INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: PERCEPTION, PRACTICE AND IMPLEMENTATION WITHIN MALAYSIA

Chua Tuan Sek & *Low Hui Min

Universiti Sains Malaysia, Malaysia
lowhm@usm.my

ABSTRACT

As of 2022, the World Health Organisation estimates that approximately 16 percent of the global population, nearly 1.3 billion people, have some form of disability. Shockingly, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization reports that at least 90 percent of children with disabilities are not attending school. Consequently, disability-inclusive education has emerged as a significant focus in global education trends. Extensive literature has addressed inclusive education, driven by international conventions advocating for every child's right to an education in an inclusive setting. From these conventions to operational directives at ministries and schools, inclusive education is consistently framed as a basic human right, entailing equal access to education in an environment that supports each student with a disability to the best of their ability. Malaysia has been proactive in aligning with global education trends, evident in its numerous education policies, particularly regarding individuals with disabilities (*Orang Kurang Upaya or OKU*). Notably, the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025 includes a dedicated section on the education of OKU. This paper will explore two main parts: Part One will discuss literature on inclusive education, while Part Two will examine the educational context in Malaysia. Additionally, recommendations will be proposed to establish learning communities, foster knowledge-sharing, and integrate inclusive education principles into legislation and policies within the Malaysian context. These efforts aim to ensure that future generations of Malaysian children with disabilities can fully benefit from disability-inclusive education.

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

INTRODUCTION

The World Health Organization's (WHO) 2023 estimates that approximately 16 percent of the global population, equating to nearly 1.3 billion people, have disabilities. Shockingly, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) reports that at least 90 percent of children with disabilities (CWD) are not attending school. Specifically, almost 240 million children with disabilities lack access to education, with half of them in low and middle-income countries completely excluded from schooling (HI, 2022). Education is considered a fundamental human right for people with disabilities (PWDs), offering the potential to alleviate isolation, foster self-esteem, and cultivate a sense of belonging and community, as noted by the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High

Commissioner and Nasir & Efendi (2016). Moreover, education can equip individuals with independence and skills necessary for employment, thus mitigating poverty (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, n.d.). However, mere education is insufficient; it must be disability-inclusive to realise these benefits. Consequently, disability-inclusive education has gained prominence in global education trends. Inclusive education emphasises access, participation, and support for social inclusion, shifting the focus from segregation to the right of PWDs to participate fully in educational settings. This qualitative research paper will be divided into two parts: Part One will explore literature on inclusive education, while Part Two will examine the context of education in Malaysia.

PART ONE: LITERATURE REVIEW ON INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Inclusive Education

Inclusive education is widely regarded as the principle of providing equal educational and social opportunities to all children in schools (Lee, 2010). UNESCO (2022) shares this perspective, defining an inclusive education system as one that embraces diversity and tailors learning to meet the physical, mental, or intellectual needs of each student. Bosi (2004) advocates for inclusive education, outlining several benefits for children with special educational needs (SEN). Firstly, inclusive education fosters a sense of belonging for these children in traditional classrooms, facilitating socialisation—a principle strongly endorsed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD). Secondly, inclusive education mitigates the labelling and classification of disabilities in school environments by prioritising improved instruction, benefiting not only children with SEN but also their peers. Thirdly, as inclusive education is a human right, students with SEN are entitled to educational opportunities equal to those of their peers. Consequently, many educators and governments have advanced towards implementing inclusive environments for children with SEN. Losert (2010) observes that numerous education ministries, international institutions, governments, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have developed inclusive policies across all domains, leading to increased public awareness of the importance of adequate education and care. In fact, UNESCO (2022) asserts 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". In other words, inclusive education has transitioned from a mere slogan to a fundamental principle referenced in education manifestos worldwide.

Gap Identification Between Policy and Implementation of Inclusive Education

Yet, despite widespread support for inclusive education, scholars such as Losert (2010) and Lee (2010) argue that there remains a significant gap between policy, as outlined in international treaties and legislative frameworks, and its implementation within education systems for children with disabilities. The National Council for Special Education (NCSE, 2010) in Ireland echoes this sentiment, highlighting the ongoing challenge of managing and implementing a truly diverse education system in many countries. Moreover, UNICEF East Asia and Pacific (2020) notes that numerous teacher education programmes in the region fail to meet the requirements of an inclusive education system, leaving teachers ill-prepared to educate children with disabilities. According to Lee (2010), the success of inclusive education hinges on several key factors. Firstly, there must be clearly defined administrative policies that foster support among communities, schools, and education systems for understanding and accepting learner diversity. Secondly, effective management and organisation of quality support and resources, including funding, facilities, equipment, and teaching materials, are essential. Additionally, teachers with pedagogical knowledge and expertise, along with trained support staff, play a critical role in ensuring the success of inclusive education (Lee, 2010). Even UNESCO (2022) acknowledges this, emphasising the importance of providing teachers and school leaders with appropriate professional development support through collaborative action learning based on reflective practice, enabling school communities to share effective inclusive practices.

Recurrent Themes in Inclusive Education Literature
Inclusive education, a concept aimed at providing equal educational opportunities for all students, regardless of their abilities or disabilities, has been a topic of extensive discussion and research in educational literature. There are two recurring themes that persist in its implementation across different educational systems globally.

Theme 1: Many education systems still emphasise integration over inclusion.
Lee (2010) found that inclusive education was often viewed as an approach associated with physical settings for students with special educational needs (SEN), primarily due to the prevalent model of integration. This model focuses on students fitting into mainstream schools by emphasising their ability to meet certain skill requirements. Similarly, Bosi (2004) observed that policies in both developed and developing countries leaned towards integrating children with special needs into regular schools, partly influenced by previous legislation mandating provisions for their education alongside peers.

Theme 2: The practice of inclusion in schools is not well-understood.
In the East Asia and Pacific region, where negative perceptions of disability still prominent, segregated education delivery systems remain common. Despite progress towards more inclusive systems, most students with disabilities are taught in special schools (UNICEF East Asia & Pacific, 2020). A global UNICEF project survey report on teaching and training teacher professionals revealed that a significant portion of respondents lacked training in inclusive education, with many reporting little practical application of inclusive practices in their training (Pinnock & Nicholls, 2012). Interestingly, while some respondents acknowledged the importance of inclusive education in teacher training and education, there was a notable gap between policy and implementation. One possible reason for the weak implementation of inclusive education in schools is the lack of a standardised definition of inclusion globally (Losert, 2010). Both Lee (2010) and Bosi (2004) agree that inclusion is often perceived as an education approach providing support services to each child with SEN to benefit from being in the classroom. Full inclusion, conversely, entails all students being in a full-time classroom/programme regardless of their disability type and severity, with all necessary services provided. There is also a middle-ground approach where the child remains in the mainstream environment but may be removed if necessary services cannot be offered in the regular classroom.

Part Two of this paper will delve into the context of education in Malaysia, examining how education for students with disabilities is perceived and practiced within the Malaysian education system.

PART TWO: CONTEXT OF EDUCATION IN MALAYSIA

Education for OKU Students
Since achieving independence in 1957, Malaysia has prioritised the development and improvement of its national education system as a key strategy for national development. This commitment is evident in the consistently high allocations in the annual national budgets, reflecting the government's strong emphasis on education. Malaysia has also demonstrated a proactive approach in keeping pace with evolving global trends in education through the formulation of numerous education policies. In line with practices observed in many countries across the Asia-Pacific region, efforts to provide education for persons with disabilities (PWD) in Malaysia can be traced back to the initiatives of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and sector-specific interest groups. For example, St. Nicholas Primary School in Penang, established in 1926 by Anglican Missionaries, provided education to children with special learning needs (Lee & Low, 2014; Latiff et al., 2015). Subsequently, the government established institutions such as the Princess Elizabeth Special Education School in Johor Baru in 1948 and the Federal School for the Deaf in Penang in 1954. These schools, which adopted curricula derived from Western models, marked the early influences of Western approaches to disabilities and special education in Malaysia (Latiff et al., 2015; Nasir & Efendi, 2016).

At that time, terms such as "orang kurang upaya" (OKU, disabled person) and "orang cacat" (handicapped person) were commonly used to refer to individuals with special needs, reflecting societal perceptions. The Malaysian Government defined "orang kurang Upaya" as a disabled person unable to participate in society or fulfill their normal needs due to a naturally born or acquired physical or mental disability (Norazit, 2010). Efforts to incorporate disability education into the public education system began in the 1960s with the integration of children with hearing and visual impairments and the establishment of the first boarding school for children with visual disabilities in 1977. The 1979 Mahathir (Cabinet Committee) report laid the groundwork for the Special Education Policy, informed by the principles of the Rukunegara and developed through collaborative efforts involving various stakeholders (Bosi, 2004). However, challenges arose due to the non-standardised school system inherited from the British colonial era, hindering system-wide efforts to unify the education system in the early years of independence (Ahmad, 1998). Consequently, the education of PWD students became less of a priority.

Changing Perspectives Towards Education of Students with Disabilities
Since 1994, the Malaysian Government has introduced many policy and legislation changes for students with disabilities as summarised in Figure 1. There have been increasing efforts from the Ministry of Education (MOE) to promote and implement better quality services for students with disabilities. One notable initiative is the Zero Reject Policy, which obliges schools to grant admission to all children regardless of legal and disability status. Children with special needs undergo the Early Intervention Programme to facilitate learning in a formal education setting (Azmi, 2018). Additionally, the government established the Holistic Inclusive Education Programme, where 220 teachers from 44 pilot schools were trained by master trainers (UNICEF East Asia & Pacific, 2020). Furthermore, the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Health collaborated to establish a multidisciplinary team of doctors, therapists, and specialists to support teachers in hospital learning centers under the Schools in Hospitals programme. These learning centers, located in hospitals, are structured to provide continuous education for children with disabilities undergoing long-term or repeated treatments (UNICEF East Asia & Pacific, 2020).

Despite these efforts, Malaysia still maintains a dual education system, as observed by Teng et al. (2014). There is a special education system for students with moderate, severe, or profound disabilities; alongside a regular system for those without or with mild disabilities. Special Education Schools are governed solely by the Division of Special Education, while Special Education Integration Programme Integration is overseen entirely by the State Education Department (Latiff et al., 2015). Consequently, the Malaysian education system faces numerous challenges, including the ever-changing policies and politicisation of education, which impact the quality and goals of the education system, particularly in ensuring an inclusive school environment for all students with disabilities (Nasir & Efendi, 2016).
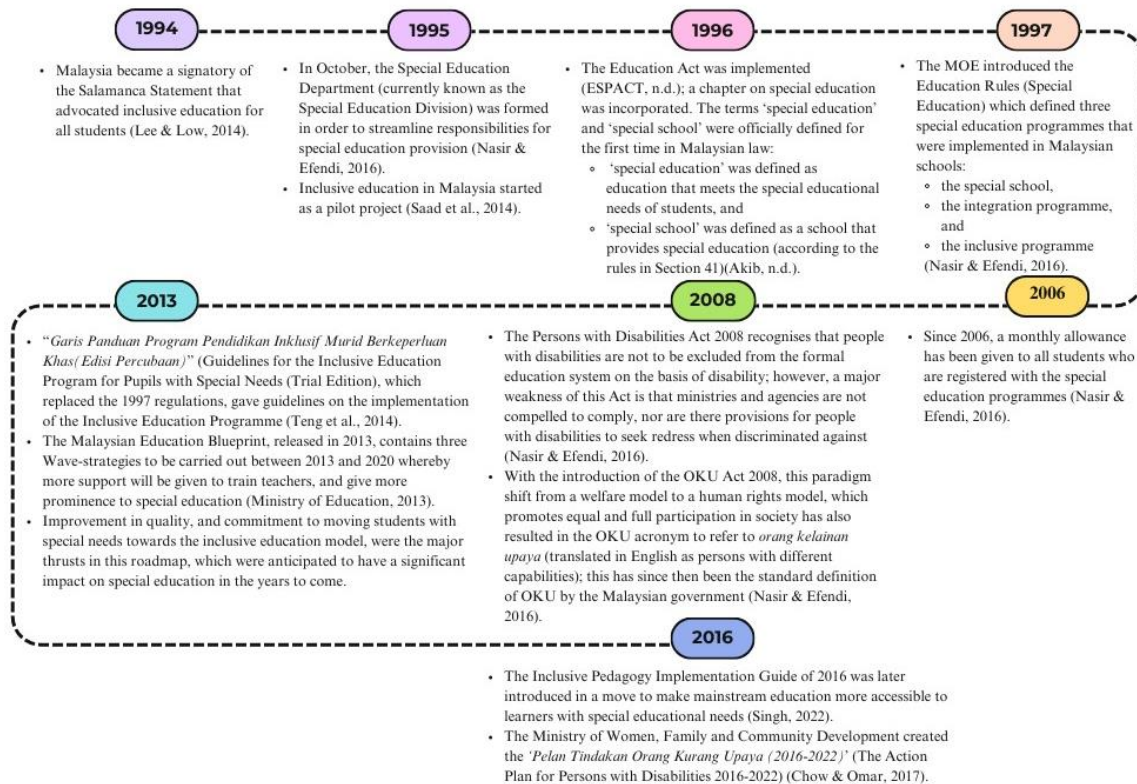
Figure 1: Timeline of Policy and Legislation Changes for Students with Disabilities

The Malaysian Education Blueprint – Initiatives for Inclusive Education

To address this issue and advance Malaysia towards its 2020 vision of becoming a developed nation, the Ministry of Education (MOE) introduced the Malaysia Education Blueprint (MEB) in 2013 as a premier education reform initiative. This blueprint, spanning from 2013 to 2025, is structured into three implementation waves: Wave 2013 to 2015, Wave 2016 to 2020, and Wave 2021 to 2025 (Ministry of Education, 2013). In Chapter 4, which focuses on student learning, the MEB underscores the importance of providing quality education at the primary and secondary levels, especially for marginalised groups such as students in rural areas, indigenous peoples (orang asli), and those with disabilities. The chapter acknowledges the necessity of creating an inclusive environment for children with special needs. To achieve this goal, the MOE has developed an implementation roadmap outlining several major initiatives aimed at enhancing the overall special education system. This roadmap includes specific planned examples and expected outcomes, as summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of The Special Education Roadmap in 2013 Malaysia Education Blueprint

Initiatives	Specific planned examples	Expected outcomes
Strengthen the current education systems	• Link "schooling options …to carefully identified competency levels"	A clearer identification system where high-functioning students can join inclusive education programmes, and moderate-functioning ones will attend special education schools
Provide healthcare support to relevant parties	• Initiate stronger collaborations "with the Ministry of Health to fast track early identification and diagnosis"	More efficient diagnosis, assessment and intervention support given to parents of special education needs students (early intervention)
Introduce accreditation mechanisms for the special education support centres	• Accredit around 15 *Pusat Perkhidmatan Pendidikan Khas* (3PK) that support such students	Improve the standard of support services for such children
Increase curricular flexibility	• Include more vocational skills like computer graphics into special needs curricula • Collaborate with employers to "develop a workplace transition programme to support graduates in entering the workplace"	30% increase of students ti be enrolled in inclusive education programmes (expected total number is 88,000 by 2015).
Increase the number of qualified special education professionals	• Equip such teachers with "basic skills and awareness of special education needs" • Provide "in-service training programmes…to teachers and school leaders …interested in specialising in special education needs teaching"	Around 1600 teachers are expected to be trained and gain an understanding of best practices, experience and knowledge on special needs education
Improving the physical and financial infrastructures	• Revamp existing schools to include "disabled-friendly facilities such as ramps, railings, handicap toilets and lifts" • Offer technical support aids to such students including "Braille typing machines for visually impaired students and hearing aids for hearing impaired students" • Channel financial resources "towards the piloting of holistic inclusive education programmes in select schools"	By 2020, all schools will be upgraded with such facilities Special needs students can use technology to aid their learning
Generate public awareness and involvement	• Introduce a "buddy system that pairs up special education needs children with buddies from preschools to secondary"	Higher spread of awareness and deeper understanding of special education needs students

	- Run "after-school activities for special education needs students that involve the community" - Develop a "training module for educational management for community centres and utilise a "train the trainer" model to train community centre teachers.	

Ultimately, the implementation of these initiatives across the three waves (2013 to 2025) aims to achieve three major goals. Firstly, it strives to ensure that all children with special needs have access to a high-quality and relevant education tailored to their particular needs. Secondly, it aims to equip all teachers with a basic understanding and application of special education principles. Finally, the goal is for 75% of students with special needs to be enrolled in inclusive education programmes by the year 2025, thereby fostering a more inclusive and supportive learning environment for all students (Ministry of Education, 2013).

DISCUSSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Inclusive education is rapidly becoming a global priority, spurred on by initiatives such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2030, particularly SDG4 "Quality Education" (United Nations, n.d.). This goal emphasises the importance of providing a truly inclusive education system for students with disabilities. Since the introduction of the Malaysia Education Blueprint (MEB) in 2012, the Malaysian government has made efforts to integrate all students with disabilities and other marginalised communities into the national education system (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). However, for the MEB to be implemented more successfully and inclusively, and for Malaysia to fulfil its obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD) to grant all people with disabilities equal rights to quality education (United Nations, 2006), it is crucial for the Malaysian Ministry of Education (MOE) to collaborate effectively with relevant government ministries. This entails developing a national strategy for school-based teams to support students with disabilities both in and outside the classroom, as well as enacting robust legislation to reinforce inclusivity within the school system.

To fully achieve the goal of inclusive education, it is essential to involve and consult all stakeholders throughout the entire implementation process of the Malaysia Education Blueprint (MEB). To this end, two recommendations are suggested. Firstly, the establishment of school-based learning and knowledge-sharing communities, either physically or virtually, that include both teachers and parents, should be promoted. This collaborative approach encourages regular meetings where teachers, support staff, special education teachers, and parents can interact and exchange insights. By fostering such environments, schools can better identify effective learning strategies tailored to the individual needs of students with disabilities. This collaborative effort has proven successful in various contexts worldwide, fostering improved student achievement and promoting social inclusion within classrooms (Adams et al., 2016; Agboka, 2018; Dan et al., 2023). Secondly, it is crucial to reevaluate the concept of inclusive education and adjust related policies to adhere to international standards. This entails a comprehensive review of existing legislation and policies to ensure they support the full inclusion of students with disabilities and enable them to reach their maximum potential. By examining global frameworks such as the Inclusive Education Framework and aligning with initiatives like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Malaysia can refine its approach to inclusive education. Drawing inspiration from countries like Scotland, which have developed robust national frameworks and legislation promoting inclusive education, Malaysia can draft inclusive education policies that uphold international standards, ensuring that all children benefit from tailored learning experiences suited to their unique needs and interests (Obah, 2024; Kenny et al., 2023; Agboka, 2018).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is important to ensure that inclusive education continues to be a top priority for nations committed to promoting equity and accessibility for students with disabilities. Recognising education as a fundamental pillar of national development, the Malaysian government rightly places significant emphasis on its advancement. With elevated education standards and a populace equipped with enhanced skills and knowledge, countries like Malaysia stand to benefit from heightened economic growth and prosperity. Through the implementation of thoughtful policies and legislation aimed at fostering greater access to inclusive education, Malaysia can empower all its citizens, including individuals with disabilities, to become active contributors to the nation's development. By breaking down barriers to education and ensuring that every Malaysian has the opportunity to fully participate in the learning process, the country can harness the diverse talents and abilities of its population to drive forward progress and prosperity for all.

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