

A PROPOSITION FOR AN INCLUSIVE SOCIETY FOR THE DEAF

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Abstract: *Language is, but not exclusively a tool for communication and this includes sign language. Sign language is an essential tool for deaf community to communicate and is often community-specific. At the local level, it is noticed that the main issue of creating a sustainable inclusive society lies in the wide spread of the significance of sign language. The gap between the hearing and hearing-impaired remains open, with effective leadership and universal access to public amenities remain constant. Consequently, this paper explores the general local landscape of Kuching (capital of Malaysian state of Sarawak), identifying existing policies and practices that can be leverage on for a more sustainable inclusive society for the deaf. The paper also proposes the replicating successful movement campaign such as #whyisign that could increase inclusion and success in building an inclusive society.*

Keywords: *inclusive society, deaf culture, #whyisign*

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia being a developing country has never ceased to strive in moving forward; from the beginning of New Economic Policy (1971 – 1990), Vision 2020 (1991 - 2020), to recent TN50 (Transformasi Nasional 2050) introduced by Prime Minister Najib bin Razak in 2016. The general focus is the vision towards a unified and highly self-sufficient nation, which can be modeled by other nations. Such lofty ideal is spelt in parallel to the concept of “inclusive society” presented by World Summit for Social Development in 1995, where the narrowing of socio-economy gaps and the elimination of socio-economy disparities anchor the tabulation of different national policies and programmes.

To date, the mass of national policies and programmes introduced is found to span across multiple dimensions, including education (PADU, 2015) or even digital divide (Hashim et al., 2015). However, such clarity is not found in the literature addressing the population of the disabled, in particular the deaf. A quick review shows that the registered number of disabled population represented a mere 1.6% of the country's population with children with disabilities representing roughly 1% of Malaysia children in government schools in 2012.

In 2013, the number of hearing-impaired individuals with social welfare is 55,000 (Murad, 2013), approximately 0.18% with total population 31,110,048 (Malaysia Population, 2017). This is just a reflection of how the population of the disabled is often “over-looked and underestimated” (Belomnte, 2014). There are various

reasons as to why the registered population of the hearing-impaired is unable to depict the reality, where hearing-impaired society generally includes acquired hearing-impaired individuals. For this particular paper, the population of “deaf” is narrowed to those who are born hearing-impaired, or those who lose the ability to hearing since young.

Deaf community and culture

Baker and Padden (1978:4) explicitly defined “deaf community” as a community “comprises those deaf and hard of hearing individuals who share a common language, common experiences and values, and a common way of interacting with each other, and with hearing people”. Such definition is important because it highlights one unique trait which is the “commonness” found in the deaf community. In other words, one deaf community may or may not share the same language, experience, values or even the way of interacting with another deaf community. In Malaysia, there are at least three distinct deaf communities – all geographically bound, namely Penang, Selangor and Sarawak.

Such uniqueness is largely defined by the “language” one deaf community uses. Just as how languages in the world, a system of linguistic composition determines power, identity, culture, so does the “language” used in the deaf communities. The main “language” of the deaf communities is sign language. Sign language is a complete and complex linguistic system that employs signs made by moving hands, combined with facial expressions and postures of the body (American

Sign Language, 2014). Due to the shared experiences and values, sign language is often region specific and there is no one universal sign language for all.

In Kuching, the capital city of Sarawak state, the “winning” sign language is Sarawak Sign Language, taught by the Sarawak Society for the Deaf (SSD). This particular organization compiles booklet, books and teaching resources for basic sign language class and Level 1 Interpreter class.

Research Objectives and Questions

This paper intends to identify existing resources in Kuching and propose strategies and approaches for a more inclusive society for the deaf at local level. This is projected into two research questions:

1. What are the existing policies and practices of an inclusive society for the deaf at local level?
2. What can be done at the local level to create a more vibrant and sustainable inclusive society for the deaf?

Literature review

What is inclusive society?

The World Summit for Social Development Copenhagen 1995 (UN DESA, 2009) defines an inclusive society as a “society for all in which every individual, each with rights and responsibilities, has an active role to play”. This definition takes a more practical view where the concept of “inclusive society” is realised through the identification of operational aspects of the concept.

Inclusive society does not eradicate societal members' differences. It is a concept where people of different “niches” come together as a functional whole (Taylor, 2007). In the case of deaf community, an inclusive society refers to the capacity of a local society in embracing members of a deaf community with an active role to play.

Active participation of societal members can be valued based on a few key elements: universal access, effective leadership and integrated education.

Key elements for an inclusive society

One of the outcomes of the World Summit for Social Development Copenhagen 1995 is the drafting of The Copenhagen Declaration and Programme of Action for Social Summit. In the declaration, it is stated that the concept of inclusive society is grounded in the principle of “respect for all human rights, freedoms, and the rule of law” and the key elements to a sustainable inclusive society can be summarised into the following: universal access, leadership and education.

Universal Access

Universal access represents a crucial element in supporting an all-inclusive participation of societal members. Universal access often refers to rights of access to basic needs, such as public infrastructures, facilities or even information.

For hearing-impaired individuals, universal access to public infrastructures and facilities does not seem to project an issue in Kuching. It is noted that hearing-impaired individuals do not exactly face unemployment or denied their rights, but they are sometimes “taken advantage of due to their easy-going nature” (Lai, 2015).

In fact, deaf members in Kuching have the portfolio of being professionals (teacher), self-employed, or even Silver Medalist, Yeo Suh Chan for the 9th International Abilympics held in Bordeaux, France (Yap, 2016). It is also noted that out of the 292 registered deaf members with SSD, at least 95% is employed (Borneo Post Online, 2014).

Effective Leadership

Effective leadership puts forth the idea of the importance of societal representation. The concept of inclusive society banks on how effective each different communities are represented, paired with the capacity to engage in local municipal policy and decision making.

In Kuching, deaf community is mainly consolidated through Sarawak Society for the Deaf (SSD). This particular organization has a range of activities that gears toward a specific mission in spreading awareness of the deaf culture among local community. This is done mainly by recruiting students for Basic Sign Language classes since 2008. It is currently chaired by Wenderine Koo and the daily operation is runned by Chief Administrative Officer/Liason Officer, Ernest Ting and a Trainee Office Executive, Jojo with the position of Chief Executive Officer (CEO)/Principal remains vacant.

Integrated Education

Education is listed as one of the key element for sustainable inclusive society as it provides opportunity to “instill values of respect and appreciation of diversity” (UN DESA, 2009) among young people.

In 2013, Malaysian Ministry of Education made an amendment to the Education Regulations (Special Education). This is a significant amendment where the clause for categorization of children with needs is removed, in the attempt to provide opportunity for equal rights in accessing education in an appropriate environment.

Following that, it is recorded that special need (hearing-impaired) primary and secondary schools are placed at north, central and south zones. At the primary level, the special needs public schools are

dedicated to children with special needs while public secondary schools adopt the Integrated Special Education Program (as of 2017).

Table 1 List of public special needs (hearing-impaired) primary and secondary schools

Public Primary Schools

North zone: SK Pendidikan Khas (P) Miri Central zone: SK Pendidikan Khas (P) Sibul South zone: SK Pendidikan Khas (P) Samarahan

Public Secondary schools (Program Pendidikan Khas IntegrasiPPKI)

North zone: SMK Dato Permaisuri, Miri Central zone: SMK Rosli Dhoby, Sibul South zone: SMK Datuk Patinggi Haji Abdul Gapor, Kuching

Significance of the study

Existing scholarship and literature do not constitute the reality at the local level, in this case, Kuching – capital city of Sarawak state in Malaysia. Many of the existing references are often obsolete and scattered across media and online resources. With the sole existence of SSD and the current resignation of its Chief Executive Officer (CEO), the capacity of pushing for a more inclusive society at the local level has come to a bottle neck.

This study attempts to review and identify current available policies and practices that can be leveraged for a more progressive development for a sustainable inclusive society for the deaf at the local level, Kuching. This paper intends to propose viable and practical strategies local municipal can adopt to enhance the sustainability development of an inclusive society.

Mapping of the local landscape Inclusive Education: Integrated Special Education Program

In Kuching, one public primary school and one public secondary school are readily available for hearing-impaired students age from 7 to 17.

SK Pendidikan Khas (P) Samarahan is a public primary school for only the hearing-impaired from primary 1 to primary 6. This primary school has a history dated back to 1964, with current teaching staffs of 26 teachers (hearing and hearing-impaired). Public special primary school adopts the main stream curriculum with added core subject of *Bahasa Isyarat Komunikasi – BIK* (Communicative

Sign Language). The main difference is classroom instructions and techniques.

In comparison, public secondary school for the hearing-impaired adopts the concept of inclusive education, where special need students share the physical commodities of a school with mainstream students. However, the administration of the school is divided into mainstream and special needs. One example is public special secondary school in Kuching, SMK Datuk Patinggi Haji Abdul Gapor with a history dated back to 1986. This integrated public secondary school has 13 classes catered for students from Form 1 to Form 5, with 19 teaching staffs (2017). Special need secondary schools uses dedicated Curriculum for Special Education (Kurikulum Pendidikan Khas).

The benefit of integrated school is self-evident, where school assembly is held for mainstream and special need students. One example is that the mainstream students are aware of the sign “clapping hands”. On top of that, special need students are involved in many school activities including on stage performance. The concept of integrated education opens the opportunity to allow the initial formation of inclusive society.

Basic Sign Language Class

Just as how other language systems work as a medium for communication, it is also an obstacle to many hearing community who attended the sign language class as “not anyone can be good at it (sign language)” (Lai, 2015). SSD Liaison Officer Ernest Ting admitted that the awareness for hearing community to sign up and learn sign language low. Over the years, only about 250 “graduated” from basic sign language course with the ability to sign generally fades and deteriorates

SSD attempts to counter this by identifying those who are able to be the “interpreter” between the hearing and hearing-impaired and introduces “Friends of the Deaf” Programme (FOD) (Borneo Post Online, 2014). It is estimated to be 120 FOD to date. FOD plays the role of mediator, involving themselves with activities organized by SSD such as Interactive Camp, badminton sessions, and other charity events. Generally, they also play the role in creating the awareness of sign language class among the hearing community.

Identified Issue at Local Level

At the local level, the obvious issue is the awareness of the hearing community to sign up and learn basic sign language, laying down the first step of effective communication to engage in a sustainable inclusive society.

For local hearing-impaired community, access to formal education is not obstructed. Hearing-impaired members are employed and worked alongside hearing society members; corporate and civil services. On the contrary, hearing society members may show the interests to help or communicate (Lai, 2015) but do not know how.

Learning how to communicate with the deaf takes the effort of committing to regular attendance to sign language class (3 months), and continuous practice after graduation. It is not surprising that the number of participants drops significantly from Basic Sign Language to Level 1 Sign Language. Even fewer made it through Level 1 Sign Language, where passing mark for each course is set at 80%.

Former SSD CEO Terrence Ee stated that sign language requires one to be expressive, not only through the use of hand movements but also the combination between facial expressions and body movements (Lai, 2015). It is a challenge for many to engage in a more animated way to communicate on top of the time commitment for sign language class.

Proposition for an inclusive society at local level

Opportunity: #whyisign Campaign

In 2016, Stacy Abrams created a week-long campaign named “Why I Sign” (whyisign.com), and the movement went viral quickly. This is a typical story of how local level can engage in practical and viable strategy to create bond, “connection” or even awareness to sustain an inclusive society for the deaf.

#WhyISign took the social media by storm and various inspiring sharing of vlogs and tweets narrate the story of different journeys in the learning sign language (American Sign Language), including the communication between the hearing and the

deaf, hard of hearing and hearing family and friends. #WhyISign has then created a trend among different local communities. In her interview with I Deaf News (Facebook, 2016) Stacy Abrams acknowledged that ASL speakers are “hungry” to share their stories. It is also noted that such campaign lends itself to an opportunity to connect those who have learned how to sign in order to communicate with the hearing-impaired.

This serves as a support that bonds the hearing-impaired, family and friends of the hearing-impaired (hearing).

Considering the scarcity of human resource and the wide coverage of the social media, a campaign as such leveraging on social media with clear message is bound to be successful. The hash tag #whyisign creates an opportunity for “conversation” and consequently establish a platform for inclusion. In addition, a movement as such is easier to replicate despite differing local contexts. Subsequently, it is also feasible for local movement to connect to the movement at a macro level (global and across nation). The disparities in sign language can be overcome by the use of written language (tweets and posts).

#WhyISign campaign can also be tweaked to include the spread of community awareness, especially in addressing why coming forward and signing up for basic sign language class is a crucial step to reach out.

Approach: Bottom up

A movement campaign can be easily replicated by local level community via social media channel. Such bottom up approach ensures a greater success rate with fewer red tapes where the main purpose is to create a trend of conversation about local deaf community.

It is undeniable that social apartheid is apparent even if it is not made explicit. For example, the existence of Olympics and Paralympics. With campaign movement at the bottom level, voices are heard and ideas, exchanged. The result of this significance exchange can generate a more explicit and solid proposition for a practical inclusive society.

CONCLUSION

In developing a sustainable inclusive society, top down approach requires effective leadership that spells distinct societal representation and the involvement in policy and decision making. At the macro level (nation), public education and universal access do not restrict the inclusion of the deaf community. However, the gap remains in bridging hearing-impaired.

Much have been done at the micro level (capital city of state) by the deaf community in the attempt to connect, and eventually building a more inclusive community. This effort is significantly set back by the inability to reach out and create enough awareness among the hearing community to play an active role in the deaf community.

By taking into consideration output efficiency with limited human resource, campaign movement like #WhyISign can achieve the purpose quickly and effectively. Local movement campaign can be modeled after existing movement campaign as it can be replicated with ease. It is hoped that this paper provides some insights and lead in to the feasible engagement at the local level for a sustainable inclusive society for the deaf.

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