

## Enhancing Learning Readiness and Interest of Special Education Students Using Recreational Therapeutic Activities through Observation Methods

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**Abstract:** Learning readiness and interest are important indicators for the success of education. This research is conducted to study the effectiveness of Recreational Therapeutic Activities as an alternative method to enhance the quality of readiness and interest for special education. Five special education students with learning problems and five teachers were chosen at a school in Tampin District, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia. This research was conducted employing a qualitative approach with action research. Data were collected through observation checklist. The data were analyzed qualitatively by theme. The findings showed that the effects of recreational therapeutic activities can improve the readiness and interest in learning of special education students with learning problems. Most dominant domains are cognitive and emotional domains. The findings can be used as a guideline by special education teachers to enhance learning readiness and interest for special education students.

**Key words:** Observation, recreational therapeutic, learning readiness, learning interests, special education students.

### INTRODUCTION

Education is one of the important aspects that not only involves the essential skills, abilities and knowledge of individuals, but also leads to overall growth and development of individuals, communities and nations as a whole (Kapur, 2018). For special education students with learning difficulties, they have less readiness and interest in learning. It is closely related to the behavior that is shown during the teaching and learning process. Controlling of their own behavior will increase if they are willing to and feel confident when they are facing any obstacles (Lee & Kozar, 2005). Therefore, controlling behavior is very crucial in increasing the learning readiness and interest of special students to study. They need an interesting activity to enhance their interest and readiness to learn. In this context, therapy is one method to enhance their readiness to learn. Therefore, recreational therapeutic has become a focus in this research to arouse their learning readiness and interest.

In addition, this research is closely related to the physical and mental problems of special education students. It can be categorized as the accumulation of physical and mental problems which give effect on their learning process. They also tend to have emotional problems, behaviors problems, developmental problems and communication problems that give them difficulties in learning process. Therefore, these special education students need a fun atmosphere to help and ensure their level of learning. To ensure that, teachers need to introduce effective teaching and learning

strategies, such using technology or giving rewards for the students who achieve good performance so that it can be as motivational factor for the students, and also when they reach low grade, usually they tend to work more for improvements. Thus, teaching and learning process that uses recreational therapeutic activities is also one of the methods to enhance the readiness and interest of students with special needs to learn better.

There are issues with teachers who have no idea in recreational activities and make the students become less interested in learning process. Therefore, they should have the abilities in attracting special education students to study (DeSimone & Parmar, 2006; Rosas & Campbell, 2010). Teachers also feel uncomfortable and unprepared with the planning of therapeutic activities (Bouck & Bloom, 2005; Maccini & Gagnon, 2006). Teachers need to have the desire to learn by designing a diverse range of activities and conceptualizing recreational therapies. For this research, the readiness of teachers has been determined as the knowledge of teachers, skills, attitudes and practices to meet all individual student needs (Ekstam et al., 2018). Two important factors related to teacher readiness and student achievement were the quality of teachers (Bolyard & Moyer-Packenham, 2008; Feng & Sass, 2013; Hill, Rowan, & Ball, 2005) and teacher's confidence (Holzberger, Philipp, & Kunter, 2013; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001).

In addition, the most common issue is that children with special needs do not know how to get leisure time and develop their skills that they have

not been mastered yet which are life skills, social skills, cognitive functions, physical advancement, communication, self-esteem, and confidence. For children with disabilities, they have limited capabilities such as lack of motivation, mental psychomotor, linguistics, or organizational skills that can cause difficulty in leisure from school and fears of failure can cause the achievement of recreational activities to fall through.

The readiness of learning means individual internal preparedness and ability to learn something new for the purpose to acquire new learning experiences. Psychologists have given the meaning of learning readiness according to their respective theories, for example Thorndike (Shaw et al., 2018) who express his opinions through behaviorist theories. In this research, the readiness of learning has become the first variable in the use of recreational therapy approaches. Researcher's views on recreational therapies are that it can enhance the cognitive, emotional and intellectual levels of special education students to study and achieve academic success.

Furthermore, learning readiness is intrinsic of individual that allows them to learn. Husin (2010) stated that learning readiness is a concept of learning ability which explains the relevant elements of a person's reaction when they acquire learning. Burckhardt (2017) aims to identify the perception of public pre-school teachers and private kindergartens on the readiness of children entering Standard 1 primary school. This research involved 80 respondents in the district of Hulu Langat, Selangor. The findings showed that all teachers agreed that cognitive readiness, socio-emotion, and language and communication are important elements that need to be mastered by children before they go to school. The development of every child is different and it happens quickly in each individual. Their development in each field is also different, some of them are too fast and some of them are too slow. The state of their possession does not last long and may change according to the exposure that they experienced (Shepard et al., 1998).

Recreational terms come from Latin words, *recreation* that means refreshing. Recreation is considered as a time to do fun and enjoyable activities. Recreation is an activity that can relieve people from work. It relates to the Latin word 're-creare', which means repetition, which refers to the activities performed for the physical and spiritual rejuvenation of a person. According to one article authored by DePauw (2009), in a book titled Disability and youth sport, he has discussed about recreational and sports activities exists during ancient times. Recreational activities can be done by various ages and most of these activities involve physical exercise and a lot of movement including physical education, therapy and sports activities. According to Collins Australian Pocket English Dictionary, recreation means a form

of game or activity used for the purpose of refreshing body and mind.

Therapeutic recreation is a medical model where therapists are trained to use art, music, animals or physical activity to achieve their goals with patients. Recreational therapy approach is one of the ways to enhance the readiness of studying in special education students and attracting them. In this way, the learning goals can be achieved soon. According to Iwasaki and Pillai (2014), active relaxation involves improving the well-being of the community as they tend to be more happy and healthier; therefore, the American Therapeutic Recreation Association recognizes recreational therapies as a provision of services based on individual interests to enhance their function and help individuals become active and healthy.

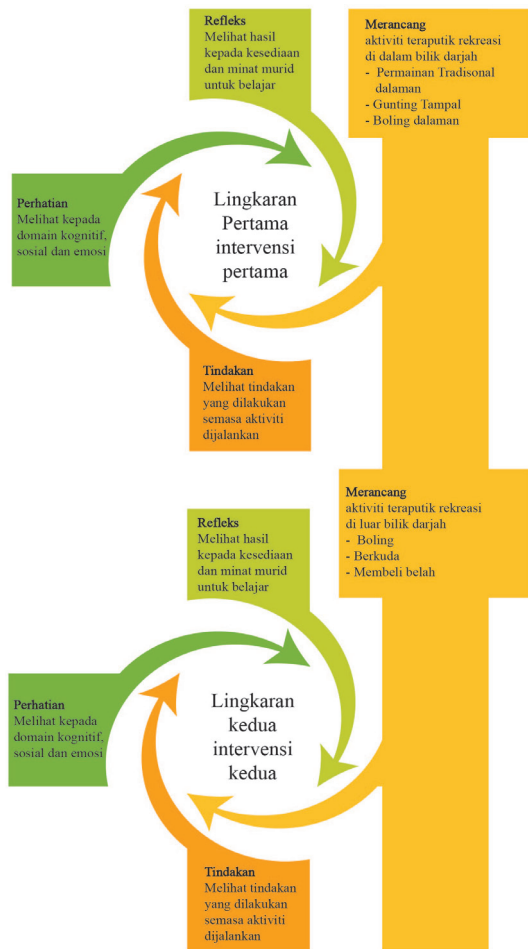
Thus, the objective of this research is to look at the effectiveness of learning using recreational therapy method in helping to improve the level of readiness and stimulate the interest of special education students to learn based on cognitive, social and emotional domains.

## METHOD

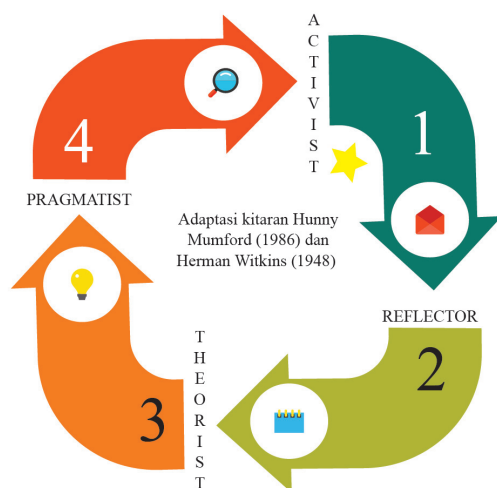
This research is an action research using a qualitative approach. The design of the research is a specific procedure which includes data collection, data analysis, and data report (Creswell, 2012). Therefore, this research only involves one school and shows the cycle of intervention improvements. There are two cycles of intervention in this research and described in figure 1.

Models that have been used are combining adaptation from model of cycle intervention Learning Style Models Witkin (1971). In Witkin's Learning Style model, it is clearly stated that high-dependent students need full guidance from teachers. Meanwhile, independent students will be more likely to reduce stress within themselves (Yahaya & Razak, 2010). The Honet and Mumford Learning Style Models is the application of the Klob Model looking at one's learning style in a cycle (Hasibuan et al., 2016). The following is a diagram of the adaptation of the learning style models of Witkin (1971).

Figure 2 in this adapted model, the first stage is called *Activits*. The stage involves students in recreational therapeutic activities inside or outside the classroom. Teachers carry out activities that attract students to enjoy their activities and then observe dependency of the students. The second stage is *Reflection* where students express their excitement and what they feel when doing recreational therapeutic activities. Then in the third stage, *Theory*, students are taught about recreational therapeutic concepts, and they build social relationships with the community, friends and teachers.



**Figure 1. First and second cycle of intervention**



**Figure 2. Cycle of Adaptation of Honet and Mumford with Model Herman Witkin (1971)**

Pragmatic is the last stage of the model where students try something new and the teacher sees the effectiveness of the activity on special education students.

A sample method has been used to determine the selected respondent. The population of this research consisted of 5 special education students and 5 special education teachers from the Integrated Special Education Program (PPKI) school in Tampin District, Negeri Sembilan. In addition, the researcher should use his own judgment to select the respondent most suited to his research (Reinard, 2001). Normally the selected individual will enhance the information value that researcher wants for the situation and the individual's behavior required by the researcher.

The research instrument is an observation checklist that contains 15 items related to the effectiveness of reactive creativity that includes cognitive, social, and emotional domains. In this checklist, each of it is assessed with five questions. This observation checklist items are adapted from The Taylor Academic Problem Identification Checklist. All items in this observation checklist are measured using Guttman Scale. According Sugiyono (2010) the Guttman scale is used when it comes to getting a clear answer to a question in question. The Guttman scale consists of 'Yes' or 'No' answers. Researchers only have to choose 'Yes' if they implement it or 'No' if they do not implement it on special education students after 8 weeks of recreational therapeutic activities.

The data were analyzed qualitatively using findings of observation checklist and interviews that were transcribed according to the appropriate theme to explain the effectiveness of recreation of therapeutic activities on the learning readiness of special education students encompassing cognitive, social and emotional domains.

In order to assess and validate the domain of observation in this study, the researcher has obtained the validity from a Therapist in the Rehabilitation Department, Tampin Hospital, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia. Additionally, these skill domains have also been reviewed by a lecturer at National University of Malaysia (UKM) who specializes in recreational therapies. The data obtained from this research have a direct correlation with the question of the effectiveness of recreational therapeutic activities in assisting the readiness and interest in learning of special education students.

In this research, the researcher used a non-participant observation method where the researcher had made full observation on the subject. The human behavior that needs to be observed must be clearly defined and measurable by the research. The researcher has fully observed the subjects action and progress based on the three selected domains.

The research was conducted for 8 weeks in 2 cycles. The first cycle was that researchers wanted to look at as the first intervention was the subject's response when going through the recreational therapeutic activities in the classroom. The researcher used some recreational therapeutic activities, for example, traditional indoor

game, cut and pastes activity and indoor bowling. The activities were carried out before the teaching and learning process, and the researchers did the observations during and after the activity.

From the observation, it was found that only a few subjects were able to adhere to the aspects in the domain of skills during recreational therapeutic activities conducted inside the classroom. Therefore, the researcher conducted a second intervention which was a recreational therapeutic activity outside of the classroom. The activities were more attractive for students, for example horse riding, shopping and bowling activities. Observations were made during these activities and during subsequent teaching and learning activities. The results from observation were analyzed and discussed in the findings.

**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

**Findings**

The findings from the checklist and from interviews conducted on the respondents were used to answer the objective of the research and to see the effectiveness of learning using recreational therapy method to enhance the level of readiness and stimulate the interest of special education students to study that involve cognitive, social and emotional domain.

*Observation checklist data*

The summary of recreational therapeutic activities in the first cycle of recreational therapeutic activities in the classroom and the second cycle of recreational therapeutic activities in the classroom on the readiness and interest of research subjects are presented in table 1. Table 1 shows the observation data of five students (RS1, RS2, RS3, RS4, RS5) in three readiness domains of cognitive, emotional and social as a result of recreational therapeutic activities carried out by research subjects in first and second cycles.

*Cognitive Skill Domain*

The Research Subject 1 (RS1), Research Subjects 2 (RS2), Research Subjects 3 (RS3) and Research Subjects 4 (RS4) could not concentrate when teacher was teaching and giving intructions after recreational therapeutic activities. They also did not have a good focus on learning after the activity was implemented. The stimulus given by the teacher was also ineffective causing students to lose focus on learning. However, there was an improvement when recreational therapeutic activities were carried out outside of the classroom. It showed that all research subjects could concentrate and hear the teacher’s instructions on the second cycle. The focus of the student that have problem in learning was easily disrupted when there were interruptions from one stimulus to another. The stimulus provided by the teacher can improve the focus of the subject and they can hear the instructions properly.

**Table 1. Skill Domain and Total research subject RS1-RS5**

Skill Domain	Total research subject RS1-RS5		
	First Cycle	Second Cycle	
<b>COGNITIVE</b>			
C1	Concentrate when teacher is teaching and giving intructions.	1	5
C2	Complete task and homework given	2	5
C3	Listening to the teacher’s intructions with correct instruction.	2	5
C4	Complete the task given perfectly, and do the task attentively	3	5
C5	Students can give a logical idea	4	5
<b>EMOTIONAL</b>			
E1	Do not blame others for own mistakes	5	5
E2	Pupils enjoyed learning activities	5	5
E3	Self-confidence is increasing	2	4
E4	Communicate well with colleagues around	4	5
E5	Do not give up and carry out various activities attentively	5	5
<b>SOCIAL</b>			
S1	Student can work in groups	4	5
S2	Student interacts with each other	4	5
S3	Student tolerates with friend	4	5
S4	Students respect teachers while teaching	5	5
S5	Less negative words	4	5

The C2 skill domain is to see whether the subject research can complete the tasks and homework given after performing recreational therapeutic activities both inside and outside of the classroom. The data showed that there was an improvement from the two subjects in

the first cycles to the five subjects of the second cycles. This shows that the subject of research is interested in the activities being implemented. At this point, the teacher has given positive reinforcement, which is to make another therapeutic activity if the subject can complete the tasks given earlier.

On the C3 domain, there are improvements of the 2 subjects to 3 subjects on the second cycle. The instructions given to the first cycle are likely to be unclear and the poor social environment in the classroom has affected the subjects. But when outdoor activities were conducted, they were more disciplined and listen attentively to the instructions.

C4 Domain is to complete the given task perfectly, and do the task attentively. It also shows improvement from 3 subjects of the research to 5 subjects. This is the result of the teacher's attitude in motivating the student to do the best in their work.

At C5 domain, RS4 could not give a logical idea in learning after doing recreational therapeutic activities. This is because RS4 is quiet and lack in communication with teachers. Thus, two-way communication did not occur between teachers and RS4. However, during recreational therapeutic activities outside the classroom it showed that RS4 has been able to provide good ideas. Communication between teachers during activities plays an important role.

Overall, in this domain, the cognitive skills show an improvement in the second cycle. This clearly shows that recreational therapeutic activities outside of the classroom have made these special needs students to become more interested and ready to learn.

#### *Emotional Skill Domain*

For the aspect of emotional skill domain, the E1 research findings after conducting recreational therapeutic activities in the classroom showed that all subjects did not blame others for their own mistakes during recreational therapy activities outside the classroom. In addition, all subjects have also shown their interest in learning after recreational therapeutic activities.

E2 is to see whether the student is enjoying learning activity. It turned out that this recreational therapeutic activity brought interest in the first cycle and had no change in the second cycle. Thus, the students' involvement in this recreational therapeutic activity is very important and makes the activity to be fun. In line with the participation in sports activities and recreation, it has proven to have a lot of benefits to physical fitness (Dahan-Oliel, Shikako-Thomas, & Majnemer, 2012; Murphy & Carbone, 2008), socialization skills (McConkey, Dowling, Hassan, & Menke, 2013).

On the domain of E3 skills, the first cycle showed 2 out of 5 subjects have shown an improvement in self

confidence. However, it was only RS4 who can not improve her self-confidence. This can be seen during horse riding. Despite being persuaded, the subject still did not ride the horse because of fear. Confidence level in RS4 was still unchanged and teachers were responsible to help RS4 so that her confidence can be increased.

The E4 skill domain shows that there is an improvement in the communication with colleague around for all research subjects. In RS3's first cycle, RS3 can not communicate with colleague around. However, it changes when doing recreational therapeutic activities outside of the classroom. explains, non-verbal communication is a way of communicating messages or information to others without using speech or words, instead of using motion or signals. This happens when SK3 can not play together and feels exile with the colleague which causes less communication in the first cycle.

All the subjects of the study have shown that they are passionate about the recreational therapeutic activities done in the classroom. They enjoy and give full attention to the activities provided by teachers. Overall, in this aspect of emotion, it shows that all the subjects of the research show interest and readiness to learn. This is because emotional intelligence is twice as important as intellectual intelligence in contributing to a person's success.

#### *Social Skill Domain*

For social domain, S1 and S2 indicated that RS4, cannot cooperate in groups and can not interact well with each other. This is because RS4 is a quiet student. RS1, RS2, RS3 and RS5 are able to communicate and work well with each other. Argues that the information environment is a positive communication climate such as openness, ease of contact, collaboration and engagement within the group. Therefore, with the interaction in the activity can increase the interest and the level of their readiness to learn. However, in the second cycle, the S1 was able to communicate well just as the other subjects have been doing after the recreational therapeutic activities outside of the classroom.

On S3 domains, the survey data shows that RS1 could not tolerate with other friends during the activity and also after recreational therapeutic activities were conducted. This shows that RS1 is an ADHD student and self-centered. During the activity, the teacher played a role to ensure RS1 did not disturb other friends during the activity. Therefore, during the second cycle, RS1 has shown an increase in compromising with friends while carrying out activities. It is a good transformation and needs to be maintained.

S4 skill domain demonstrates all the research subjects respect their teachers while recreational therapeutic activities is being conducted. Indeed, the

respect has been nurtured even though not only during recreational therapeutic activities. This attitude must be maintained to ensure a safe school environment and prevent disciplinary problem.

The findings showed that this recreational therapeutic activity has made the research subject using less negative words. In the past, RS1 liked to put out negative words. But now, RS1 and all other research subjects are no longer giving negative words during and after recreational therapeutic activities. The subjects also do not show negative behavior during learning and focusing on engaging in learning activities. These recreational therapeutic activities are implemented to help children achieve greater success in school, increase self-esteem and solve bad behavior problems.

The findings of the observation checklist on interest and readiness of subjects related to cognitive domain, emotional domain and social domain after the implementation of recreational therapeutic activities demonstrate an improvement on the readiness of learning and interest in stimulating the potential and skills of each domain to produce students who are academically, emotional and self-management to achieve excellence.

## DISCUSSION

The findings in the cognitive domain showed that students successfully improved their cognitive skills. In C2 skill, students were also able to perform the task after the intervention. According to Salleh and Zainal (2018) positive reinforcement is closely linked to the rewards of highlighted behaviors and supposed to be maintained. This illustrates that the behavior will be repeated with the reward. If the teacher is aware of what a student is interested in, it is easy to give an idea as a positive reinforcement to improve the students' weakness and to give them a high motivation for something to be achieved and become their stimulus (Katmana et al., 2016).

Similar result was also obtained in C3 skill where students listened to the instruction given by the teacher. Studies have shown that social intervention for students with special learning problems is based on student-centered. This may include social skills training to address social and social cognitive skills (Elksnin & Elksnin, 1998; Erdley & Asher, 1999; Plavnick, Kaid, & MacFarland, 2015) contributing to social interactions and student relationships with teachers and colleagues friend.

The improvement is also a result of the teacher's attitudes. The teacher's attitude, such as paying attention and responding to students, giving time for students to perform activities, praising the quality of work of the students, and responding to questions asked by the students also need to be emphasized in teacher's teaching (Stokking, 2000).

The communication between the teacher and the students was also effective due to the recreational therapeutic activities. According to Effendy (2009), education is a communication a process involving two components comprising human beings, the teacher as a communication interpreter and the student as the recipient of communication. Therefore, effective communication has a huge impact and ideas during the teaching process despite recreational therapeutic activities in order to stimulate their interest and learning readiness.

### *Emotional Skill Domain*

The interesting activities during the intervention also proved to help students improve their emotional skill domain. Similar findings for teachers at Canyon View showed the efforts made to engage learning materials according to the interests of students. For example, classroom conversations which reflect students' hobbies like baseball, motorcycle races, and computer programming can relate with their respective personal development fields like socializing in the classroom. (Burckhardt, 2017). This explains that the hobbies that engage with recreational therapists can enhance students' interest in learning.

Because of the positive results found in the first cycle, the second cycle also shows a good improvement in emotional domain skills. It is clear that students are easier to hear the instructions and enhance their interest to learn. However, a subject that is still uncertain may be given more interesting time and activities. According to Chakraborti-Ghosh, Orellana & Jones, 2014; Hunter-Johnson, Newton & Cambridge Johnson, 2014) Understanding the social, emotional and behavioral needs of special education children makes changes to the existing ones to support children in their educational settings. Therefore, these aspects need to be seen to increase their interest and readiness to learn.

### *Social Skill Domain*

In general, the recreational therapeutic activities is also effective to improve students' social skill domain. Although in its implementation, teachers still need to play their role, it can be seen that students are able to learn in similar situation. Indeed, teachers are responsible in understanding ADHD children and they can provide additional academic assistance for these children (Mirza, Nisar, and Ikram., 2017).

## CONCLUSION

The findings of this research provided information for teachers as well as parents in nurturing special education students so that it can enhance their readiness and learning interest in any field. The readiness to

study and the interest of special education students are inconsistent, sometimes it is good and sometimes it is bad. Thus, teacher should master the ways to help enhancing special education students' learning readiness and interests in addition to improve in other aspects such as social, cognitive and psychomotor. Therefore, teachers need to have the wide knowledge and diverse techniques as well as learning methods that are appropriate to the diversity of students' abilities.

Recreational therapeutic activities give benefits not only for the special needs students, but also to the local community. It is important for them to know how to implement it. It is a big hope that this research will be useful for all parties including the public as well as the authorities.

Recreational therapeutic activity has a great impact on the readiness and stimulation for special education students with learning problems. Recreational therapy activities are to improve students' physical, emotional, and social conditions. The researcher expects other researchers to chose this idea and make horse riding as the main theme of their research.

There are many activities that can be used for therapeutic recreation that can be conducted by teachers either inside or out of the classroom. Some of the most popular activities in recreational therapies are music, animals, arts and crafts, theater, dance and movement, horse riding, swimming, and team sports. By modifying these activities according to the individual's ability and goals, it will be more effective and will bring confidence to one's self. Other researchers may engage in recreation related artistic activities in their research. It is also suggested to other research to implement recreational therapeutic activities to the regular students.

In this study, the researcher only focuses on the three skill domains which are the domain of cognitive, social and emotional skills. As a further study, another domain can be added, for example in terms of physical domains.

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