

Research Article:

## **Perspectives of Teachers on Supporting The Participation of Students with Learning Disabilities in Inclusive Secondary Schools: A Qualitative Study**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Inclusive education is a strategy to provide opportunities for students with learning disabilities (LD) to interact with their typically developing peers in the classroom. Moreover, teachers play a vital role in aiding the participation of students with LD in mainstream settings. This study explores the views of mainstream and special teachers on inclusive education in Malaysia. The study focuses on describing and understanding school inclusion practices along with the teachers' roles in supporting the participation of students with LD within the mainstream school environment. Six teachers were recruited through purposive sampling for the interview, whereby the interviewed data was subjected to thematic analysis. The findings emphasised the need for school-classroom interventions that reflect teachers' professionalism, the network connection of students with LD in schools, the importance of student's placement in mainstream school settings, together with challenges encountered by students with LD to develop interactions and relationships with mainstream teachers and typically developing peers. In conclusion, the study revealed teachers' readiness on supporting regular education experience for students with LD in mainstream classrooms. The results can also be used to map effective inclusive education practice strategies and policies in Malaysia.

**Keywords:** Teachers' perspective, students with learning disabilities, inclusive education, secondary schools

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## INTRODUCTION

The practise of inclusive education to ensure quality education for students with special educational needs (SEN) has become a trend in worldwide education (Garrote et al., 2017). The practice should meet the agenda of the Salamanca Inclusion Statement (UNESCO, 1994) and Article 24 of the UN Convention of Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006). The inclusion process not only includes students with SEN in the mainstream education context but also requires changes and modifications in the pedagogical strategies and learning structure to ensure a positive participatory learning experience (General Comment 4, UNCRPD [United Nations, 2016]) so that the needs of all learners can be met (Booth & Ainscow, 2002). Within the inclusive education setting, furthermore, all students are encouraged be participating, achieving and valued (Anderson et al., 2014).

Although the Malaysian government demonstrated its commitment to this programme, the current special and inclusive education is not fully developed and supported (Khairuddin & Miles, 2020). Most of the SEN students are still placed in special classrooms within mainstream schools (segregated) in Malaysia. Through the objectives of the 2013–2025 National Education Blueprint (Ministry of Education, 2013), the Ministry of Education targeted 75% of the students with SEN to join mainstream education either on a full or partial inclusion strategy. Full inclusion refers to full-time placement with full participation in the national curriculum and co-curriculum activities. While partial inclusion depicts selected academic or non-academic subjects to mix students with SEN with the mainstream students. Nevertheless, to ensure students with SEN to be able to follow the mainstream learning pace, only highly capable students with SEN and controlled behaviour allowed to join full inclusion (Hosshan, 2020).

To understand the current inclusive practice in Malaysia, it is important to examine school and social experience to understand the effectiveness of the Malaysian secondary school inclusion strategies for students with learning disabilities (LD) (Hosshan et al., 2020). Also, the teachers' views are vital in understanding the challenges faced by in-service teachers in supporting the participation of students with LD. Within the school context, participation or 'involvement in life situation' is a main outcome. According to Maciver et al. (2019), the school participation may includes unstructured activities (e.g. play), organized activities (e.g. sports, clubs), classroom based activities (e.g., group work, study) and engagement in social situation. In fact, special and mainstream school teachers are equipped with pedagogical support for inclusive education but are not trained to offer personal and/or participation support for the students with LD in full inclusion program (Lee & Low, 2013). Therefore, it may contribute to social alienation and peer rejection of students with LD. As such, there is a gap in the available literature highlighting the voice of in-service teachers in supporting the practice of inclusive education.

The present study aims to explore the teachers view on the inclusion practices in secondary schools and their role in supporting students with LD to participate in mainstream school

settings. A school system may be stronger and weaker by the aspect of the organisational structure and how importance of the inclusive education practice is seen within the schools. Therefore, the perspectives from educators act as essential evidence to answer the issues in the present study.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This qualitative study used of semi-structured interview method. This method offered detailed descriptions of Malaysian teachers' role in supporting the participation of students with LD in the mainstream learning context. Overall, this study explored the teachers' views of inclusive education practices and their role in facilitating the participation of students with LD in inclusive settings. Having said that, the qualitative research approach has been proven useful when researching educational processes, problems and programmes, to understand and improve the practices in the future (Merriam, 1998).

## **PARTICIPANTS**

Through purposive sampling of participants, six teachers (regular and special education) from two secondary schools in the Klang Valley, Malaysia were recruited for this study. All of the teachers were females with 3 to 8 years of experience in the practice of inclusive education. Two of the teachers were from special education who managed the inclusive education programme for each school. The two schools selected in this study were acknowledged as exemplifying inclusive education secondary schools according to the Federal Special Education officers.

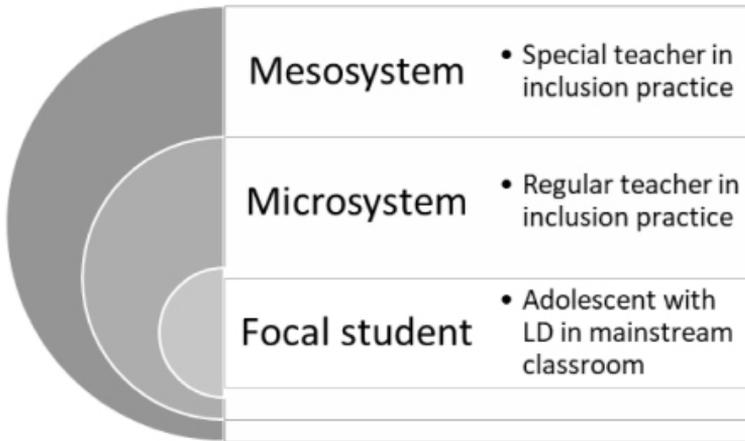
All the teachers were directly involved in the full inclusion education for students with LD in the mainstream classrooms. Therefore, they were encouraged to speak freely about their daily experiences in school. Moreover, since not many students with LD joined the full inclusion programme, the teachers were familiar with the students' learning development in mainstream education.

## **Data Collection**

The present study adopted Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological systems theory (Anderson et al., 2014; Bronfenbrenner, 2005). The socio-ecological systems theory considers individuals and their development within the context of systems of relationships (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). It enables the consideration of relationships at five levels namely the *macro-*, *exo*, *meso-*, *micro-* and *chronosystem*. By seeking information from participants drawn from several levels of the socio-ecological model, researchers could demonstrate a holistic and in-depth overview of the inclusive education practice in Malaysia.

Due to the restrictions in space and information sharing within this article, the data of the present study will only be highlighted in the micro- and mesosystem level of inclusive education practices in Malaysian secondary schools (Figure 1).

Overall, the socio-ecological system theory provided contextual and descriptive information on the Malaysian inclusive education practices, along with its indirect influences on the educators' view on the inclusive practice.



**Figure 1:** The present study focuses on teachers' perspectives on practice of inclusive education and their role to support adolescents with LD (please refer micro- and meso-system level of inclusive education practice based on socio-ecological system theory. (Adapted from Hosshan, 2020)

The semi-structured interviews included several open-ended questions to foster flexibility and reflect the research objectives. The semi-structured interview questions employed the models Inputs- Processes and Outcomes (Kyriazopoulou & Weber, 2009). The question contents were developed from extant studies on inclusive schooling in secondary school (De Vroey et al., 2016; Frostad & Pijl, 2007). The interviews were conducted outside lesson times at the schools and/or by telephone were also recorded using digital audio recorders. To maintain anonymity, all the participants were de-identified using pseudonyms (ID codes). All potential participants were required to provide their informed consent following an explanation of the study purpose, researcher role and background. Participants were fully briefed on what to expect during the research procedures (via Participant Information Statement, PIS). All potential participants were informed that their participation in the study is voluntary and that they could withdraw at any stage. If they consent for voluntary participation, they were required to sign Participants Consent Form (PCF).

To increase the credibility of the data, several methods are used to confirm the situation of the phenomenon in the inclusion schools (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Several the interview transcriptions went member checking processes and peer debriefing with several interviewed teachers. Audit trails conducted to enhance the thruswothyness of the present study and document analysis also used to comparing the data gathered the extent to which findings can be verified (Yin, 2003). These strategies demonstrated a major strength of the present study design by used of mutiple sources of evident through triangulation.

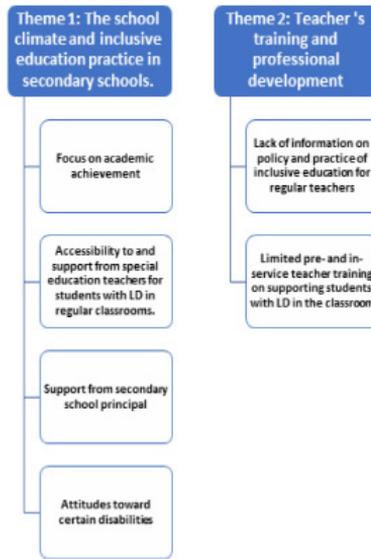
Prior to conducting the study, permission was obtained from the University of Sydney's Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC), Educational Research and Planning Division, Ministry of Education and other Malaysian Government bodies.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis was conducted according to Braun and Clarke (2006) procedure for thematic analysis. An inductive approach was applied to search for the pattern of data. Six phases of thematic analysis were implemented to develop themes from the qualitative materials. In the first phase, the participants' completed transcripts were reviewed. Then, the initial ideas for codes were generated, reviewed, and manually coded, where a total of 105 relevant codes for each data item was extracted. The third phase involved the next stage of coding for sub-themes. This process required considerable involvement with the material and in-depth thought on the themes and sub-themes that best fit the codes. In the next phase, the existing themes were reviewed and refined to ensure coherence within themes and distinction between themes. Six sub-themes were derived from the codes representing the relevance of each theme. The names of the themes were refined and the essence of each theme was identified in the fifth phase. Finally, once the themes related to the research questions were determined, a written process was performed.

### **FINDINGS**

The findings identified the barriers and facilitators to inclusive education practice in secondary schools. Based on the interview with the teachers, two themes and six sub-themes were derived from the analysis (Figure 2). All the themes and subthemes are presented in this section.



**Figure 2.** Themes and subthemes from the analysis of the present study.

### **Theme One**

“The school climate and inclusive education practice in secondary schools” was the first theme that was derived containing four subthemes.

#### ***Focus on academic achievement***

The Malaysian education system is examination-oriented, where students with good achievement in the national secondary school examination are still celebrated by media and stakeholders. According to some of the interviewees, only students with LD with a strong recommendation and who could be successfully prepared for the national examination would be accepted into secondary mainstream classrooms. The selection of the students with LD who can be enrolled for the mainstream secondary education involves school committee members consisting of the school principal, other school administrators, special and regular teachers with consent from the parents. RT3 explained that:

... the high academic status of secondary school B had been maintained for many years with the expectation that school B would perform consistently with other elite schools every year.

***Accessibility to and support from special education teachers for students with LD in regular classroom***

The regular teachers admitted that the special education teachers and programmes were crucial in assisting students with LD in practising inclusive education in secondary schools. Three regular teachers (RT1; RT2; RT4) added that the provision of special education in each school offered support for students with LD where needed. Similarly, a special teacher (ST2) also added that special education teachers can advise or directly manage the students when the regular teachers are unable to handle a situation involving students with LD. Nonetheless, the findings indicated that support is mostly provided for academic and behavioural issues, far less on socio-emotional needs of students with LD in mainstream context. The findings also emphasised that the special educational support was focussed on academic and/or administrative matters (i.e., financial aid; school activities) (ST1; ST2), with little support available for the emotional and social needs of these students in regular classrooms (RT1; RT3).

According to ST1, these students would be trained to be as independent as possible within the mainstream environment.

The assistant students' management staff from special education unit [special education aides], are assigned responsibility for these students with LD in the mainstream classroom.

ST1 further emphasised that minimal support was needed especially when students with LD could perform in the regular classroom and are not being reported with challenging behaviour within the school disciplinary system.

***Support from secondary school principals***

Based on the interviews, the school principals in both the schools are supportive of inclusive practices, however, their level of involvement differed. ST1 mentioned that:

...we rely on how and what support we will get, depending on the leadership of the school principal... an individual principal has a different philosophy and different aims in managing the school... we got strong support from those willing to help students with disabilities... it can help us to support all types of students with LD either in our programme or the regular stream...

According to both the special education teachers (ST1; ST2), the inclusive objectives and culture in both the secondary schools were affected by the change of school principals. The special education programme would only receive strong support if the school principal prioritises the development and welfare of students with LD. As such, ST2 claimed that:

...the special segregation and inclusive education programmes were not being highlighted by the present school principal compared to the previous one... currently less activities and limited financial support is available for those students.

### ***Attitudes toward certain disabilities***

RT4 revealed that the presence of high-functioning students with LD in the mainstream classroom had minimal impact on regular classroom lessons because they believed the situation was less disruptive in the teaching and learning lessons. RT3 added that:

I am blessed that students with LD who are included in the mainstream education were selected from among the 'high functioning' LD student group..."

On the other hand, RT4 was concerned that students without disabilities might not notice or be aware of their peers with LD in the classroom. Hence, they may also be less concerned with the challenges faced by peers with LD. RT3 stated that:

All students were only taking care of themselves... academic competition is so high in the classroom. Thus, few peers provide support to the students with SEN.

The involvement of students with LD and "high-functioning" ability could ease the responsibility of regular teachers in the classrooms. Therefore, the regular teachers indicated they only accepted students with LD required fewer support in their classroom. RT1 claimed that:

... I would feel substantially less effective in teaching or managing the classroom if students with moderate or severe LD were included into the regular classroom.

### **Theme two**

The second theme was "teacher's training and professional development." This theme contained two subthemes.

#### ***Lack of information on policy and practice of inclusive education for regular teachers***

Based on the responses from the interviewees, the importance of teacher's training and professional development activities was determined (RT1, RT2, RT3, ST1, ST2). The school community, though to a limited extent, was aware of the newly implemented right for students with SEN to be included in the mainstream classroom. All the teachers was informed that the Malaysian government aims to increase the numbers of students with

SEN in the regular classes over the next five years. However, several issues need to be addressed in achieving this objective. According to RT3's suggestion:

... the education administration at the territory level should supply us with workshops and training on how to manage inclusion classes. At the moment, it is reported that a lack of training and professional development is available.

Although all the regular education teachers (RT1, RT2, RT3 and RT4) were eager to provide proper support for learning in the classroom, they have limited strategies and low confidence in their approaches while managing students with LD. According to RT3 and RT4, they face difficulties in attracting the student's interest during a lesson. RT4 also added that the student was more interested in chatting with the student beside him during her lesson.

I usually only keep changing their seat to avoid them chatting to each other... (RT4)

***Limited pre- and in-service teacher's training on supporting students with LD in the classroom***

The present study discovered that regular teachers with more training and a better understanding of the needs of students with LD could implement and improve best practices in inclusive education. On the contrary, the regular teachers who participated in this study had limited exposure to teaching students with disabilities.

Since RT3 did not undergo any courses on inclusive education during her tertiary education and no specific training in inclusion classroom management, she did not know how she would to manage a class that had a student with a disability. Moreover, she added that most regular teachers have limited knowledge of inclusion education and were less knowledgeable on the types of disabilities among students with SEN.

After receiving appropriate and sufficient inclusion teachers training, the attitudes of educators towards inclusion were found to be more positive.

... the special teachers initiated beneficial in-house training for the regular teachers. All regular teachers who are teaching in inclusive classrooms were invited to join the training, especially on understanding the characteristics of students with disabilities. Due to restricted hours of training, there was not much we, as regular teachers could learn, considering it was only two days in the whole academic year, which is a very short period. But overall, it boosted our confidence for teaching efficacy in the classroom with students with LD. (RT4)

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings highlighted the views of educators towards inclusive practice in secondary schools along with the challenges faced by them in supporting students with LD in classrooms. The two main themes were identified include the school climate and inclusive education practice in secondary schools and teacher's training and professional development. Both of the themes affect the current practices of inclusive education in Malaysian secondary schools.

As the National Policy intends to support inclusive education practices in Malaysia, what really happen in the school is mainly on how the special education teachers influence and provide support to the regular teachers. Moreover, the findings also proved that the culture of inclusive education in Malaysia is based on the influences of school principals in getting the school community to accept and support an inclusive environment similar to the experience in Thailand's inclusive education system (Bualar, 2016). In short, the identity of a secondary school as an inclusive education system is the responsibility of the respective school principals in realising the idea and taking the idea to actual practice.

As the present study explored the micro- and mesosystem of socio-ecological theory in secondary schools, the Malaysian education system demonstrated a clear distinction between regular and special education in teaching students with SEN. The interconnectedness of students with disabilities is within micro and mesosystem of the secondary schools influence of why and how the participation between these students and the people in ecological system. It should be noted these are presented on the focused of participation, and participation hold greater value, which define by Booth and Ainscow (2002) on the Index of inclusion as "learning alongside others and collaborating with them in shared learning experiences. It requires active engagement with learning and having a say in how education is experienced" (p. 3).

The education system that puts students with SEN into segregated settings is acceptable among the school communities than getting those students into mainstream settings. Due to the exam-oriented learning culture in secondary schools, all students in mainstream classrooms compete with each other to excel in academics. Hence, the students with LD who are included in inclusive education are also required to value of person as being when one is respected and capable of doing (Aspin, 2007). It is demonstrated through activities and relationships with their peers and teachers (Bali & Othman, 2019; Hosshan et al., 2021). The participants interviewed also talked mostly about academic achievement, which happens in other Asian countries, such as Singapore (Yeo et al., 2016) and Taiwan (Chang et al., 2018). However, due to the widened practice of inclusive education in Malaysia, more students with LD could join activities with their typically developing peers outside of academic subjects (Ang & Lee, 2018; Special Education Division, 2018).

In order to achieve 75% of students with SEN in mainstream placements, system support for students with SEN in mainstream classrooms is fundamental. As evidenced in the

present study's findings, the cooperation of special education teachers in supporting regular education teachers was encouraged. However, the special education teachers provided vastly lower support to students with LD in mainstream classrooms. Hence those teachers considered high functioning students with LD who were placed with the typical developing peers could become dependent most of the time in the mainstream settings.

If the regular teachers had negative attitudes towards the abilities of students with LD in mainstream education, this contributed to the low educational expectations for them (Lalvani, 2015). There is evidence to suggest (e.g. Messiou, 2017) that the cooperation of school staff in supporting all students with SEN has improved and should introduce a support system for school staff in providing holistic support in mainstream learning.

On the other hand, teacher's training and professional development is a major advantage for inclusive education (Hughes et al., 2011; Holmqvist & Lelinge, 2020). The present findings indicated that the lack of teacher's training among regular teachers leads to barriers to inclusion (Lee & Low, 2013). Continuous policy changes and practices to broaden inclusive education practice, sometimes make the school practice confused. It can consequently lead to confusion in the school's practices. The selected stakeholders should provide more equal opportunities for students with all types of disabilities to be included in mainstream classrooms. Since regular education teachers consistently claimed that they have very limited inclusive education training, the teachers in the present study did not support the idea of including students with severe disabilities in regular classrooms.

## **THE IMPLICATIONS OF THIS STUDY**

The present study recommends in-service regular education teachers be given additional training in catering to special education needs. Whereas, an inclusive education course should be included as a compulsory subject in all teachers training institutions for pre-service regular teachers under training. In the current situation, it is clear improvement that all teachers training institutions (Institut Pendidikan Guru, IPG) and public universities (i.e., Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, UPSI) in Malaysia have included the inclusive education course as a compulsory subject in the teachers training curriculum (Ang & Lee, 2018). This strategy will not only provide sufficient knowledge and understanding of the practice of inclusion but could create a positive inclusion school culture within the ecological systemic framework in the future.

## **CONCLUSION**

The present study is expected to contribute to the Malaysian practice of inclusive education by presenting a rich and detailed description from the views of teachers on inclusive education implementation and the support they could provide students with LD in mainstream learning settings. Inclusive education is a social construct, by exploring the

socio-ecological system in the Malaysian secondary schools demonstrated a crystal clear stance on the level of participation students with LD in the mainstreaming schooling. The perspective of regular teachers could add an overview to encompassing the delivery of education to all. Hence, the present study could therefore represent a best-case scenario for inclusive education in Malaysian secondary schools. Based on the findings, the secondary school climate on inclusive education practices along with the teacher's training and professional development were the two issues discussed by the Malaysian teachers on their roles in supporting the participation of students with LD in the mainstream learning context. However, more research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness and appropriateness of the recommendations in promoting inclusive education by supporting the participation of students with LD within the classrooms.

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