

# Inclusive education in malaysia



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Malaysia's move toward inclusion was given impetus by its participation in workshops and conferences set up under the auspices of the United Nations. Inclusive education was introduced in the Education Act (1998) as part of the continuum of services available for children with special needs. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the interpretation of policy pertaining to inclusion, its contradictions and its translation into practice within the Malaysian context; and to share experiences on how the national context explains and constrains inclusive practices. This paper also reviews the extent inclusion has brought benefits to children with special needs and their families; as well as examine the problematic issues associated with the interpretation and implementation of inclusive practices at community and school levels.

## **Introduction**

In line with the global trend toward inclusive education, Malaysia officially began its efforts to include students with special needs in mainstream education through its involvement in workshops and activities initiated by the United Nations (UN) and United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). Standards of several UN policies affirm the right of all children to equal education without discrimination within the mainstream education system. These include the UN Convention on the rights of the Child (1989), the UN Standard Rules on the Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (1993), the UNESCO Salamanca Statement (1994) and the UNESCAP Biwako Millennium Framework (2002). The Salamanca Statement on Principles, Policy and Practice in Special Needs Education (UNESCO 1994) has stressed the importance to develop national capacities for policymaking and systems management in support of inclusive

education and the need to address equal educational opportunity and access to all children including those with special educational needs. Subsequently, inclusive education was introduced in the Malaysian Education Act 1996 (1998) together with provisions for children with learning difficulties.

Although huge strides have been taken in the provisions and allocations for special needs education in Malaysia, inclusive education seems elusive to many children who need it.

The purpose of this article is to examine and analyse the current policy and practices pertaining to inclusive education within the parallel system of general and special education, and to share experiences on how the national context explains and constrains inclusive practices. Concepts and principles in inclusive education will be discussed against the backdrop of Malaysian general education system and school culture. Inclusive education in Malaysia originated from the 'special education' agenda as defined in the Education Act 1996 (1998) and its approach is referred to this tradition. The discussion begins with an introduction to the development of special needs education as a discipline and as a profession in Malaysia, and its influence on the development of policy and practice toward inclusive education.

## **The Evolutionary Phases of Special Needs Education**

The history of special needs education in Malaysia parallels developments seen in other helping professions in developing countries worldwide (Azuma, 1984). Foreign experts are initially relied upon to provide the knowledge and to encourage its development prior to the emergence of a profession within a country. The first professionals to provide services are usually trained abroad. The second stage followed this first stage, in which colleges and

universities established programs and departments to teach the discipline and prepare the professionals. The second stage leads to the third stage, in which colleges and universities import developed from abroad to achieve standards that characterised the discipline in more developed nations. During this stage, the concepts, theories and models of implementation found in the more developed countries are taught, applied and tested; some of which may transfer more successfully than others.

The fourth stage sees research initiated in the country to develop the concepts, theories and practices and technologies essential to enhance practice. The fifth and last stage is reached when this new body of knowledge developed in one country is integrated into the larger body of knowledge available internationally. As professions and disciplines of knowledge evolve from one stage to the next, they gain strength and improve qualities associated with the earlier stages of the development.

Malaysia embarked on the first stage when the first school for the blind was opened in 1929, followed by a school for the deaf very much later in 1954. These schools were initiated under the programs of the Ministry of Social Welfare with the help of religious missionaries. Malaysia entered its second stage when professional preparation programs for special education were formally established by the Ministry of Education in 1961. Lacking its own expertise and technology, Malaysia entered its third stage when it began importing knowledge and expertise by sending its education professionals abroad for research degrees and in-service attachments in special needs education in the 1980s and 1990s, and attempting to customize what was learned to its national conditions. Malaysia's participation in international

workshops and activities of the UN and UNESCO and subsequent reforms as reflected in the Education Act (1998) describes the active development of policy and changes in practices during this period.

In 1993, the first preservice teacher preparation leading to a Bachelor of Education degree program in special needs education was initiated in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. The program was developed alongside a collaborative project in curriculum development with three universities in the United Kingdom, namely, the Universities of Manchester, Birmingham and Cambridge (Jelas, 1996; 1999).

Special needs education in Malaysia is currently in its fourth stage with research being initiated in the local universities with funding from the government to 'indigenise' special needs education as a discipline. The establishment of research degree programs in special needs education has generated interest among students and academics and attempts to integrate local knowledge with the larger body of knowledge internationally have started (Jelas, 1996, 1999, 2000; Azman et al., 2003; Ali et al, 2006).

### **Development of policy: A force for or against inclusion**

Education for children and youth with special needs is provided for by two government agencies: The Ministry of Education (MOE) and the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (MWFCD). The MWFCD through its Welfare Department, provides learning and skills training services for children and youths with i) severe physical disabilities, ii) severe and profound intellectual disabilities; and iii) multiple disabilities. These learning

and skills training services are implemented in collaboration with non-governmental bodies and community-based rehabilitation centres.

The Special Education Department of the MOE is responsible for coordinating all special education programmes in the regular schools and the administration of all special education schools which cater only to students with hearing and visual impairments. Children who are identified with i) down's syndrome, ii) mild autism, iii) developmental delays, iv) attention deficit hyperactivity disorders, and v) specific learning disabilities, are placed in self-contained special classes in the Learning Disability Programmes in regular schools.

The terms 'special needs' introduced in the Education Act 1996 (1998) are defined as follows:

"Pupils with special needs' means pupils with visual impairment or hearing impairment or with learning disabilities"

And 'inclusive education' is introduced as part of the continuum of services available for children with special needs:

"Special education programme" means –

A programme which is provided in special schools for pupils with visual impairment or hearing impairment;

An integrated programme in general schools for pupils with visual impairment or hearing impairment or with learning disabilities; and

An inclusive education programme for pupils with special needs and who are able to attend normal classes together with normal pupils”

(Education Act 1996, 1998, p. 341)

However, the eligibility for special education placement is based on the ‘educability’ of children as assessed by a team of professionals. This is documented in the Act, which states:

“(1) For government and government-aided schools, pupils with special needs who are educable are eligible to attend the special education programme except for the following pupils:

physically handicapped pupils with the mental ability to learn like normal pupils; and

pupils with multiple disabilities or with profound physical handicap or severe mental retardation.

A pupil with special needs is educable if he is able to manage himself without help and is confirmed by a panel consisting of a medical practitioner, an officer from the MOE and an officer from the Welfare Department of the MWFC, as capable of undergoing the national educational programme”

(Education Act 1996, 1998, p. 342)

The eligibility dilemma

A number of issues and contradictions arise when we analyse policies that explicitly state a criterion for eligibility. While the current public policy for

children with special educational needs, particularly those categories of children classified as experiencing ‘ learning disabilities’ have access to regular schools as stated in the Act, the ‘ educability’ criteria contradicts the goals of providing equal education opportunities as stipulated in the United Nation’s Standard Rules on the Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (1993), The Salamanca Statement (1994) and the Biwako Millenium Framework for Action (UNESCAP, 2002).

These mandates are intended to promote equal rights and access to education for persons with disabilities. The ‘ educability’ criterion assumes that there are children who are uneducable within the public school system and thus these children are catered to within community-based rehabilitation (CBR) settings (MOE, 2006). CBR programmes are government-initiated, centre-based programmes at the community level aimed to provide education that emphasises therapy and rehabilitation to children with learning disabilities (Kuno, 2007). CBR programmes are quite detached from the mainstream school system. However, in practice, the division between both provisions is less definite, and students who should benefit from them become victims of bureaucratic procedures (Adnan & Hafiz, 2001). The true meaning of “ equal rights and access” is still evolving in the Malaysian context, as policy makers and the schools put into practice their interpretation of what they perceive those rights to be.

Deciding on who does or does not have a special educational need, or who is ‘ educable’ and who is not poses a major problem. Before special programmes were available, students with special needs were described by their characteristics and by the instructional challenges they presented to



teachers. When the education system began to respond to the needs of each emerging group of special needs students, services were established and eligibility criteria determined. From that point on, a child was identified (for school and placement purposes) as having or experiencing a ‘special educational need’ and if he or she is “able to manage him or herself without help” (Education Act 1996, 1998), the child will be eligible for a given programme or service. This process was repeated as each new group of special needs students emerged – for example, children with visual and hearing impairments in the 1960s, children with mild intellectual in the 1980s and 1990s, and more recently, children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorders and children with dyslexia.

Thus it is regulated in the Education Act 1996 (1998) that the perspectives of professionals (“a medical practitioner, an officer from the MOE and an officer from the Welfare Department of the MWFC” p. 342) have the most power in determining the way children are categorised and whether these children are “capable of undergoing the national educational programme” (Education Act 1996, 1998). In this context, policy makers and professionals continue to see special schools and classes as well as categories as having an important place in provisions. Responses at the Ministerial level revealed an emphasis on diversity and acceptance of human characteristics as problematic and that learning difficulties are technical problems that require specialised discipline knowledge that cannot be dealt with in the “normal classes with normal children” (Education Act 1996, 1998 p. 341). In this context, the MOE sees segregation as the right to be educated in a separate environment from the mainstream and inclusion is implemented on the principle “that

integrate and include children with special needs where possible, and retain the right to segregate where necessary” (Booth & Ainscow, 1998).

Within the Malaysian context, the belief that the child must be ‘educable’ to be educated reflects a rigid and narrow interpretation of the concept of inclusion. The requirement reinforced what Peters (2004) referred to as the “continuum of placements” paradigm; where inclusion is conceptualised as a place that one needs to be eligible and not as a service delivered. Such a narrow and limited interpretation results in the exclusion of SEN students from within the school system. Jelas (2000a) summarised the interpretation of the process of inclusion in the Malaysian context in Figure 1.

## **INCLUSION:**

### **MEETING OUR COMMITMENTS**

Salamanca

Statement 1994

Malaysian

Education Act 1996

Responses to human

diversity

Responses to

categories

Commitment to

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change

Commitment to

existing demands

Rejection of medical model of disability

Coexistence of medical & social model

perubatan & sosial

Equity

## **PROCESS OF INCLUSION**

Educability

## **PROCESS OF EXCLUSION**

Figure 1. Inclusion: Its interpretaion in the Malaysian context

### **Rationalising exclusion**

While the literature on inclusive education would be in agreement over the basic philosophical stance of inclusion as it relates to issues of social justice and equity of educational opportunities, its interpretation and translation into practice remains unclear in Malaysia. The National Report on the development of education states:

Inclusion in Malaysia subscribed to the concept of placing SEN students into mainstream classes to be educated alongside their peers, either with or without additional support, and within the present school system. This concept of IE (inclusive education) might not be in line with the ideal concept

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based on “ acceptance, belonging and about providing school settings in which all disadvantaged children can be valued equally and be provided with equal educational opportunities ...

(MOE, 2004, p. 28),

While the philosophical basis of including SEN students into mainstream schools is accepted as a policy, the continued legitimization of paradigms that exclude SEN students is also acknowledged by rationalising between the “ ideal” and the “ not-so-ideal” concept of inclusive education. This ambivalence is reinforced by the following statements:

Prior to inclusion, especially in the early part of their formal education, SEN students are equipped with relevant basic skills and knowledge to enable them to cope with mainstream learning. Only those who are diagnosed capable to cope with mainstream learning would be included fully or partially.

(MOE, 2004, p. 29)

The emphasis on the ability “ to cope with mainstream learning” seemed consistent with the integration models that came about in the 1980s. Integration models mainly focused on placing students with mild disabilities, identified and “ diagnosed” as having special needs in mainstream schools. In such models, students must adapt to the norms, expectations, styles, routines and practices of the education system instead of the education system adapting to the learner (UNESCO, 2008). The integrated programme is the dominant format for delivering services to special needs students in

Malaysia, then and now. Students typically were referred to a medical practitioner to determine their eligibility and to confirm their disability, and if they met the eligibility criteria, they were placed in a special class in a regular school. Once placed, few special education students returned to the regular education class on full-time basis. Although the special classroom and special schools continued as options, integrated programmes (placement in regular classrooms) for students with visual and hearing impairments are available with support from the resource teacher. Within this model, students were “pulled out” for part-time placement in resource rooms, or a special education teacher comes to the regular education classroom to provide remedial assistance to the student or to assist the classroom teacher.

By the mid -1980’s special education in the developed countries, specifically in the United States and United Kingdom, no longer relied on segregated special classes to serve students with SEN. Historically, the disenchantment of many special educators and the concern of the efficacy of the prevailing approach (Ainscow, 1994; Meyen & Skrtic, 1995; Sorrells, Rieth & Sindelar, 2004; Stainback & Stainback, 1992) raised questions about how best to assure a quality and equitable education for students with disabilities and spawned the push for a more inclusive approach to special education programming. While these reforms were mandated in the United Nations Declarations and UNESCO’s Framework of Actions on special needs education of which Malaysia’s policy on inclusive education subscribes to, the focus on diagnosis, prescription, and intervention continued to be central to determining eligibility and making placement decisions. Thus, although

special education practices had changed, the grounding assumptions of human pathology and organisational rationality (Biklen, 2000; Oliver, 1996; Skrtic, 1991) have not been critically examined. In this context, special education is used to maintain and legitimise exclusion of students with disabilities within a school culture and system characterised by competition and selection (Skrtic, 1995; Corbett, 1999; Slee, 2001; Kearney & Kane, 2006). Inclusive education is seen as problematic; educators and policymakers have serious reservations about the widespread placement of SEN students in mainstream schools because systemic problems in the current provisions and school culture remain unresolved. Malaysia needs to recognise that integration models are not inclusion and that inclusive practices do not just mean placing SEN students into mainstream schools. The pathway to inclusion is fraught with foundational assumptions that support exclusionary processes and practices.

## **Challenges in policy and practice**

Even though inclusive education was implemented at the policy level more than 10 years ago and school participation has rapidly increased quantitatively, Malaysia is far from reaching its goal of providing “ a responsive education path for every child and youth with SEN” (MOE, 2004). Policy statements and procedural processes and requirements that are seen as “ safeguarding the normality of the school population” (Slee, 1996, p. 25), and that which rest on the basic philosophy of exclusion and segregation as the best way to educate students with disabilities will obviously make inclusion efforts very difficult and counterproductive. There is a need to formulate policies to ensure that segregation is not practiced within the

education system. The barriers created by the current policies may have many sources but three of the most critical are: (1) the non-acceptance that all children can learn; (2) the need for a reconceptualisation of special educational needs; and (3) the culture of elitism.

The acceptance that all children can learn and have a right to education

Malaysians in general and educators specifically need to acknowledge that inclusive education is part of the human rights agenda that argues that all children, irrespective of their characteristics, can learn and have access to education. Although special education is seen as a right and as an access to education, school exclusion of children who do not meet the eligibility criteria is made legal and therefore, not the responsibility of the MOE. Labeling children who do not meet the criteria for placement in schools as ‘uneducable’ and denying them the opportunity to education would be an irony of the education system. Under these circumstances, they are the ones that have the greatest need for education, are the least likely to receive it. Further, denying these children of the opportunity to learn within the public school system is a violation of the child’s basic rights (United Nations, 1989; United Nations, 1993). The question of whether all children with disabilities have an unqualified right to the education system must be addressed. Opportunities for schooling should be extended to all disabled children without specifying any eligibility criteria; the MOE needs to implement a paradigm shift from a charity-based approach to the development of persons with disabilities and to accept responsibility for education for all children.

In principle, Malaysia is committed to providing education for all with the implementation of compulsory education in 2003 as evident by a high participation rate of 98.49 per cent (MOE, 2004). This statement of intent towards compulsory education for all which was an amendment of the Education Act 1996, however, did not include children with disabilities:

“ The MOE has reviewed the Education Act 1996 that regulates the provision of preschool, primary and secondary education. The review was to enable the implementation of compulsory education at primary school level. In 2002, the Education Act 1996 was amended and the compulsory education took effect in 2003. This policy ensures that every child in Malaysia beginning at age six, regardless of sex, social and economic background, and residential locality has the right to primary education. Accordingly, every Malaysian parent must ensure that their child has access to primary education when the child reaches the age of six or on the first day of the current school year when the child would be six years old.”

(MOE, 2004, p. 4)

International mandates have declared that education is a basic right for all children and have called for the inclusion of all children in primary education by 2015 (UNESCAP, 2002). Malaysia needs to include disability dimensions in all new and existing laws, policy plans, programmes and schemes. In this context, we need to strengthen our national capacity in data collection and analysis concerning disability statistics to support policy formulation and programme implementation. The exclusion of children and youth with disabilities from the broader framework of education results in their being



deprived from further opportunities, thereby diminishing their access to vocational training, employment, and preventing them from achieving economic and social independence. This increases their vulnerability to marginalisation in what can become a self-perpetuating, inter-generational cycle.

### Conceptualisation of special educational needs

The current interpretation of special educational needs in Malaysia emanates from a traditional special education framework and knowledge base that emphasise the pathological/medical model of special needs (Skrtic, 1991). The continued emphasis on explaining educational difficulties in terms of child-centered characteristics has the effect of preventing progress in creating policies and provisions for SEN students. Dyson (1990) aptly summarises the argument by saying:

The fact remains that the education system as a whole, and the vast majority of institutions and teachers within it, are approaching the twenty-first century with a view of special needs the same as that with which their counterparts approached the present century. That view, for all its avowed concern for the individual child, promotes injustice on a massive scale. It demands to be changed

(Dyson, 1990, p. 60-1)

The radical perspective that leads to a reconceptualisation of special educational needs have been well documented for the past twenty years (Barton, 1988; Lipsky & Gartner, 1989; Ainscow, 1991; Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994;

Clark et. al., 1998; Donoghue, 2003) and critiques argued and showed evidence how the education system creates rather than remediate disabilities (Skrtic, 1991; Corbett, 1999; Vlachou, 2004; Carrington & Robinson, 2006). The new perspective on special educational needs is based on the view that the way forward must be to reform schools in ways that will make them respond positively to pupil diversity, seeing individual differences as something to be nurtured. But, as cautioned by Ainscow (1994):

This kind of approach is only possible in schools where there exist a respect for individuality and a culture of collaboration that encourages and supports problem-solving. Such cultures are likely to facilitate the learning of all pupils and, alongside them, the professional learning of all teachers. Ultimately, therefore, this line of argument makes the case that increasing equity is the key to improvements in schooling for all.

(Ainscow, 1994, p12)

The assessment of the characteristics of the child and the child's total environment call for methods of assessment that build on the positive qualities while recognising areas of weaknesses. The interactionist perspective (Cline, 1992) adopts an ecological approach which recognises that features of the learning context, such as the curriculum, the teaching process, the management of the classroom and other variables are essential factors that influence learning. By accepting the interactionist approach to special needs, Malaysian educators would be able to look at the learning needs of students and how school policies, culture and practices enable or disable, not only students with disabilities, but all students. In identifying

educational needs, Noddings (2005) emphasises that it is crucial for educators to balance the ‘inferred needs’ and the ‘expressed needs’ of all students, in saying that “by ignoring expressed needs, we sacrifice opportunities to develop individual talents, intrinsic motivation, and the joys of learning” (p 147). The human side of education is more than just an ethics of justice issue but an ethics of care which is needs-based. This is of particular importance because it is this grounding principle of care that creates understandings, values, and beliefs that formulate policies and subsequently the practices.

### The culture of elitism

Education in Malaysia is driven largely by an examination-oriented system characterised by curriculum rigidity and rote learning rather than critical and independent thinking. Like schools in Singapore and Hong Kong (Poon-McBrayer, 2004), school leadership are in great pressure to compete for the best examination results in terms of the percentages of passes and the number of A’s acquired by students in public school examinations. The competitiveness has resulted in students to enroll as many subjects they can in the Malaysian Certificate of Education with the expectations of getting the highest number of A’s as possible.

The culture of elitism compels parents to prepare their children to be accepted into high ranking or fully residential schools which usually achieve high scores in examination results. The introduction of the Tuition Voucher Scheme (MOE, 2004) for students in Year 4, 5 and 6 with poor academic performance exemplifies the need for students to perform academically in

the Year 6 Open Certification Examinations. Within the School Cluster Program (MOE, 2007), schools are encouraged to compete to strive for excellence and to be a 'cluster school' that promises, among others, a special status. To be eligible for selection, schools need to fulfill two requirements: (1) certified excellent by the Malaysian Education Quality Standards and (2) three continuous years of excellent examination results at the Primary School Assessment, the Lower Secondary School Assessment and the end of school Open Certificate Examination. Although the 'intertwining of the standards and inclusion agenda' can lead to positive consequences (Ainscow et al, 2006), the emphasis on the preparation and drill for the public examinations therefore, left little or no time for teachers to accommodate individual learning needs of students in general. Media reports on schools' and students' performance intensify competition and further marginalise SEN students, who, to a large extent are not expected to compete. Competing priorities make it more difficult for schools to fully include children with SEN.

## **Conclusion – Opportunities for change**

The Malaysian approach to inclusive education this far has been intertwined and limited to the domain of special needs education. The conception of policy provides the basis for analysing policy implications in relation to critical issues. In this paper it is argued that the current policy and practice toward inclusive education for SEN students are exclusionary and discriminatory. The concept of 'educability' as an eligibility requirement for educational placement is a major issue that needs to be reviewed.

Continued advancement of special needs education in Malaysia will require bifocal perspectives. One focus has an international perspective and requires Malaysians' awareness of the international body of literature and trends in practice that enables them to take advantage of the knowledge and experience gained by those in other countries. Malaysia may also profit especially from knowledge provided by its Asian neighbours namely Japan, India and China, or other countries that seems to be struggling with many of the same issues.

However, effective special needs education services require awareness of social and educational traditions, social philosophies that manifest in schooling and school culture and ways of resolving conflict that may be unique to one country and the impact these qualities have on general and special needs education services (Peters, 2003). The second perspective, thus, takes a more narrow view, one that enables the evolution of special needs education services that reflect the needs and characteristics of Malaysians.

The first perspective may identify as viable goals the extension of services to students with learning difficulties, inclusion, garnering additional political support for special needs education through parent advocacy and supporting the further employment of people with disabilities. However, a more narrow focus on issues directly important to Malaysia is likely to clarify more viable future directions for students with disabilities in Malaysia. Further initiatives critical to Azuma's (1984) Stage 5 will require considerable research and policy debate among Malaysians.