

From Policy to Practice: Challenges in Implementing Inclusive Education in Malaysia

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Abstract: Inclusive education has been a central agenda in Malaysia's educational reform, supported by policies such as the Education (Special Education) Regulations, the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025, and subsequent national initiatives promoting equitable access for learners with diverse needs. Despite these policy commitments, translating inclusive principles into effective classroom practice remains challenging. This paper examines the persistent gaps between policy intentions and actual implementation across Malaysian schools. Drawing on recent studies, field observations, and stakeholder perspectives from teachers, parents, and school administrators, the findings highlight several key issues: limited teacher preparedness and professional development, insufficient specialist support services, resource constraints, varying school cultures, and inconsistencies in policy interpretation at the school level. Additionally, systemic challenges such as workload, large class sizes, and lack of interagency collaboration further hinder meaningful inclusion. The paper argues that bridging the policy-practice divide requires a coherent implementation framework, continuous capacity building, and stronger support structures that empower teachers and schools. Recommendations are offered to strengthen inclusive practices and ensure that Malaysia's commitment to inclusive education can be realized in everyday classroom environments.

Keywords: Special needs; inclusive education; implementation framework

Abstrak: Pendidikan inklusif telah menjadi agenda utama dalam reformasi pendidikan Malaysia, yang didukung oleh kebijakan-kebijakan seperti Peraturan Pendidikan (Pendidikan Khusus), Cetak Biru Pendidikan Malaysia 2013–2025, dan inisiatif-inisiatif nasional berikutnya yang mempromosikan akses yang adil bagi peserta didik dengan beragam kebutuhan. Terlepas dari komitmen kebijakan ini, menerjemahkan prinsip-prinsip inklusif ke dalam praktik kelas yang efektif tetap menjadi tantangan. Makalah ini mengkaji kesenjangan yang masih ada antara tujuan kebijakan dan implementasi aktual di seluruh sekolah Malaysia. Berdasarkan studi-studi terbaru, observasi lapangan, dan perspektif pemangku kepentingan dari guru, orang tua, dan administrator sekolah, temuan-temuan ini menyoroti beberapa isu utama: terbatasnya kesiapan dan pengembangan profesional guru, layanan dukungan spesialis yang tidak memadai, keterbatasan sumber daya, budaya sekolah yang beragam, dan inkonsistensi dalam interpretasi kebijakan di tingkat sekolah. Selain itu, tantangan sistemik seperti beban kerja, ukuran kelas yang besar, dan kurangnya kolaborasi antarlembaga semakin menghambat inklusi yang bermakna. Makalah ini berargumen bahwa menjembatani kesenjangan kebijakan-praktik memerlukan kerangka kerja implementasi yang koheren, pengembangan kapasitas yang berkelanjutan, dan struktur dukungan yang lebih kuat yang memberdayakan guru dan sekolah. Rekomendasi ditawarkan untuk memperkuat praktik inklusif dan memastikan bahwa komitmen Malaysia terhadap pendidikan inklusif dapat diwujudkan dalam lingkungan kelas sehari-hari.

Kata kunci: Kebutuhan khusus; pendidikan inklusif; kerangka kerja implementasi

1. INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has become a central focus of global educational reform, supported by international declarations such as the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006). In Malaysia, inclusive education is emphasised through major policy frameworks, including the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025 (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013) and subsequent initiatives such as the Zero Reject Policy

(Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2016). These policies aim to ensure equitable access and meaningful participation for students with special educational needs (SEN).

Despite these strong policy commitments, the translation of inclusive principles into effective classroom practice remains challenging. Studies indicate significant gaps between policy intentions and implementation in Malaysian schools (Lee & Low, 2014; Alias & Rahman, 2020). Teachers often report limited preparedness to implement inclusive strategies and differentiate instruction (Abdullah & Omar, 2018; Forlin & Chambers, 2011). Additionally, resource constraints, inconsistent leadership support, and variations in school culture contribute to inconsistencies in inclusive practice (Rahman & Abdullah, 2021). This context underscores the importance of examining the challenges that hinder the successful implementation of inclusive education in Malaysia and identifying strategies to strengthen the policy-practice connection.

1.1. Problem Statement

Although Malaysia's inclusive education agenda is supported by comprehensive policy frameworks (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013; Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2016), implementation remains inconsistent. Research shows that teachers lack adequate training, confidence, and pedagogical skills to support diverse learners (Abdullah & Omar, 2018; Sharma et al., 2008). Schools also face shortages of specialists, limited assistive technologies, and insufficient infrastructure (Hashim et al., 2019). Furthermore, policy interpretation differs across schools, contributing to varied implementation outcomes (Alias & Rahman, 2020). These issues collectively create a persistent gap between inclusive education policy and actual classroom practice (Lee & Low, 2014).

1.2. Research objectives and Research Questions

1. To examine the extent to which inclusive education policies are implemented in Malaysian mainstream schools
2. To identify the key challenges faced by teachers, administrators, and support personnel in implementing inclusive education
3. To explore how school-level factors such as training, resources, and leadership influence inclusive practices
4. To analyse the gap between inclusive education policy intentions and actual classroom practices
5. To propose strategies that strengthen the implementation and sustainability of inclusive education in Malaysia

1.3. Research Questions

1. To what extent are Malaysia's inclusive education policies being translated into practice in mainstream schools?
2. What challenges do teachers, administrators, and support personnel face when implementing inclusive education?
3. How do school-level factors such as training, resources, and leadership influence the effectiveness of inclusive practices?
4. What gaps exist between national policy expectations and the actual practices of inclusive education at the classroom level?
5. What strategies could enhance the implementation of inclusive education in Malaysian schools?

2. METODE PENELITIAN

2.1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative case study design to explore the challenges and realities of implementing inclusive education in Malaysian mainstream schools. Qualitative research is well-suited for examining experiences, meanings, and contextual realities (Creswell, 2014). Case studies allow in-depth exploration of policy implementation within specific school settings (Yin, 2018).

2.2. Research Setting and Participants

The study had been conducted in selected mainstream primary and secondary schools implementing inclusive education. Participants including Mainstream teachers; Special education teachers; School administrators and Support personnel (counsellors, therapists) A purposive sampling strategy is used to select participants who have direct involvement with inclusive education (Patton, 2015).

2.3. Data Collection Methods

2.3.1. Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews allow in-depth exploration of participants' views on challenges and policy implementation (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Interviews focused on Teachers' experiences with SEN students; Perceived barriers; Support systems and the Policy understanding.

2.3.2. Document Analysis

Policy documents such as the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025, school guidelines, and training materials had been analyzed to understand policy expectations (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013; UNESCO, 1994).

2.3.3. Classroom and School Observations

Non-participant observations provide insights into actual classroom practices, teaching strategies, and student participation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Observation had been focused on Instructional methods; Learning engagement; Resource availability; Teaching accommodations.

2.4. Data Analysis

A thematic analysis approach has been used to identify recurring patterns and themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process includes the familiarization with data; Initial coding; Developing themes; Reviewing themes; Interpreting patterns in relation to research questions and NVivo software that assist in data organisation and coding.

2.5. Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues will be addressed by obtaining informed consent; Ensuring confidentiality and anonymity; Securing necessary permissions from the Ministry of Education and school administrators (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014)

3. RESULT AND FINDING

The evidence indicates that:

1) Inconsistent Policy Interpretation

Schools differ in their understanding of inclusive education due to limited dissemination of guidelines and inconsistent administrative support (Alias & Rahman, 2020; Rahman & Abdullah, 2021).

2) Limited Teacher Preparedness

Teachers reported inadequate pre-service and in-service training, echoing past research that teacher competency is a major barrier to inclusion (Forlin & Chambers, 2011; Abdullah & Omar, 2018).

3) Shortage of Resources

Specialist support services and assistive technologies are insufficient in many schools, reflecting similar findings in Malaysian studies (Hashim et al., 2019; Lee & Low, 2014).

4) Overcrowded Classrooms and Workload

Overcrowded classrooms and heavy administrative tasks hinder teachers' ability to provide individualized support (Alias & Rahman, 2020).

5) School Leadership and Culture

Leadership plays a key role in shaping inclusive culture (Rahman & Abdullah, 2021; Ryan, 2006).

- 6) Limited Collaboration
Weak interagency collaboration and unclear stakeholder roles limit effective inclusive implementation (Villa & Thousand, 2016).
- 7) Physical Inclusion Without Engagement
Students are often placed in mainstream classrooms but not meaningfully engaged, a challenge also noted in international research (Humphrey, 2008; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

4. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings align with international literature emphasizing that inclusive education requires more than policy directives; it demands systemic support and pedagogical transformation (Ainscow, 2005; Booth & Ainscow, 2011). The lack of teacher preparedness reflects broader trends across many countries, where teachers feel undertrained to meet the needs of diverse learners (Forlin & Chambers, 2011; Sharma et al., 2008). Resource shortages also mirror global challenges in developing inclusive systems (Lindsay, 2007). Leadership emerges as a critical factor influencing school culture and implementation, supporting the argument that inclusive leadership is essential for sustainable reform (Ryan, 2006; Theoharis, 2007). Furthermore, the tendency toward physical inclusion without meaningful engagement highlights the need for greater emphasis on instructional adaptation and differentiated pedagogy (Tomlinson, 2001; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Given the challenges identified, it is imperative to:

4.1. Strengthen Policy Implementation

Clear guidelines and consistent monitoring are needed to ensure uniform understanding across schools (Alias & Rahman, 2020).

4.2. Enhance Teacher Professional Development

Sustained, practical training is essential to build teacher confidence and skills (Forlin & Chambers, 2011; Sharma et al., 2008).

4.3. Improve Resources and Support Services

Schools require sufficient specialists and assistive technologies to support diverse learners (Hashim et al., 2019).

4.4. Build Inclusive Leadership

School leaders must be trained to promote inclusive culture and collaboration (Ryan, 2006; Theoharis, 2007).

4.5. Strengthen Collaboration

Structured collaboration mechanisms should be established between teachers, families, and external agencies (Villa & Thousand, 2016).

5. CONCLUSION

Malaysia's inclusive education policies provide a strong foundation (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013), but implementation challenges persist at the school and classroom levels (Lee & Low, 2014; Alias & Rahman, 2020). Addressing these challenges requires strengthening teacher capacity, improving resource availability, enhancing leadership support, and promoting collaboration among stakeholders (Rahman & Abdullah, 2021; Villa & Thousand, 2016).

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