Inclusive Education: Perception, Practice and Implementation within Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Disability-inclusive education is quickly becoming an important focus in today's global education trends. Several defining agreements have already championed the individual child's right to education in an inclusive setting – from international conventions to operative statements at ministries and schools. Despite many countries ratifying these treaties, their education systems are still based on integration rather than inclusion. The concept of inclusion is also not well understood, possibly because of the lack of standardised definition worldwide. By implementing the best practice of inclusive education, such policies can be further strengthened, and the number of students enrolled in inclusive education will increase as well. Malaysia's implementation of this best practice has resulted in stronger definitive legislation and policies, as well as a higher number of students with Special Education Needs (SEN) enrolled in the inclusive education programme. Further recommendations to reinforce the concept of inclusion within the Malaysian education system are finally suggested to policymakers to ensure future Malaysian students with disabilities can benefit from disability-inclusive education more fully.

Keywords: disability-inclusive education, policy, perception, practice, implementation

Introduction of Best Practice

The World Health Organisation (WHO) 2023 Factsheet on Disability has estimated the total number of people with disabilities (PWDs) worldwide to be 16 percent or nearly 1.3 billion people. At least 90 percent of children with disabilities are not going to school, according to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2022). Around 240 million children with disabilities have no access to education; 50 percent of these children in low and middle-income countries do not attend school at all (HI, 2022). Without access to education, the vicious cycle of poverty continues to seriously impact children with disabilities and their families.

Indeed, education is a basic human right for PWDs. Empowering PWDs through good and quality education will enable them to harness important skills needed to access greater employment opportunities, which can translate into a better economic life for their loved ones in the future (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs; Division for Social Policy and Development, 2013). Nasir & Efendi (2016) agreed, pointing out that education can instil a sense of belongingness and community, and allow them to reach their full potential.

With greater social awareness of the various disabilities, and a higher increase in the number of students with learning disabilities, it becomes a necessity to find out what education model may best serve PWDs, and that answer may be disability-inclusive education where PWDs can fully participate in their learning while enjoying a greater "sense of respect and belonging in schools" (UNICEF, 2021; Education Links, 2023). Hence, the best practice of inclusive education should be explored in greater depth.

It comes as no surprise then that disability-inclusive education is now becoming an important focus in today's education trends around the world. Much literature has been written about inclusive education, as a result of several defining international conventions that champion the individual child's right to education in an inclusive setting. Since disability-inclusive education places great importance on access, participation, and support with social inclusion, barriers that prevent PWDs from accessing school programmes and services should be eliminated.

Justification of Best Practice Implementation

At this point, it would be helpful to offer global justifications for this best practice implementation.

UNESCO (2022) describes an inclusive education system as one that supports diversity and matches the learning to the student's respective physical, mental or intellectual development needs. UNESCO (2022) also notes that "every country in the world has ratified at least one of the instruments mentioned; this means that all States have the responsibility to provide inclusive education and must be held accountable".

Challenges

However, challenges in consistently implementing this best practice across the world still persist today. For example, many education systems are still based on integration, not inclusion; in Lee's (2010) study, inclusive education was seen more of an approach-association with physical settings for Special Educational Needs (SEN) students due to the prevalent integration model, which placed more importance on such students having the necessary skills to fit within mainstream schools. Additionally, Bosi (2004) observed that policies in both developed and developing countries leaned towards the integration of SEN children into regular schools, partly due to preceding legislation mandating the provision of such education for these children alongside their peers.

At the same time, the concept of true inclusion in schools appears not to be well-understood worldwide. In a global UNICEF project survey report done on teaching and training teacher professionals, 33 percent said that inclusive education was not covered in their training; 50 percent found that their training did not have practical application of inclusive practices; and 40 percent did find inclusive education in their policy and training curriculum but little implementation or progress was done (Pinnock & Nicholls, 2012). Interestingly, 16 percent of the same respondents agreed that inclusive education should be a top priority in teacher training and education (Pinnock & Nicholls, 2012).

To compound this even further, inclusive education itself is such a broad term with various classifications of disability and services and needs; there is no single standardised definition of inclusion worldwide. For example, inclusion is thought to be a dedicated education approach to providing support services to each child with SEN so that he/she can benefit from being in the class (Lee, 2010; Bosi, 2004). On the other hand, full inclusion refers to all students being in a full-time classroom/programme regardless of their disability type and severity; all services must be given to that child. There is also a middle-ground that the child should first stay in the mainstream environment and only removed if the services cannot be offered in the regular classroom.

Benefits

With all that said, implementing the best practice of a truly inclusive education environment within schools can enable all children – both with and without disabilities – to enjoy an equal platform of accessing educational and social opportunities (Lee, 2010). When education ministries, international institutions, governments and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) developed policies on inclusion in all aspects, more public awareness on sufficient education and care for these children were observed (Losert, 2010).

Other significant benefits that SEN children can reap are outlined below:
- Such children in traditional classrooms will get a sense of belonging, which will allow them to experience greater socialisation.
- By focusing more on improved instruction which would remove the labelling and classifying of disabilities in school environments, an inclusive education system would benefit such children as well as other children.
- As inclusive education is a basic human right, students with SEN should enjoy every right to be given equal educational opportunities as well.

Consequently, more and more educationalists and governments all over the world have pushed for the implementation of an inclusive environment for SEN children.

Malaysia

A prime example is the Malaysian government. Their commitment to include all SEN students within the national education system can be seen in the many policy and legislation changes in the following chronological timeline:

- Malaysia became a signatory of the 1994 Salamanca Statement which advocated inclusive education for all students (Lee & Low, 2014). Inclusive education started as a pilot scheme in 1994 (Bosi, 2004).
- In October 1995, the Special Education Department (currently known as the Special Education Division) was formed in order to streamline responsibilities for special education provision (Nasir & Efendi, 2016).
- In 1996, the Education Act was implemented (ESPACT, 2015); a chapter on special education was incorporated. The terms 'special education' and 'special school' were officially defined for the first time in Malaysian

law: 'special education' was defined as education that meets the special educational needs of students and 'special school' was defined as a school that provides special education (according to the rules in Section 41) (Akib, n.d.).

- Subsequently, the Malaysian Ministry of Education (MOE) introduced the Education Rules (Special Education) in 1997, which defined three special education programmes that were implemented in Malaysian schools: (1) the special school, (2) the integration programme, and (3) the inclusive programme (Nasir & Efendi, 2016).

- Since 2006, a monthly allowance has been given to all students who are registered with the special education programmes (Nasir & Efendi, 2016).

- The Persons with Disabilities Act 2008 recognises that people with disabilities are not to be excluded from the formal education system on the basis of disability; however, a major weakness of this Act is that ministries and agencies are not compelled to comply, nor are there provisions for people with disabilities to seek redress when discriminated against (Nasir & Efendi, 2016).

- With the introduction of the PWD Act 2008, this paradigm shift from a welfare model to a human rights model, which promotes equal and full participation in society, has also resulted in the *Orang Kurang Upaya* (OKU) acronym to refer to *orang kelainan upaya* (translated in English as persons with different capabilities); this has since then been the standard definition of OKU by the Malaysian government (Nasir & Efendi, 2016).

Yet, even with these efforts to improve Malaysia's education system for SEN students, several researchers feel Malaysia's abovementioned efforts are still not yet fully aligned with the best practice of an inclusive education system. For instance, Teng et al. (2014) observed that Malaysia still practiced a dual education system: "a special education system for students with moderate, severe or profound disabilities and a regular system for those without or mild disabilities". Latiff et al. (2015) concurred, noting that "Special Education Schools are governed solely by the Division of Special Education, and Special Education Programme Integration is governed entirely by the State Education Department respectively", resulting in discrepancies in implementing the Inclusive Education Programmes among various Malaysian schools.

Objectives of Implementation

Therefore, by implementing the best practice of a truly inclusive education system for SEN students in Malaysia, these following objectives can fill in the gaps:

1. To strengthen the legislation policies for Malaysian students with SEN placed in an inclusive education system. By enhancing these policies, there will be a greater onus on the Malaysian government to provide all SEN students equal access to quality education within a fully inclusive education system, and to offer greater awareness of the process of implementing the inclusive education system among teachers and practitioners.

2. To increase the number of Malaysian students with SEN in inclusive education. Having a higher enrolment means more such students in Malaysia can develop and acquire crucial skills and knowledge needed to succeed in life, and achieve their fullest potential.

Best Practice Implemented in Malaysia

Since then, the Malaysian MOE has strived to promote and implement better quality services for SEN students in relation to inclusive education:

- In 2013, "*Garis Panduan Program Pendidikan Inklusif Murid Berkeperluan Khas (Edisi Percubaan)*" (Guidelines for the Inclusive Education Program for Pupils with Special Needs (Trial Edition) gave guidelines on the implementation of the Inclusive Education Programme where students could be placed in either full inclusion (full-time mainstream classrooms for all school subjects) or partial inclusion (included in selected subjects or extra-curricular activities, depending on their abilities and talents) (Teng et al., 2014).
- The Malaysian Education Blueprint (MEB), released in 2013, contains three Wave-strategies to be carried out between 2013 and 2025 whereby more support would be given to train teachers, and give more importance to special education (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). Improvement in quality, and commitment to moving students with special needs towards the inclusive education model, were the major thrusts in this roadmap, which were anticipated to have a significant impact on special education in the years to come. A chapter (under the area of student learning) was dedicated to listing out goals for providing an inclusive environment for children with special needs. The following essential Wave-strategies are detailed as follows:
  - ✓ Wave 1 (2013-2015): The enrolment of registered students with SEN to be increased by 30%, such students would also be placed according to their competency – for example, "high-functioning SEN students who can cope with the mainstream curriculum and assessment, are encouraged to attend in the Inclusive Education Programme" (Latiff et al., 2015).
  - ✓ Wave 2 (2016-2020): Teacher training programmes to be further reinforced; stronger cooperation between government and non-governmental agencies to be boosted (Latiff et al., 2015).
  - ✓ Wave 3 (2021-2025): Evaluation of both Waves 1 and 2 initiatives; every SEN student to be able to access a "high quality education that is relevant with their specific needs" (Latiff et al., 2015).

Impact of Best Practice Implemented in Malaysia

With the implementation of this best practice of inclusive education in Malaysia, two major impacts have emerged.

The first is the MEB spelling out an ambitious goal to enrol 75% of Malaysia's SEN students in inclusive programmes (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). As a result, several important guidelines and policies regarding inclusive education were released, which are listed as follows:

- The Inclusive Pedagogy Implementation Guide of 2016 was introduced to "assist mainstream teachers and special education teachers to include students with special education needs in inclusive classrooms" (Singh, 2022; UNESCO, 2021).
- In 2016, the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development created the '*Pelan Tindakan Orang Kurang Upaya* (2016-2022)' (The Action Plan for Persons with Disabilities 2016-2022) (Chow & Omar, 2017).
- The Zero Reject Policy "obliges schools to grant admission to all children, regardless of legal and disability status"; children with special needs would undergo the Early Intervention Programme to help them "learn in a formal education setting" (Azmi, 2018).

From these legislative and policy changes, the Holistic Inclusive Education Programme was set up where 220 special education teachers from 44 pilot schools were trained by master trainers (UNICEF East Asia & Pacific, 2020; Singh, 2022). UNICEF East Asia & Pacific (2020) also noted that the Malaysian MOE and Ministry of Health also teamed up to "establish a multi-disciplinary team of doctors, therapists, and other specialists that support teachers in hospital learning centres under the Schools in Hospitals programme" where "learning centres, located in hospitals, are specially structured to provide continuous education for children with disabilities and undergoing long-term or repeated treatments".

The second impact is the total number of Malaysian SEN students placed in an inclusive school environment. In 2013, only 9.6 percent of SEN students were enrolled in the Inclusive Education Programme (IEP). Yet in September 2019, this figure jumped to 50.5 percent, which consisted of 247 students in preschool, 8221 primary school students, and the remaining 7,740 in secondary schools (Kannan, 2019; see Table 1 below).

Table 1
Number of SEN students enrolled in Inclusive Education Programme (IEP)

Year	2013	2019
%	9.6	50.5

At the same time, the number of SEN students enrolled in regular schools (Full Inclusion) saw a steady climb from 14,321 in 2018 to 16,140 in 2022 (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022; see Table 2 below). This indicates a greater awareness of the need to provide a truly inclusive school environment in Malaysia.

Table 2
Number of SEN students enrolled in Regular Schools (Full Inclusion)

Year	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Number	14,321	14,704	15,155	15,540	16,140

Overall, the increase in the number of Malaysian SEN students in the IEP and regular schools (full inclusion) can be explained by two factors: 1) the Malaysian MOE's determination to achieve their goal of 75% SEN students placed in inclusive education programmes by 2025; and 2) the rapid series of strong legislative guidelines and policies released by the Malaysian MOE and other Ministries since 2016.

Summary and recommendations

The Malaysian government is right to see education as a central player in national development evidenced by the significantly high allocations in the annual national budgets. With higher standards of education and more skilled and knowledgeable people, nations, including Malaysia, can enjoy better economic prosperity. When provided equal access to inclusive education, all persons with disabilities can be more active contributors to their respective country's national development.

Since the MEB is divided into three implementation waves with the last being Wave 2021 to 2025, the full impact of implementing the best practice of inclusive education in Malaysia is yet to be seen currently (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). Even then, it is important for the Malaysian MOE to work cohesively with relevant government ministries to design a nationwide training programme for all teachers, develop a national strategy of school-based teams in caring for students with disabilities in and beyond the classroom, and empower strong legislation to reinforce the national education notion of inclusivity within the school system.

If policymakers want to ensure true inclusion is successfully implemented in Malaysian educational settings, these recommendations should then be taken into consideration in the suggested following order (of importance):

1. Firstly, the Malaysian MOE should ensure local policies and legislation are aligned with international initiatives which will help the government move towards fuller inclusion of PWD students. Reviewing how international frameworks like the Education For All Guidelines prescribe the implementation of disability-inclusive education will also help the Malaysian MOE to better direct its inclusion programme towards the intended target audience.

2. At the same time, inclusive schools should be allowed to initiate regular meetings with parent groups that will facilitate greater collaboration between home teachers, support teachers, special education teachers, parents and children in deciding what is best for the individual student's learning.

3. Administrative policies can then be revised to clearly respect and accept the diversity of learners with disabilities within communities, schools and education systems.

4. Effective management and organisation of appropriate quality support and resources including funding, facilities, equipment and teaching materials; experts with a deep knowledge of education pedagogy, and trained supportive teachers should be recognised as critical parts of these support and resources as well.

5. From there, a comprehensive training programme can be better identified to train all teachers involved in inclusive education, not just the home-teachers. Reason being, many of the students with disabilities often require individual attention and disability-specific learning resources so it would be helpful to have more teachers being more aware of the various learning needs.

6. Finally, teachers and school leaders "should be provided with appropriate professional development support through collaborative action learning based on reflective practice, enabling school communities to work together and share effective inclusive practices" (UNESCO, 2022).

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