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Factors affecting the social skills in the curriculum of mentally retarded students from the viewpoints of educational managers in Bushehr Province, Iran

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Abstract

Background and Aims: Given the considerable importance of education among children with intellectual disability, the present study aimed to investigate the factors affecting the social skills in the curriculum of students with mental retardation.

Materials and Methods: The statistical population of this study included all experts in the special education organization, all curriculum planning specialists in vocational high school, and all high-school teachers of mentally retarded students in Busher Province, Iran. The statistical sample was selected using simple random sampling and Cochran's formula. A total of 40 experts in special education, 80 curriculum planners, and 93 teachers were requested to complete the questionnaire. A researcher-made questionnaire was utilized to collect data.

Results: According to the results, the teachers believed in the poor suitability of vocational high-school curricula concerning the social interests of such students, less individual self-sufficiency achievement among graduates, and an insignificant role in the vocational rehabilitation of mentally retarded students.

Conclusion: More efforts should be taken to improve the social interests, willingness, self-sufficiency, and vocational rehabilitation of intellectually disabled children.

Keywords: Curriculum, Education, Intellectual Disability, Social Skills

1. Introduction

Today, education is not observed as an insignificant issue, especially in case of mentally retarded people. Education and rehabilitation represent a lifelong entity, which should cover the whole life of a person from birth to death. The education of disabled students is a permanent effort that requires collaboration among school administrators, parents and families, social institutions, religious leaders, and business operators (1-3). Since a mentally retarded person needs and depends on various types of educational and rehabilitation services at all stages of life, a perfunctory attitude toward vocational education is one of the critical elements that is accompanied by the most harmful effects on such services.

Vocational education covers initial formal educations to complementary training, supervision, and guidance during work. Therefore, efficient educational systems and effective social education programs for different stages of life lead to formulate, implement, and oversee interconnected plans and strategies which, in total, provide self-sufficiency, social continuity, and relative stability of the individual's condition (4, 5).

Occupational success greatly depends on the skills learned by a person at school. The education of these skills should commence when the child enters school and continue until maturity and entrance to the community (2, 6). Education of people with mental disabilities aims to prepare them for social life and provide them with the essential skills for having an independent life or the least dependence (6-8). One of the requirements for such people is to provide an opportunity to develop their capabilities to be able to support themselves (3). Researchers have concluded that instead of teaching specific professions to these children, it is better to teach them basic skills of semi-specialized or non-specialized jobs (9).

Timely integration of social education and a special

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curriculum can help the students to become more aware of the existing jobs, as well as favorite and even least favorite businesses (9). Studies have shown that the evolution of social education programs is beneficial in increasing the social competence of high-risk students (10, 11). Planners can increase the interest of students in their curriculum by providing the appropriate social education, making them more effective in their programs (12).

Despite the efforts of Iran's Special Education Organization regarding the social empowerment of mentally retarded students for having a healthy and adaptable life, this group of people suffers from deficits in the components of social empowerment skills. The social empowerment skills among mentally retarded people are organized into three categories, including adaptive, basic, and technical skills. Adaptive skills include such factors as reading, writing, and adaptability. Basic skills encompass social, technological, and analytical skills. Moreover, individual mastery in the occupation is regarded as a technical skill (7). Socially empowered employees have technical and process skills, use their theoretical knowledge and expertise in the real workplace, and own the key skills and competencies, having a combination of cognitive and non-cognitive features (13).

Social ability among mentally retarded students includes the institutionalization of knowledge (what he/she knows), skills (what can be performed by his/her knowledge), and attitudes (how to use their skills) (7). These skills help people with intellectual disabilities to receive positive feedback in social environments. Moreover, it prevents them from getting negative feedback and facilitates interpersonal relationships (8). The members of the Vocational Education Program Group are a collection of curriculum specialists, experts, teachers, and professionals of various careers in the community whose key roles cannot be ignored (14). The power of influence and decision-making should be equally divided among these sectors. Any kind of inequality will cause to diminish the rights and effect of other groups (15).

However, it should be noted that training should lead to the improvement of skills of mentally retarded individuals (1). The studies on vocational skills in Iran indicate that the achievement of social skill goals has not been accomplished practically, showing inaccessibility of educated mentally retarded graduates to their social skills (16). The achievement of the goals of social and economic independence is not feasible merely by providing purely theoretical education; however, full-functional and applicable training is required to address the needs of the disabled person as a community member (17). According to what is mentioned above, this study mainly aimed to investigate whether the vocational high-school curriculum created social empowerment for mentally retarded educable male students or not.

In doing so, three questions were addressed as follows:

1- Is the vocational high-school curriculum suitable concerning the students' social interests and willingness?

2- Does the vocational high-school curriculum lead the graduates to self-sufficiency?

3- Does the vocational high-school curriculum focus on students' vocational rehabilitation?

Materials and Methods

The statistical population included all experts of special education, all curriculum planners in high-school, and all teachers in vocational high schools in Bushehr Province, Iran. Accordingly, in total, 40 experts of special education, 80 curriculum planners, and 93 teachers were included in this study. Cochran's formula was utilized to specify the sample size, and due to the limited number of vocational-technical schools, the simple random sampling was employed in this study. In addition to library studies to acquire research history, a 44-item questionnaire was also employed to collect the required data about curriculum elements (i.e. objective, content, method, evaluation, and environment) of vocational high school for educable mentally retarded students. This researcher-made questionnaire is scored from 0 to 10 assessing the viewpoints on the current status of textbooks and their suitable status.

The reliability of this scale was approved using Cronbach's alpha (α=0.95). Moreover, since the questionnaire was assessed and approved by psychologists and curriculum planning scholars in special education, the criterion validity of the questionnaire was also confirmed in this study. In the next stage, semi-structured calculations were performed for the better use of information and not to conceal the comments.

Regarding the topic, concept, and objectives of the present study, this study was conducted based on a survey-descriptive research design. Moreover, descriptive (frequency, percentage, cumulative percentage, and mean) and inferential statistics (one-way analysis of variance[ANOVA] and Tukey's tests) were used to analyze the collected data.

Findings

A total of 40 experts in special education, 80 curriculum planners, and 93 teachers were requested to complete the questionnaire. Table 1 summarizes the results obtained from ANOVA, which shows a significant difference among the groups (F 2.210=165.858; P>0.05). Tukey's test results of comparing the mean values are presented in Table 2.

Table 1. Comparison of the suitability of vocational high-school education curricula concerning the students' social interests in terms of intra-group and inter-group indices

		Sum of Squares	Degrees of Freedom	Mean square	f	P
Suitability of vocational high-school education curricula concerning the students' social interests	Inter-group	167.246	2	83.623	165.858	0.000
	Intra-group	105.878	210	0.504		
	Total	273.124	212			

Table 2. Tukey's test results of comparing the mean values

	Triple Groups		Mean Difference	Standard Error	P
Suitability of vocational high-school education curricula concerning the students' social interests	Teachers	Experts	-1.9200(*)	0.13426	0.000
	Teachers	Specialists	-1.7106(*)	0.10828	0.000
	Experts	Specialists	0.2094	0.13750	0.282

Table 3. Comparison of individual self-sufficiency achievement among vocational high-school graduates in terms of intra-group and inter-group indices

		Sum of Squares	Degrees of Freedom	Mean square	f	P
Individual self-sufficiency achievement among vocational high-school graduates	Inter-group	186.225	2	93.113	135.591	0.000
	Intra-group	144.210	210	0.687		
	Total	330.435	212			

Table 4. Tukey's test results of comparing the mean values

	Triple Groups		Mean Difference	Standard Error	P
Individual self-sufficiency achievement among vocational high-school graduates	Teachers	Experts	-1.9183(*)	0.15669	0.000
	Teachers	Specialists	-1.8683(*)	0.12636	0.000
	Experts	Specialists	0.0500	0.16047	0.948

As can be seen, a significant difference is observed between teachers and experts, as well as teachers and specialists regarding their opinion; however, the mean difference is not significant between experts and specialists in terms of their opinions, indicating teachers' belief in the insignificant suitability of vocational high-school education curricula concerning the students' social interests. Tables 3 and 4 reveal the results regarding responses to the second question in the present study. Table 3 tabulates the results obtained from ANOVA which shows the significant differences among the groups ($F_{2.210}=135.591$; $P>0.05$).

The results of Tukey's test to compare the mean values are presented in Table 4.

As can be seen, the mean difference is significant between teachers and experts, as well as teachers and specialists regarding their opinions; moreover, there is an insignificant mean difference between experts and specialists in this regard, indicating teachers' belief in the lower impact of vocational high-school curricula on individual self-sufficiency achievement among the graduates.

Table 5. Comparison of the impact of vocational high-school curricula on students' vocational rehabilitation in terms of intra-group and inter-group indices

		Sum of Squares	Degrees of Freedom	Mean square	f	P
Students' vocational rehabilitation	Inter-group	215.056	2	107.528	114.275	0.000
	Intra-group	197.602	210	0.941		
	Total	412.658	212			

Table 6. Tukey's test results of comparing the mean values

	Triple Groups		Mean Difference	Standard Error	P
Students' vocational rehabilitation	Teachers	Experts	-2.1823(*)	0.18342	0.000
	Teachers	Specialists	-1.9364(*)	0.14792	0.000
	Experts	Specialists	0.2458	0.18785	0.392

Tables 5 and 6 present the results of the responses related to the third question of the present study. Tukey's test results of comparing the mean values are included in Table 6.

As can be seen, the mean difference is significant between the teachers and experts, as well as teachers and specialists regarding their opinions; however, there is no significant mean difference between experts and specialists in this regard, indicating teachers' belief in the lower impact of vocational high-school curricula on the students' vocational rehabilitation.

Discussion

Vocational training program for mentally retarded students has been expanded and experienced as an evolutionary process. The quantitative increased coverage of vocational training, transformation of vocational courses, and establishment of pre-vocational and vocational training courses generally represent valuable ideas for students with special needs. Nevertheless, it should be noted that mentally retarded people display more problems in terms of social abilities among the adaptation imperatives (18). Accordingly, the viewpoints of planners, experts, and executives can be an effective factor to improve this trajectory.

Given the obtained results regarding question 1, unlike experts and specialists, teachers believe in the poor suitability of vocational high-school education curricula concerning the students' social interests and willingness. The probable causes of such a significant difference can be addressed as follows:

Vocational measurement is not conducted at schools since this issue determines which students are led to what kind of talent. Moreover, teachers are in direct contact with the students' parents and are more aware of their day-to-day activities during and after education, compared to experts and curriculum specialists. Additionally, according to the results obtained from the interviews, the teachers are unsatisfied with the lack of diversity. This finding is in line with the results of some previously conducted studies (19-21).

Similarly, the provision of practice and repetition-based courses, emphasis on theoretical and practical background, and merely attention to individual differences in the educational system of especial education are of the major causes of the unsuitability of vocational high-school education curricula concerning the students' social interests.

Similar to the results related to question 1, unlike experts and specialists, teachers believe in the insignificant impact of vocational high-school curricula on the students' self-sufficiency achievement (question 2). The following causes can be addressed for such a significant difference:

The current attitude towards mentally retarded people is the same as that of ordinary people; moreover, they have to reach their maximum potential, whereas there is no difference between them and ordinary people; however, their learning is conducted in a slower process (16). According to an interview with the teachers in this category, high-school students are completely dependent on their teacher, and in case of the teacher's absence, they are confused and unplanned. Moreover, the books contain a great number of lessons and are based on certain foundations that may even be less effective for the current students. Accordingly, they get discouraged at this stage due to the lack of experiencing the life skill factors (i.e. decision-making, human communication, responsible citizenship, problem solving), which are required for individual self-esteem. This finding is in line with the results of previously conducted studies (4,17,22).

Lack of a developmental and supplementary assessment on vocational high-school curricula by specialists and

curriculum planners at this stage can be a reason for the insignificant impact of vocational high-school curriculum on the students' self-sufficiency.

Regarding the results related to question 3, a significant difference was observed among the opinions of teachers, experts, and curriculum planners regarding the impact of vocational high-school curriculum on vocational rehabilitation of mentally retarded students. Accordingly, the teachers believe in the insignificant impact of the vocational high-school curriculum on the vocational rehabilitation of mentally retarded students.

The probable causes of such a disagreement can be explained as follows:

Since teachers are the main executors of the educational system, and according to their experience and objective observation of the particular needs of mentally retarded students, they are more aware of the necessity and importance of the theoretical content enrichment and the skills required to achieve success among the mentally retarded students. They are also unsatisfied with the lack of proper implementation of the curriculum in acquiring such skills. This finding is consistent with the results of previously conducted studies (17,22-23).

The traditional learning-teaching pattern presentation and lack of social learning patterns in the educational system are the reasons for the weakness of social empowerment curricula from the teachers' viewpoint. Given the interviews, the teachers are unsatisfied with no post-graduate support of mentally retarded students, teachers' insignificant role in syllabus design, lack of social opportunities in books, lack of holding appropriate workshops for vocational skills, and insufficient time due to a great deal of theoretical content in the curriculum of educable mentally retarded students. This finding is consistent with the results of previously conducted studies (17,21,23-26).

The major reasons for the insignificant impact of vocational high-school curricula on the students' vocational rehabilitation include lack of specific training courses for this particular group in the curriculum, lack of post-graduate support, low proportion of educational content related to the daily needs, lack of conformity of textbooks with geographic location and social opportunities in different regions of the country, and absence of mentally retarded graduates' specific entrepreneurship centers. Although few studies have been conducted on such an important issue, this study was carried out to pave the way for future studies to investigate the mentally retarded students' social interests.

Limitation of the Study

Regarding the limitations, one can refer to the limited range of information presented by the educational managers about mentally retarded students, lack of permission from parents due to personal biases and beliefs, as well as limited database and history in this area. Accordingly, it is suggested that further studies be conducted in other regions of the country using a wider range of population groups. Moreover, personality traits (e.g., openness, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and neuroticism), as well as family functioning, are proposed to be evaluated along with education among intellectually disabled adolescents.

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