing their ideas. To deal with this teachers need to develop learning strategies so that all the slow learners in the class are educated without being left behind. These teachers, need to first understand what are strategies and why are they used. The concept of strategies will be discussed next.

Learning Strategies

Many scholars have defined learning strategies in their understanding and also through their research work. Oxford (1989) defined learning strategies as the regularly cognizant strides of practices utilized by language students to upgrade the addition, stockpiling, confinement, review, and utilization of new pieces of information. Likewise, Cohen (1998) defined learning strategies as "those processes which are consciously selected by learners and which may result in action taken to enhance the learning or use of a second or foreign language, through the storage, retention, recall, and application of information about that language" (p. 4). The strategies are used by the teachers in the classroom to enhance the students learning. Shi (2017) claimed that when we compare strategies with learning tactics then learning strategies are long-range where the outcomes of the strategies implemented will give the results after a longer period. Hence (Ellis, 1997; Oxford, 1989; Cohen & Oxford, 1992), concluded that learning strategies pose a long-term process where the kids use different strategies in a particular moment of their learning development whereas learning tactics are of a very short time process using actions at a short period. If teachers use proper learning strategies it can bring about more noteworthy inspiration and determination among the children in school. Learning strategies can improve students' self-viability and self-sufficient learning which will help the students to assume liability for their very own learning process. Educators need to give students access to methodological assets and suitable learning techniques, displaying methodologies, and direction to enable students to gain ground and make scholastic progress (Shi, 2017). To enhance the learning of slow learners in a classroom it is very important to use strategies that somewhat suit the slow learners in that particular classroom. For this, the teachers need to know what are the features of strategies therefore features and characteristics of the strategies will be discussed next.

Features and Characteristics of Learning Strategies

To have an effective learning and teaching process in a classroom it is very important to develop effective learning strategies. These learning strategies are for slow learners in the classroom to improve their academic achievement. Chauhan (2011) concluded in her publication that "Slow learners or educationally backward children need special attention and care for being duly helped in getting rid of their subnormality in terms of rate of learning and educational achievement" (p. 287). This special attention should be given to the slow learners in the learning strategies form. It depends on how effectively a learner has used strategies to enhance his/her academic achievements. "The more effective learners used strategies more appropriately, with greater variety, and in ways that helped them complete the task successfully" (Chamot & Kupper, 1989, p. 17). Different learning strategies will work on different types of learners. Not all strategies are going to bring effective results for the same child (Cohen & Oxford 1992). According to Dörnyei & Skehan (2003) "strategies are not the end for language instruction but are suggestions for enhancing learner's motivation and confidence which emphasizes the significance of regular praise, positive reinforcement and supportive environment in strategy instruction" (p. 590). The strategies that are developed should be linked to the learning styles of the students in the classroom. Teachers should know the learning styles of their students so that they do not face any difficulty in adapting the teaching and learning strategies for the slow learners in their class to enhance their learning. Hartini, Widyaningtyas, & Mashluhah (2017), concluded that "learning strategies for the slow learner is the most important and effective way to help the slow learner to learn to achieve certain learning objectives" (p. 35). Based on this teachers play a critical role in the ways of developing strategies that best can be adopted by the slow learners in a particular classroom. For that, the teachers also need to understand the importance and the features of how to develop effective learning strategies.

Background & Significance

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Method

The use of professional learning intervention to develop strategies is an outstanding method to improve students' academic performance in schools (Garcia & Al-Safadi, 2014). Hence for this small-scale research work, a professional

learning intervention was conducted to develop strategies to enhance slow learners' learning in one of the prominent schools in Labasa. After the professional learning intervention was carried out an administration officer was interviewed to gain his insights on how the developed strategies will help the teachers achieve their academic targets of a 100 percent pass rate.

Participant

The participants of this intervention were the teachers of one of the prominent secondary schools in Labasa. A request letter requesting the permit approved by the school principal to conduct the professional learning intervention in the school during a professional development session. The focus of this intervention was to develop strategies that will enhance the learning of slow learners in the school. Once the request has approved a date was negotiated since all the teachers were busy with the external examination preparation. Before the intervention, professional development was carried out in the school to give some knowledge on the topic. A total of 22 teachers comprising 12 males and 10 females took part in the professional learning intervention. Of these 22 teachers, 2 were admin teachers having an average of 15 years of teaching experience. After the intervention activity, one of the administration officers was interviewed to gain his reflection on the developed strategies. The administration officer was the vice principal of the school having a teaching experience of 18 years. The design and how the intervention was carried out are discussed next.

Intervention activities

The intervention started with an introductory session on the topic by the researcher. All the teachers were briefed on the purpose of this intervention. There was a PowerPoint presentation on the sub-topics such as the definition and characteristics of a slow learner and strategies. After the PowerPoint presentation by the researcher, the teachers were asked to form groups of members of

around 5-7. The teachers were then asked to work in groups and develop at least 5 learning strategies to enhance slow learners in their school. Teachers were reminded of how important it is to develop these strategies as these strategies once adopted by the slow learners in their schools will help the students to improve their academic performance. Once all the groups completed their task they were asked to present their developed strategies. The group members presented their strategies that will enhance the learning of slow learners in their school. Each group was given positive feedback from other groups and an open discussion forum was created. After the intervention activity, one of the administration officers was interviewed on the strategies that will enhance the learning of slow learners. The officer was asked to give his reflections on the strategies developed through the teaching experience

The presentation and the interview part were audio-recorded which was a very useful tool while doing the discussion part of this paper. The data collected from the intervention was analyzed thoroughly under the subheadings of the most common strategies each group mentioned.

	G 1	G 2	G 3	G 4	Total
No of males	3	3	3	3	**12**
No of females	3	3	2	2	**10**
Average teaching experience	7	12	10	8	**22**

(Table 1.0 Participant summary)

Findings and Discussions

The data were collected and analyzed under the following subheading of strategies: the use of visual aids, collaborative learning, individual coaching, positive reinforcement, and feedback. The final section of the discussion was based on the personal reflection of the participant from the interview. The participants

were represented by the group IDs (G1, G2, G3, G4) when their quotations were used in this discussion section. The interviewee was represented by the ID of (VPs Reflection) since he was the vice principal of the school.

The use of visual aids

From the intervention, all 4 groups mentioned the use of visual and audio aids as one of the strategies that will enhance the learning of slow learners in their school. Shabiralyan et al. (2015) defined visual aids as "those devices which are used in classrooms to encourage student's learning process and make it easier and interesting" (p. 226). These types of aids are the best method for an effective teaching and learning process. It was good to note that all the teachers knew the importance of visual aids as their strategies that are going to improve the academic performance of slow learners. According to Rather, (2004) examples of visual aids are maps, charts, projectors, models, and film strips. "From the visual aids those students who are slow learners try to picture the concept that is being taught by the teacher and also it captures the attention of the students too" G2) was one of the comments while the discussion was going on after group 1 presented their strategies. This was agreed by the finding from Nachiappan et al. (2017) that "usage of electronic teaching aids attract the interest of students to pay attention in class by using videos as a means to capture the interest of students" (p. 18). Visual aids used by the teachers help slow learners to disclose the ideas identified with the exercise educated while guaranteeing the students can more readily comprehend the exercise taught by the teacher in the classroom. Therefore the teachers need to use visual aids as one of the strategies to improve the results of slow learners in their classroom. In summary, all the participants of the intervention activity understood and agreed that using visual aids in teaching will enhance the learning of slow learners. The strategy of peer learning will be discussed next.

Collaborative learning

The 2nd most interesting strategy that was common among the 4 groups was Collaborative learning which will help improve the performance of slow learners in the school. "Collaborative learning is a strategy in which students learn in small groups in which they interact within their group and learn from each other's experiences" (Khatoon & Akhter, 2010, p. 144). The collaborative learning strategy used by the teachers organizes little friend gatherings to help the better learning accomplishment of slow learners as they fabricate an environment where they survive their learning troubles, and adapt freely in a dependable condition where they have confidence in their friend bunch pioneers. During the discussion after the presentation of group findings, all the teachers agreed that by using collaborative learning as one of the strategies we can improve the academic performance of slow learners. Through collaborative learning of companion bunch pioneers, it demonstrates to be a compelling learning procedure and in this manner, it can improve the learning capacity of slow learners. According to G4 in the discussion "when slow learners are in their peers they feel free to learn, they do not hesitate to clarify things from their friends, which help them to build their self-esteem and self-confidence rather than asking clarity from the teachers because these slow learners are also shy to open up their mind in front of everyone in the classroom". The same concept is agreed by Suranjana, Ujjani, & Kanti (2015) that "Peer tutoring makes the slow learner feel they are not alone, it boosts their self-esteem as they are more open to suggestion from peers than their teachers. The slow learner gets a boost in ego when their peers praise their progress because the slow learner discusses their cognitive difficulties easily with their peers" (p. 132). In summary, it can be said that all the participants from the intervention agreed that by using the strategy of collaborative learning slow learners will be able to improve their academic performance in the schools. Collaborative learning will help slow learners to build their self-esteem and also increase their

cognitive abilities in learning. After collaborative learning, the teachers need to go to the individual slow learners and scaffold them in their academic work. The strategy of individual coaching will be discussed next.

Individual coaching

The 3rd strategy that was common amongst the 4 groups was individual coaching. Some groups said individual coaching and some said face-to-face tutoring which meant the same thing. Slow students can learn just as fast students learn if guidance is drawn closer efficiently and delicately if they are given additional time as well as they are helped in their learning troubles. This can be done by face-to-face tutoring. According to Vasudevan (2017), "Tutoring is a face-to-face, one-to-one relationship or situation in which the tutor has the primary responsibility of helping a child in his learning difficulty which may be also done in a small group consisting of four to five children, but the essence of the situation remains the same in a small group as in one-to-one situation: individual help, attention and time" (p. 310). These tutors are the teachers who are teaching these students. This tutoring can be done during recess, lunch, or any other time when the slow learner and the teacher are free. During the discussion of the strategies G1 highlighted that "individual coaching is similar to scaffolding a child. It is the way of helping the slow learner to achieve more marks and this can be done to individual learners by the class teacher". This is agreed by Burch (2007) that "Scaffolding a child does not mean simplifying the task or concept during the learning experience or event; but, rather, the task or concept remains constant, and the teacher provides varying degrees of support according to how well the child is doing on the task or with the new learning" (p. 25). In summary, scaffolding can be used as one of the strategies that can be given during the individual tutoring of slow learners to enhance the learning of these slow learners in the school. All the participants agreed that doing individual tutoring and giving scaffolding to the slow learners will improve their academic performance in the school, hence every child in the classroom will pass the exam. In individual tutoring, it is very important to motivate and give feedback to slow learners which will be discussed next in this paper.

Positive reinforcement and feedback

The 4th strategy that was developed from the intervention activity was the use of positive reinforcement and giving positive feedback. The 4 groups who participated in the intervention developed the strategy of giving positive reinforcement and feedback to the slow learners which will help them in improving their academic performance in school. According to Pettit (2013) "Positive reinforcement increases student's self-awareness and provokes confidence as the student understands what they are expected to do as when teachers use specific praise, it helps the slow learners to understand exactly what they have done correctly" (p. 4). Positive reinforcements are given to slow learners so that they are motivated to learn. Motivation is characterized as the person's longing to take an interest in the learning process for slow learners. The participant mentioned that creating positive reinforcement and giving feedback to slow learners is going to improve the learning of all the slow learners in their classroom. Bashi, Kabir, & Rahman (2016) agreed that "Good feedback practice can not only provide useful information to the students in improving their learning but also can offer decent information to teachers which is eventually improve the learning experience for the students" (p. 39). Through giving effective feedback to the slow learner teachers have a fundamental job in expanding their student's very own capacity for understanding the self-guideline process of what has to be done to achieve their academic targets. In teaching slow learners, it is suggested that the strategy of motivation and confidence is likely to improve the slow learner's ability in academic performance. In summary, it can be said that all the participants know the value of giving

positive reinforcement and feedback as one of the strategies for improving the results of the slow learners in the school. Children learn better when they are praised by their teachers and timely positive feedback is given to them.

Administration officer's reflection on the strategies that will enhance the learning of slow learners

After the intervention, an administration official was interviewed to reflect on the strategies that all the teachers had developed to improve the learning of the slow learners in the school. The purpose of this interview was to see how the strategies developed by the participants in the professional learning intervention are going to be taken by the teachers in the school and how the outcomes of the strategies will be achieved. From the vice principal's point of reveling in his reflection that the teachers found this intervention very useful and relevant to their teaching and learning process in the school. When asked how these strategies going to help them in improving the results the participant of the interview mentioned that "from my personal experience as an administration officer that strategies developed are going to help the teachers to mold the slow learners to improve their results. Strategies such as the use of visual aids is a very useful strategy as it will bring the slow learners thinking into reality by showing them the pictures, charts, even the videos" (VPs Reflection). Research done by Shabiralyani et al. (2015) concluded that the use of visual aids in the classroom helps to slow learners to understand the concepts in a more precise way, and at the same time, active learning is established by the teacher.

Moving on when interviewed the Vice-principal of the school on how collaborative learning and the use of individual coaching strategies are going to improve the results of slow learners then he explained in his reflection that "in 21st-century learning process those students who are slow learners they feel shy to ask questions in front of the whole class to clarify their doubts but they feel free to ask in groups with their peers. These students can also

be helped if they are being given scaffolding in a face-to-face setting with their teachers also known as face-to-face tutoring" (VPs Reflection). Slow learners learn better and they are comfortable with their peers to clarify doubts rather than humiliate themselves in front of the classroom. Therefore the strategy of collaborative learning and tutoring is an effective strategy that can be used by the learners in their classroom to improve the learning of slow learners.

When asked about the last strategy that teachers had developed which was positive reinforcement the participants of the interview reflected that " if the motivation is given through positive reinforcement a slow learner is going to improve his/her results. This will be appreciated more if individual feedback is given to the slow learners regarding their academic performance" (VPs Reflection). Slow learners need to be cared for and praised to make them learn. This is done through positive reinforcement and also through positive feedback to the slow learners in the classroom. By giving positive feedback to the slow learners their attention is gathered by the teacher too (Bashi, Kabir, & Rahman, 2016).

In general, when asked how these developed strategies are going to be taken up by the teachers in the school than the participants of the interview reflected that the teachers are going back to the classroom and then they will identify the slow learners in their classrooms. After that, they will implement the strategies that have been developed by the teachers. Once the strategies have been adopted by the slow learners an effective evaluation will be carried out to assess how well the strategies have been implemented. Once it has been assessed, a review should be done to innovate and do reforms in the developed strategies if needed to improve the results of the slow learners in the school.

Conclusion

This research aimed to develop strategies that will enhance the learning of slow learners in the

school. These strategies were developed through intervention activities in one of the professional development sessions. From the findings and discussions, it can be concluded that slow learners are those students who achieve below average than a normal academic child is subjected to achieve. A slow learner cannot be categorized as a special child. A special child is a student who has some form of disability and this type of student needs special education. This finding agrees with Vasudevan (2017) that a child who is a slow learner in a normal school does not need any form of special education as special education is for special and disabled children. The students who are slow learners in the classroom need to adopt strategies that will enhance their learning in the class. The main aim of this research project was to develop strategies that will enhance the learning of slow learners in the school. The strategies were developed through a professional learning intervention in one of the professional development sessions in the school.

From the collected data it was analyzed that the developed strategies were; using visual aids, collaboration learning, individual coaching, and positive reinforcement with feedback if implemented by the teachers in school on slow learners which is going to improve the academic performance of the slow learners. The findings on developing strategies that will enhance the learning of slow learners agree with Hartini, Widyaningtyas, & Mashluhah (2017) as they mentioned that "learning strategies play an important role in providing convenience in the child's learning process slow learner so that learning objectives can be achieved effectively and efficiently" (p. 31). Once a learning strategy is being developed it is very important to see how well is implemented. This can be done by evaluating developed strategies once it is being adopted by slow learners. I recommend that another research could be done to see how effectively these developed learning strategies from the intervention are being implemented or if there need to be reforms that can be done to the existing strategies that have been developed to get better results.

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