

AN EMPIRICAL STUDY ON TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN MALAYSIA

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The hallmark of inclusive education is the teachers' willingness to accept students with special needs. Their attitudes and knowledge about inclusive education are important as these are indicators of such willingness. The purpose of this study was to examine teachers' attitudes and their perceived knowledge towards inclusive education in Malaysia. The respondents (n=235) were the mainstream and special education teachers in the public primary and secondary schools. They were given a set of questionnaire which sought their responses regarding their attitudes and knowledge towards inclusive education. The data were analysed using descriptive statistics such as frequency and percentages. The main finding shows that, in general, teachers have positive attitudes towards inclusive education. They agreed that inclusive education enhances social interaction and inclusion among the students and thus, it minimizes negative stereotypes on special needs students. The findings also show that collaboration between the mainstream and the special education teachers is important and that there should be a clear guideline on the implementation of inclusive education. The findings of the study have significant implications to the school administrators, teachers, and other stakeholders who directly and indirectly involved in implementing inclusive education.

Inclusive education is a concept that allows students with special needs to be placed and received instruction in the mainstream classes and being taught by mainstream teachers. According to the Malaysian Ministry of Education, students with special needs are those who are *visually handicapped, or partially or fully deaf or suffer from the disability to learn* (Akta Pendidikan 1996). These are the students that have been identified as suffering from physical-sensory deficiencies and learning disabilities. The Ministry of Education provides special education programmes for the three types of disabilities, namely, hearing, visual and learning disabilities.

The learning disabilities programme provides educational service to a heterogeneous group of students with mild retardation, students with autistic tendencies and students with multiple disabilities. Such students have been placed in special classes or in special schools. Placement into special needs programmes is decided based on the special needs categorizations, namely visual, hearing and/or learning disabilities. For students with visual or hearing impairments, they are either placed in special schools or in the integration programme in the mainstream schools. Students with learning disabilities are regularly

placed in the integration programme in the mainstream schools. Table 1 shows the types of programme and numbers of students with special needs in Malaysia.

Table 1
Types of programme and the number of students with special needs in Malaysia

Types of programme	No of schools (No of students)		Total
	Primary	Secondary	
1. Visual impairments			
a. Special schools	6(234)	1(104)	7(338)
b. Integration programme	11(124)	15(201)	26(325)
2. Hearing impairments			
a. Special schools	23(1,713)	2(523)	25(2,236)
b. Integration programme	41(448)	39(965)	80(1,413)
3. Learning disabilities			
a. Special schools	-	-	
b. Integration programme	402(7,437)	160(2,786)	562(10,223)
Total	483(9,956)	217(4,579)	700(14,535)

(Source: Jabatan Pendidikan Khas [Department of Special Education], 2002)

The initiatives to implement inclusive education in Malaysia by the Ministry of Education were conducted through seminars (Zalizan, 1995a; 1995b; 1997), workshops and field works (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 1995). The inclusive programme in Malaysia has been conducted in regular classes as a part of a service continuum for students with special needs. Trailing from the UNESCO's declaration of *Education for All*, this programme aimed at encouraging interaction between students with special needs and the mainstream students. Students with special needs are placed in regular classes and are taught by a class teacher who is also assisted by a special education teacher. In the following section, this paper discusses briefly on inclusive education in Malaysia. This is followed by the discussion on an empirical study about the teachers' perceptions and knowledge towards inclusive education.

Overview of inclusive education in Malaysia

Inclusive education in Malaysia began through the Malaysians' involvement at the international level in seminars and workshops hosted by the United Nations particularly under the UNESCO activities. The World's Declaration on Education for All in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990 has been focusing on integration initiatives and equity issues for all including those with special needs. Further commitment on education for all was emphasised in the UNESCO's Sub-regional Seminar on Policy, Planning and Organisation of Education for Children with Special Needs in Harbin, China in 1993. The outcomes of the seminars and workshops on special education and *Education for All* have made way for the change of emphasis from integration to inclusion. The concept of inclusion assumes that the mainstream classes can be restructured and adapted so that the needs of children with special needs can be met. This orientation towards inclusion was part of the important agenda in the seminar in Spain in 1994 which brought forward *the Salamanca Statement on Principles, Policy and Practice in Special Needs Education* (Zalizan, 1997). This seminar was represented by 92 countries including Malaysia, and 25 international organisations.

In Malaysia, inclusive education was first introduced in the mid-1990s as part of a reform initiative that was focused on students with special needs. However, the term *inclusive education* is loosely defined and understood by the policymakers and practitioners. Akta Pendidikan 1996 (Education Act 1996) explains that the national context towards special education is based on the principle *to integrate and to make inclusive special education students who have the right to be alienated as and when necessary* (Akta Pendidikan 1996). Acknowledging the obstacles to full inclusion, the students are either partly or fully included based on their level of ability to follow instructions in the mainstream classes. In Malaysia, inclusion is carried out in schools at primary and secondary levels where there are also integration programmes for students with special needs.

Theoretical Framework

The inclusion of individuals with disabilities in mainstream educational, occupational and societal frameworks has become an accepted concept in western countries in the last two decades (Heiman, 2004). The inclusion policy specified attendance at mainstreamed schools and also dealt with different models of implementing the inclusion and with teachers' needs in terms of practical and theoretical training. Research has shown the many positive effects of placement in inclusive classes and the different benefits for students with disabilities.

According to Heiman (2004), there are four different models of inclusion: (a) *in-and-out*, (b) *two-teachers*, (c) *full inclusion* and (d) *rejection of inclusion*. In her study of inclusive education in United Kingdom and Israel, Heiman (2004) found that most of the teachers in United Kingdom and Israel thought that an *in-and-out* model would be more effective for the students with learning disabilities. These teachers believe that this approach would enable students with disabilities to benefit from two worlds: the special instruction they needed together with regular lessons and interactions with their peers in regular settings. The *two-teacher* model was somewhat popular in Israel and less so in Britain. According to this model, two teachers teach simultaneously in the classroom with one of them, who has had training in special education, concentrating on the students with disabilities. Small percentages of teachers in both countries thought that *full inclusion* is the right model to apply within the regular classroom. They thought that with additional support and cooperation between teachers and with the services of the educational system, full inclusion could succeed and be the most beneficial for all. Some teachers in both countries *rejected inclusion* completely. The teachers in this group thought that it would be better for students with disabilities to study in separate classes, according to special programs, so they could progress at their own pace. They felt that such model is more effective since special needs students in inclusive class would never be able to reach the academic level of the mainstream students. Similar models were observed in Malaysia. From our observation, full inclusion is the least method used. Most teachers would apply hybrid models such as *two-teachers* and *in-and-out* approaches.

Review of Literature

During the past two decades, the inclusion movements have made significant progress in (a) supporting the rights of children to have their special educational needs identified and met through education legislation and the right of individuals with disabilities to equal opportunities, (b) minimizing unjustified discrimination, and (c) developing support facilities and services for individuals with special needs (Disability Rights Task Force Final Report, 2004; Ministry of Education, 2004).

According to Heiman (2004), students can be included in mainstream classes based on a multidimensional diagnosis including psychological and educational tests. The students usually receive additional academic support from a special education teacher in their regular classrooms or in a resource room. To provide flexible inclusion in the least restrictive

environment, the schools need to train more mainstream teachers to handle and cope with special needs students in their classes.

Despite the apparent benefits of inclusion, and regardless of the teachers' commitment and positive attitudes; and notwithstanding their having the knowledge and skills necessary to meet the educational needs of diverse students with disabilities, teachers were concerned about the academic, social, and behavioral adjustment of the students with disabilities in inclusive classes. Some teachers felt that inclusion would bring little benefit to students with disabilities and, consequently, they questioned the advantages of inclusion (Heiman, 2002; Priestley & Rabiee, 2002).

Other teachers stressed their concern that as more students are included, teachers would need additional tools and skills for coping with the social and emotional problems that accompany inclusive schooling (Idol, 1997). Vaughn, Schumm, Jallad, Slusher & Samuell (1996) mentioned several aspects which might cause teachers to raise objections to inclusion, such as the large number of students in the class, budget shortages, the teachers' work load, difficulties in standardized evaluation. Still, others pointed to the lack of teamwork, or asked for guidance in dealing with students with special needs (Danne & Beirne-Smith, 2000).

Some of the mainstream teachers claimed that they had chosen to teach a specific discipline and not special education, and the inclusion policy forced them to enter areas they were unsure about or not interested in it (Vaughn, et al., 1996). Mock and Kauffman (2002) described the *catch* in which teachers were trapped: on one hand, teachers cannot be prepared to answer the unique educational needs of every student with special needs, and, on the other hand, teachers in inclusive classes teaching students with special needs, might function beyond their training and their specialization.

Perception and knowledge of teachers towards inclusive education in Malaysia

In order to determine the outcome of the implementation of inclusive education in Malaysia, a survey on the attitudes and knowledge of school teachers regarding inclusive education was conducted. This descriptive study involved regular and special education teachers in public primary and secondary schools. A sample (n=300) was randomly selected from a nation-wide directory of Malaysian teachers using a stratified sampling method. The population was stratified into 5 zones – northern, western, central, eastern, and southern zones. The respondents were given self-rated questionnaire to identify their attitudes and knowledge towards inclusive education. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics in the form of percentages based on the three categories: Agree, Uncertain, and Disagree. A total number of 235 of the questionnaires were returned which constituted 78% return rate. The findings were synthesised according to the aspects of teachers' perception and knowledge towards inclusive education, collaboration with special education teachers and other related matters concerning with the implementation of inclusive education.

Table 2 depicts the teachers' perceptions regarding inclusion education in Malaysia. Overall, the majority of respondents agreed that inclusive education is appropriate for special needs students, at least in theory. For Item 1, only half of the respondents (50.6%) agreed that students with special needs are academically better in inclusive classrooms. Nevertheless, approximately two-thirds (66%) of the respondents were in favor of the notions that special needs students should be integrated into the mainstream classes/community and that the students would be benefited from inclusive classes (Items 2, 3, and 6). Items 4 and 5 show mixed feelings of the respondents regarding academic performance of special needs and mainstream students in an inclusive setting. In Item 4, about one-thirds (32.4%) of the respondents agreed that the placement of students with special needs in regular classes negatively affects the academic performance of normal students while the rest (25.5%) were uncertain and (42.1%) disagreed. A similar pattern was seen in Item 5 where 42.1% of the

teachers disagreed that the academically-talented students would be isolated in the inclusive classrooms while 27.2% of the teachers agreed and 30.6% were uncertain. With regard to Item 7, approximately two-thirds (62.5%) of the respondents believe that students with special needs have the right to receive an education in mainstream classes. Most importantly, more than half (57.1%) of the respondents believe that the negative stereotype of special needs students can be minimized in inclusive classroom. In particular, labeling of the students with special needs can be reduced (Item 8).

Table 2
Teachers' perception towards inclusive education

ITEM	AGREE (%)	UNCERTAIN (%)	DISAGREE (%)
1 Students with special needs are academically better in inclusive classrooms	50.6	32.3	17.0
2 Students with special needs must be integrated into the regular community	62.1	8.1	29.8
3 In order to achieve the highest level of inclusion, it is necessary for students with special needs to be placed in regular classes with back up support	67.7	12.3	20.0
4 The placement of students with special needs in regular classes negatively affects the academic performance of mainstream students	32.4	25.5	42.1
5 The academically-talented students will be isolated in the inclusive classrooms	27.2	30.6	42.1
6 Students with special needs will benefit from the inclusive program in regular classrooms	66.8	20.4	12.8
7 Students with special needs have the right to receive an education in mainstream classes	62.5	15.3	22.1
8 Students with special needs will not be labeled as 'stupid', 'weird' or 'hopeless' when placed in regular classrooms	57.1	22.6	20.4

Collaborative efforts between mainstream and special education teachers in inclusive classrooms

Table 3 illustrates the perceptions of Malaysian teachers regarding the collaborative efforts between mainstream and special education teachers in an inclusive classroom. Data for Item 1 shows that the majority of respondents (80%) agreed that the collaboration between the special education teachers and regular teachers is vital in the implementation of the inclusive program (Item 1). However, almost half (49.8%) of them stated the implementation of inclusive education is ineffective (Item 2). In terms of who is taking charge of inclusive classroom (Item 3), 49.3% of the respondents agreed that the mainstream classroom teacher is the one who is in-charge while 34.4% of the respondents disagreed. In addition, most of the respondents (43.5%) agreed that the presence of a special education teacher in the regular classrooms could raise difficulties in determining who really is responsible for the special students (Item 4). Finally, majority of the teachers (63%) concurred that the role of special education teacher is to assist the students with disabilities (Item 5). The success of the inclusive program depends among others, on the attitudes of the classroom teachers towards the children with special needs (Anotonak & Larrivee, 1995 & Wilczenski, 1992 in Zalizan, 2000). This includes the teachers' perception towards the learning abilities and the willingness of the teachers to change in order to fulfill the needs of different individuals. The

collaboration between the mainstream and the special needs teachers is a critical factor in determining the successful implementation of inclusive program. Zalizan (2000) suggested that in order to ensure the success of an inclusive program, a collaboration or co-operation form or mode between the particular teachers should be introduced within the programme as soon as possible.

Table 3
Collaboration between mainstream and special education teachers

ITEM	AGREE (%)	UNCERTAIN (%)	DISAGREE (%)
1. Special needs teachers and regular teachers need to work together in order to teach students with special needs in inclusive classrooms	80.0	6.0	14.1
2. Although the inclusive education in a good concept, its implementation is ineffective due to objections from the mainstream classroom teachers	49.8	28.9	21.3
3. Mainstream classrooms teachers have a main responsibility towards the students with special needs placed in their classrooms	49.4	16.2	34.4
4. The presence of a special education teacher in the regular classrooms could raise difficulties in determining who really is responsible for the special students	43.5	23.0	33.7
5. The special education teacher only helps the students with special needs	63.0	11.5	25.6

Strategies to improve inclusive education

There are several strategies that can be employed in order to enhance the effectiveness of an inclusive programme. Table 4 highlights some of the issues that need the attention of the parties involved in implementing this program. Over half of the respondents (56.6%) stated that the mainstream classroom teachers lack the exposure and the skills to deal with students with special needs (Item 1). This response contradicts Rogers (1987)'s opinion which stated that exposure to the population of students with special needs does not influence a teacher's perception. Within the context of the study, it is felt that the exposure to inclusive education is important in order for the teachers to understand the form of the education programme as well as to understand their role in implementing inclusive education.

The majority of the respondents (78.3%) agreed that special needs students need extra attention and help in the classroom (Item 2) and that these students were seen as having more disciplinary problems when compared to the regular students (Item 3). The lack of guidance and cooperation from the special education teachers and the limited resources in the teaching and learning of students with special needs (Items 4 and 5) were the critical aspects that need to be improved. Thus, the findings show that when dealing with the students with special needs, teachers' willingness to adapt and change is necessary to ensure that the teaching and learning process is carried out according to the abilities of those students (Zalizan, 2000; Madden & Slavin, 1983).

The way forward with the current implementation

Based on the results of the study, in general, the efforts to implement the inclusive programme received a positive response from the teachers. In relation to this, the implications and suggestions for the parties involved in the implementation of inclusive education are discussed, following Table 4.

Table 4
Strategies to improve inclusive education

ITEM	AGREE (%)	UNCERTAIN (%)	DISAGREE (%)
1 Mainstream classroom teachers have the training and skills to teach special needs students	29.4	14	56.6
2 Special needs students need extra help and attention	78.3	14.5	7.2
3 Students with special needs committed more disciplinary problems compared to the regular students	50.7	13.2	36.2
4 Mainstream classroom teachers received little help from the special needs teachers	47.7	26.4	26.0
5 Although inclusive education is important, the resources for the students with special needs in a mainstream classroom are limited.	70.2	15.7	14.1

Schools' administrators

The active involvement and support of the schools' administrators in the implementation of inclusive education programme is critical. Schools with the administrative support for inclusive education demonstrate a significant increase of awareness regarding the concept of inclusion. A recent study (Salisbury & McGregor, 2002) suggests that the school principals have an essential role in improving the school environment and in implementing educational policy. The researchers demonstrate the complex relationships between the school staff and the school climate, and emphasize the importance of the principal's awareness of the role of the staff in implementing the inclusion successfully. When most of the teachers share in an open dynamic discussion group regarding their beliefs, difficulties, different aspects of teaching and ways of coping with dilemmas, this encourages them to find better coping solutions and support in their difficulties with the inclusion process. In addition, when the school principal shares the decision making process with the school staff, this contributes to more educational accountability and responsibility.

Teachers

This study found that the inclusive education programme could be successfully implemented if the level of the teachers' competency is increased. Thus, the opportunities to attend courses that are related to the inclusive education program have to be created, especially for those who lack of exposure and training in special education. Adjustments towards the pedagogical aspects can be trained internally by experienced teachers to the new teachers. The effort towards a collaborative teaching between mainstream and special education teachers should be put in place. Indirectly, this effort could help to reinforce a cooperative spirit in implementing inclusive education. Literature has shown that the success of the inclusive education depends, to a large extent, on the willingness and the ability of teachers to make accommodations for individuals with special needs (Bender, Vail, & Scott, 1995). In addition, research also shows that teachers who are aware of the inclusion policy and therefore can define the pragmatic meaning of inclusion is more willing to be part of the

inclusion team. However, numerous studies found that teachers agree that the inclusive education is important, but many find it difficult to apply.

Teacher Training Institutes

Specifically, the role of teacher training institutes is very important. Teacher training institutes should incorporate the concept of inclusion as part of the curriculum. For example, The Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia offers education courses with honours (special education), which trains future special education teachers. Many important aspects in relation to special education and special needs are stressed throughout the duration of the courses. This includes the aspects of inclusive education. There are also courses which are open to students from other programmes as well which indirectly help to prepare the trainee teachers to gain knowledge in relation to students with special needs. As part of the teacher training programme, it is therefore recommended that education courses make room for critical discussion regarding issues and concepts of inclusion and teaching effectiveness. It is also recommended that the trainee teachers be given structured opportunities to experience inclusive education in practice. Exposure to observing teaching children with special needs in inclusive setting is one of the essential components in the process of breaking down barriers and building positive attitude (Garner, 1996).

Conclusion

Results of the study discussed in this paper revealed that teachers may form perceptions based on a number of discrete factors, that is, how these teachers perceived inclusive education programme, their opinion on the team effort or collaboration between teachers and how they viewed the possible ways of improving the related aspects of inclusive education. The discussion in this paper also indicated that teachers have a positive perception towards the implementation of the inclusive education programme. However, there are some aspects that can be improved such as the collaboration between the mainstream and special education teachers and the preparation to train regular teachers in handling and teaching students with special needs. The need to provide adequate resources to inclusive classes is never been more critical. In addition, there should be an increasing effort in promoting inclusive education programme to the public as well as to the stakeholders.

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