



Inclusive Education Experiences of Parents in Malaysia

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Summary

Inclusive education of children with disabilities is accepted internationally as a standard and right for all children. While Malaysia appears to subscribe to this opinion in principle, the reality on the ground appears to be challenging and many parents and children face difficulties obtaining full inclusion. The National Education Blueprint spells out that inclusion is the expected norm for any child with disabilities and has set a target of 75% by 2023.

Parents, professionals and NGOs from various national family support groups conducted a survey of parents in Malaysia, in October 2018, to share their inclusive education experiences for children with special needs attending primary school. The survey was aimed at capturing recent positive or negative experiences with both Ministry of Education (MOE) schools as well as private, international and home schools. We targeted parents who have attempted inclusive education into primary school in the past 3 years (whether successful or not). 406 parents who have children with disabilities and had attempted inclusion recently responded to the survey from every state, all over the country. 70% of the parents with special needs children who responded had attempted inclusion in MOE schools; the remainder tried private (14%), international (10%) or home school (6%). Parents who attempted inclusion reported that 52% (range 48 to 72%) of all type of schools were supportive. However MOE schools were significantly less supportive than other types of schools. Of those who attempted inclusion for their special needs children, only 41% were successfully included. Another 20% had partial success. Successful inclusion rates were highest for international schools followed by private, MOE and home schools. The major obstacle to inclusion is an education system that is not supportive; especially its personnel. So much so that children with disabilities (and their parents) are made to appear as the problem and said to be “not being able to adapt to inclusion”. The continued denial of allowing shadow aides, victimising children who have disability registration (OKU card) and the opposition from parents of children without disabilities is disheartening.

We hope that this feedback to MOE and the public about the current status of inclusive readiness of schools will assist agencies, schools and the community to promote inclusion in a greater way. The group has offered some key recommendations that will enable inclusion to be better enabled in all our schools.

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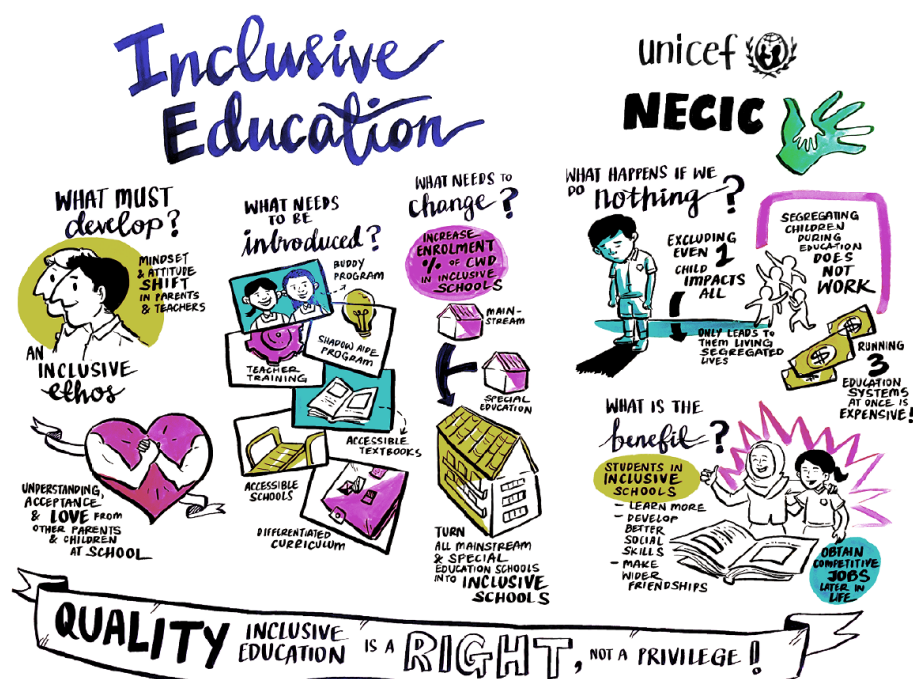


Figure 1: Overview of Inclusive Education, NECIC National Conference 2018

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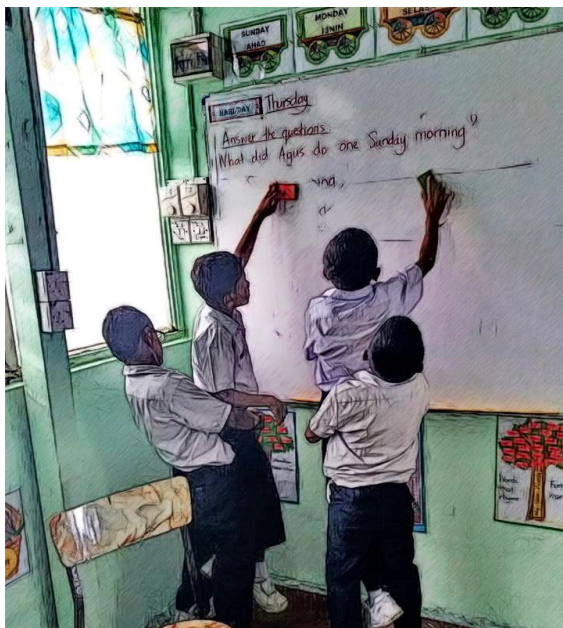
Introduction

Inclusive education of children with disabilities is accepted internationally as a standard and right for all children. While Malaysia appears to subscribe to this opinion in principle, the reality on the ground appears to be challenging and many parents and children face difficulties obtaining full inclusion.

Inclusion means that the child is placed alongside other children and fully participates in the mainstream class, not in an integration or special class or special school. It also means that we do not deny any child the opportunity for education.

The National Education Blueprint spells out that inclusion is the expected norm for any child with disabilities and has set targets for the Ministry of Education (MOE) schools to achieve - 30% special education needs (SEN) students in the inclusive programme by 2015 and 75% by 2023.

Parents, professionals and NGOs from various national family support groups conducted a survey of parents in Malaysia to share their inclusive education experiences for children with special needs attending primary school. The survey was aimed at capturing recent positive or negative experiences with both Ministry of Education (MOE) schools as well as private, international and home schools. We targeted parents who have attempted inclusive education into primary school recently (in the past 3 years), whether successful or not. The group hoped to give feedback to MOE and the public about the current status of inclusive readiness of schools and the need to promote this.



In an inclusive setting, students are not expected to work at grade level or "keep up" with the other students. Instead, they are asked to "keep learning" and fully participate with other students.

Inclusion is not about the child with disability fitting in and meeting mainstream education targets but about the system adapting to include her/him.

Overview of Research Design

The survey form was developed by a team of 6 individuals, 4 of them parents of children with special needs, who are active in advocacy nationally. The other two were a project officer with the NECIC (a coalition of more than 30 NGOs advocating for early intervention and inclusion) and a senior consultant paediatrician (also involved with the NECIC).

The survey tool was developed using the Google Form format. The inclusion criteria were Malaysian parents who had a child with disability and had attempted inclusive education into primary school in the past 3 years (whether successful or not). The tool captured the region and school type and explored school supportiveness to inclusion, inclusion success, factors that made inclusion work and obstacles to inclusion. Responses were offered both closed and open-ended options. The last 6 digits of the parent's Malaysian identity card number (IC number) were requested to prevent duplicate submission and ensure responses were only from Malaysians. The survey tool was pretested before use.

The survey tool as a Google Form was distributed electronically via an on-line link to existing family support groups and disability NGOs via a variety of social media channels. A one month period was used to collect data after which the study data collection was terminated.

Ethical Considerations

All responses provided by parents were confidential and respondents were allowed to refuse participation in the study. No unique identifiers were collected and only summarised data will be presented in reports or publications. Open-ended statements made by parents were edited, if necessary, to preserve the identity of the participant.

Plan for Data Analysis

Data from the Google Form was extracted electronically into an Excel sheet. Open-ended options were recoded and also used verbatim. The final data set was exported into SPSS version 20 for analysis. Categorical data was presented in frequency and percentage. Chi-square was used to determine the association between relevant factors. A p-value of less than 0.05 was taken as the statistical significance level.

Results

406 parents who have children with disabilities responded to the survey from every state, all over the country in October 2018. The majority were from Selangor (37%), Kuala Lumpur (16%), Perak (12%), Penang (9%) and Sarawak (7%).

Table 1: Parental response to survey by region

State	Number	Percentage
Selangor	150	36.9
Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur	66	16.3
Perak	50	12.3
Penang	37	9.1
Sarawak	30	7.4
Johor	19	4.7
Sabah	11	2.7
Pahang	9	2.2
Kedah	6	1.5
Malacca	6	1.5
Federal Territory of Labuan	5	1.2
Negeri Sembilan	5	1.2
Federal Territory of Putrajaya	4	1.0
Perlis	4	1.0
Kelantan	3	0.7
Terengganu	1	0.2
Total	406	100.0

70% of the parents with special needs children who responded had attempted inclusion in MOE schools; the remainder tried private (14%), international (10%) or home school (6%). Parents who attempted inclusion reported that 52% (range 48 to 72%) of all type of schools were supportive. However MOE schools were significantly less supportive than other types of schools (see Figure 2 & Table 2).

Figure 2: School Supportiveness to Inclusion of Children with Disabilities by School Type

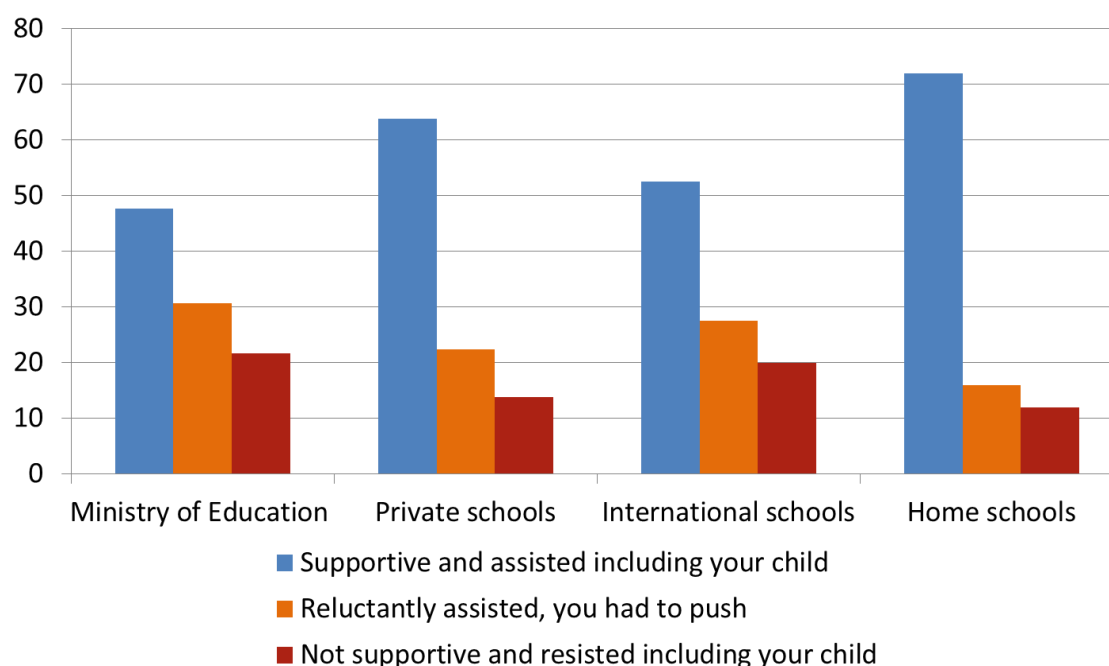


Table 2: School responsive/supportiveness to inclusion of children with special needs by School Type

School Type	Supportive and assisted including your child (%)	Reluctantly assisted, you had to push (%)	Not supportive and resisted including your child (%)	Total
Ministry of Education	135 (47.7)	87 (30.7)	61 (21.6)	283 (69.7%)
Private schools	37 (63.8)	13 (22.4)	8 (13.8)	58 (14.3%)
International schools	21 (52.5)	11 (27.5)	8 (20.0)	40 (9.9%)
Home schools	18 (72.0)	4 (16.0)	3 (12.0)	25 (6.2%)
Total	211 (52.0)	115 (28.3)	80 (19.7)	406 (100%)

NB: Significance testing for MOH vs other school type (supportive vs the rest), Chi-square: 6.82, $p < 0.001$

Table 3 shows the success of recent inclusion attempts. It is important to note that the respondents are parents who had attempted inclusion in the past 3 years. Many parents (possibly as much as 50%) would not have even tried inclusion due to the current difficulties and barriers faced. Of those who attempted inclusion for their special needs children, only 41% were successfully included. Another 20% had partial success. Successful inclusion rates were highest for international schools followed by private, MOE and home schools. There was no significant difference in the success rate of MOE schools when compared to other types of schools.

Figure 3: Success of Inclusion Attempts by School Type

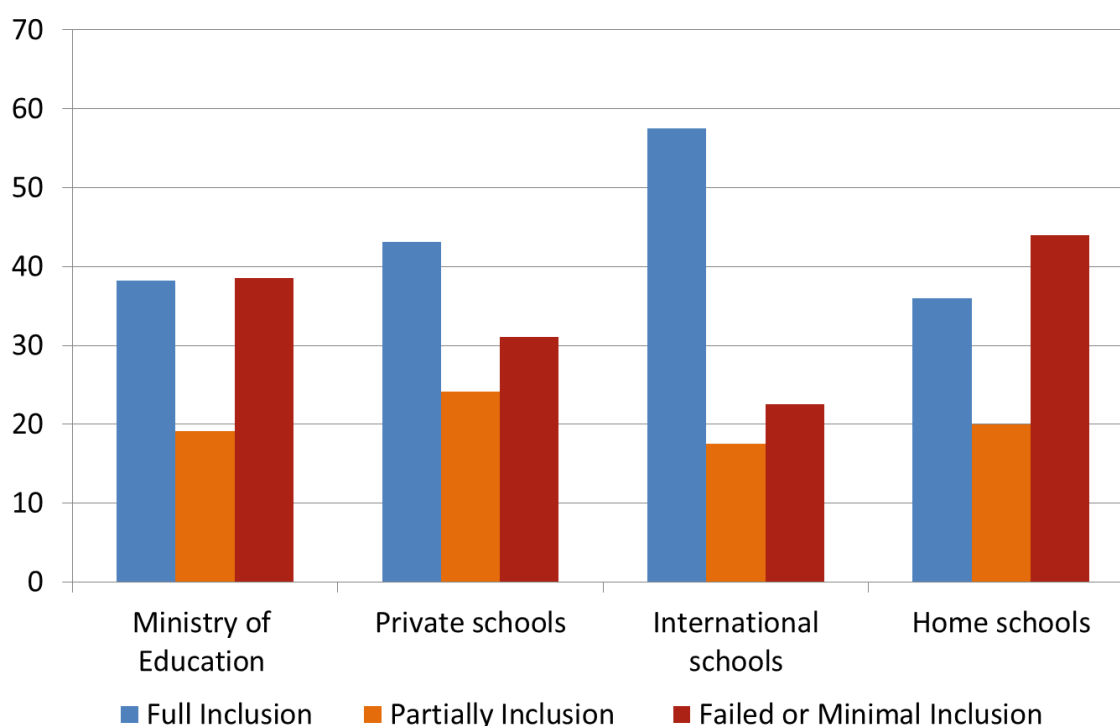


Table 3: Success of inclusion attempts by School Type

School Type	Fully included into mainstream class	Partially included into mainstream class (more than 50% of sessions included)	Minimally included into mainstream class (e.g. physical education class, art's class)	Failed to include	Still too early to tell	Total
Ministry of Education	108 (38.2)	54 (19.1)	50 (17.7)	59 (20.8)	12 (4.2)	283
Private schools	25 (43.1)	14 (24.1)	11 (19.0)	7 (12.1)	1 (1.7)	58
International schools	23 (57.5)	7 (17.5)	3 (7.5)	6 (15.0)	1 (2.5)	40
Home schools	9 (36.0)	5 (20.0)	3 (12.0)	8 (32.0)	0 (0.0)	25
Total	165 (40.6)	80 (19.7)	67 (16.5)	80 (19.7)	14 (3.4)	406

NB: Significance testing for MOH vs other school type (successful inclusion vs the rest), Chi-square: 1.81, $p < 0.179$

Table 4 shows the factors that were enabling and made inclusion happen (full or partial inclusion; more than one response was allowed). 47% said that the headmaster/teachers or system was supportive (MOE 42%, Private school 53%, International school 63%, Home school 56%). Other important factors were parents who pushed very hard against the system for inclusion (29%), professionals (doctors, therapists, NGOs, etc) who helped parents to make inclusive education happen (23%), schools that allowed or required a shadow aide (14%) and other parents who have children with special needs who helped out (8%). Some parents (3.5%) had to appeal to state or national MOE managers or the minister of education for help. The least supportive system and staffing was MOE which also had the lowest rates of allowing the use of shadow aides.

“The shadow aide and the supportive class teacher made it happen for my child.”

Table 4: Factors enabling inclusion success (full or partial) by School Type
(multiple responses possible)

School Type	The headmaster, teachers or system was supportive	As a parent I pushed very hard to make it happen	Professionals (doctors, therapists, NGOs) helped us to make it happen	School allowed shadow aide	Other parents who have children with special needs helped us	Other reasons*
Ministry of Education	119 (42.0%)	81 (28.6%)	61 (21.6%)	29 (10.2%)	20 (7.1%)	41 (14.5%)
Private schools	31 (53.4%)	18 (31.0%)	13 (22.4%)	10 (17.2%)	6 (10.3%)	6 (10.3%)
International schools	25 (62.5%)	8 (20.0%)	14 (35.0%)	15 (37.5%)	3 (7.5%)	4 (10.0%)
Home schools	14 (56.0%)	9 (36.0%)	4 (16.0%)	3 (12.0%)	4 (16.0%)	8 (32.0%)
Total	189 (46.6%)	116 (28.6%)	92 (22.7%)	57 (14.0%)	33 (8.1%)	59 (14.5%)

*Other factors included appealing to state or national MOE managers or the minister of education for help; parents working with teachers and parents of other children in the class; making other children aware of the SEN child's needs; etc.

Among the **positive** comments made by parents included:

"The class teacher was very supportive".

"The headmistress was supportive and we had a special needs trained teacher to support".

"The headmaster is supportive and few, not all teachers, tried to help my child".

"Even though the teachers, counsellors and headmistress seemed supportive, we felt their reluctance and frustration. It is unknown how long more they can cope with my child".

"His class teacher was supportive until she was transferred to another school and the replacement teacher was not supportive".

"The teachers treated my child like a normal child".

"We invested time to raise awareness to all the students, and their parents and got all of them engaged into inclusion. The teachers and owner of the centre also helped to maintain engagement".

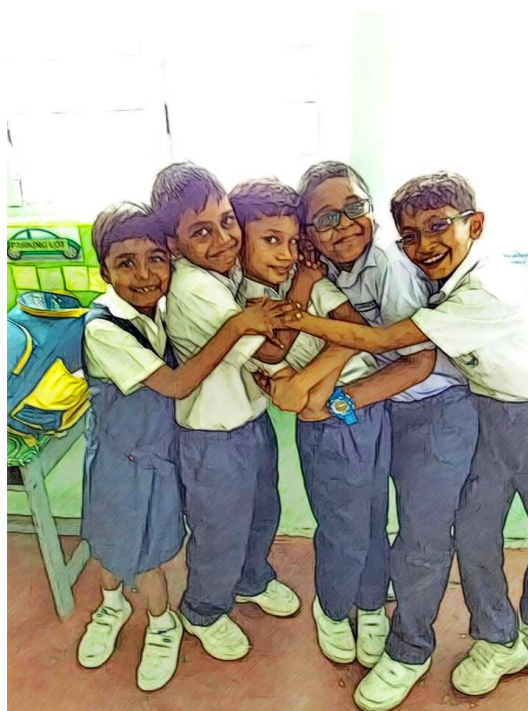
"The school has many other children with special needs and therefore understand in terms of the children behaviour and attention. Being in home school with some other children of the same condition, bullying case and isolation case by the teachers will never happen. They are taught to make friend with each other".

"Other class students were made aware and accepted my child"

"We made it happen by getting a shadow teacher who is an OT and we had to come to school and talk with the teachers and administration".

"The school allowed parents as shadow aide. The school allowed my son bring in our own vision aids to help in his study."

"There are many activities to support my child".



The common obstacles faced by parents in getting inclusive education are shown in Table 5 (more than one response was allowed). 23% said that the headmaster, teachers or system was not supportive. This occurred more commonly in MOE schools. It is sad to note that 13% of parents felt that their child was considered as “not being able to adapt to inclusion” when in reality the system has failed to include the child. Some parents (13%) felt it was very stressful to advocate for inclusion. Of note is that, despite a directive to support the use of shadow aide, 12% were refused this valuable resource. Some parents of children without disabilities were also obstacles (8%) and having a disability registration (OKU card) worked against inclusion (6%).

“It is very difficult for parents to find a school willing to accept children with disabilities.”
 “It’s hard for our child to adapt when some teachers are not interested to support them.”

Table 5: Common obstacles faced by parents in getting inclusive education by School Type
 (multiple responses possible)

School Type	The headmaster/ teachers or system was not supportive	My child could not adapt to inclusion	It was too stressful for us as parents to maintain inclusion	School did not allow shadow aide	Other parents with children in mainstream refused to support inclusion	The OKU card (disability registration) hindered me from getting inclusion	Other reasons*
Ministry of Education	70 (24.7%)	43 (15.2%)	39 (13.8%)	37 (13.1%)	23 (8.1%)	22 (7.8%)	29 (10.2%)
Private schools	10 (17.2%)	7 (12.1%)	9 (15.5%)	8 (13.8%)	5 (8.6%)	1 (1.7%)	6 (10.3%)
International schools	8 (20.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.5%)	1 (2.5%)	2 (5.0%)	1 (2.5%)	1 (2.5%)
Home schools	4 (16.0%)	4 (16.0%)	2 (8.0%)	1 (4.0%)	2 (8.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (4.0%)
Total	92 (22.7%)	54 (13.3%)	51 (12.6%)	47 (11.6%)	32 (7.9%)	24 (5.9%)	37 (9.1%)

*Other obstacles faced included lack of physical accessibility & facilities; limited experience & exposure of teachers; one size fits all approach; failure to understand the meaning of inclusion; etc.

Among the **negative** comments made by parents included:

"It is very difficult for parents to find a school willing to accept children with special needs"

"Private & home school is too expensive for a medium income family" "We have no choice but use MOE"

"It was very stressful for parents when some teachers are not interested to support our child. It's hard for the child to adapt to different teachers if they are not supportive".

"The teacher's attitude towards my son was very disappointing & very negative. In the 1st semester, my son with a disability was no. 16 out of 40 in class examinations and he scored in a few subjects but teachers still did not accept him"

"There is a shortage of teachers with special education background who can support inclusion. This has to be enhanced and increased to ensure every child is given an education." (there were numerous complaints about teachers lack of experience and training to handle SEN children) "Teachers generally lack awareness, knowledge and skills to support learning differences. Parents remain the main educator."

"Teachers didn't know how to handle my child".

"Special needs teachers not ready for the inclusion system. They wanted the allowance rather than the job. Most of them play with their iPhones rather support the child in the class. When you discuss with them they will take action against your child like put your child aside".

"Other children went home and complain to parents. Angry parents complain in the class Whatsapp group shaming my child & pointing out his short-comings"

"The MOE school did not allow a shadow aide"

"The OKU card (disability registration) hindered me from getting inclusion"

"The mind set has to change. The istilah OKU is demeaning. Subconsciously my child is stigmatised."

"The school asked us to take my son with autism out and offered to repay all the fees I had paid. My son asked 'what wrong have I done?' That made me think, he should not be the one who gets punished."

"In the end my son was not allowed to take UPSR as the school was worried it would mess their overall results. So was it worth it?"

"My son was from Permata Kurnia. He was supposed to be inclusive. He was not by the school. The school said if we insisted him to be inclusive they would not be responsible for him anymore and they would not allow shadow aide in the very beginning. So we were resigned to his fate and he was put in the special class."

"The Malaysian Education system is badly lacking in support and diversity for children with special needs. Parents have to work exceedingly hard to just find a place for their child."

"Bullying of our special needs children is common and often not addressed by the teachers or school authorities".

"We had to fork out RM XX,000 of our own money to renovate a storeroom and a medical treatment room to relocate my child's classroom from the third floor to the ground floor, renovate one of the toilets to be disabled-friendly, covered the grill-less drains for ease of wheelchair use and overall safety purposes for the students, added ramps on walkways between buildings, etc."

Discussion

Key Findings and Implications for Policymakers

In reading these results it is important to note that many parents do not attempt inclusion due to the current difficulties and barriers faced. Hence the 406 who responded here, and attempted inclusion in the past 3 years, are not the majority. MOE is the commonest education sector parents attempted inclusion (70%) but a sizable proportion were willing to pay for private, international or home schools. Sadly of those who attempted only 41% had successful inclusion (with some limitations), with another 20% having partial success. Overall MOE schools were significantly less supportive than other types of schools. This survey shows that the major success or obstacles to inclusion is the supportiveness of the education system, especially its personnel. At times children with disabilities (and their parents) are made to appear as the problem and said to be “not being able to adapt to inclusion” – an educational oxymoron. The continued denial of allowing shadow aides, victimising children who have disability registration (OKU card) and the opposition from parents of children without disabilities is disheartening. Despite there being a policy for shadow aide, this is still very much at the discretion of the headmaster and is often refused. All of this in the face of an education blueprint that advocates for inclusion.

MOE claims a 41% success in inclusion for 2017 but many of us who are closely in touch with many parents of children with disabilities are aware that this figure is not entirely true and many have been conveniently generated for managers. Children with SEN who are partially or minimally included into mainstream class (e.g. only physical education class, art's class) are also reported in MOE data as receiving inclusive education.

Furthermore MOE has limited awareness of the large number of children who have SEN in the country. In 2017 MOE data shows that they had identified 56,413 children with special needs. The total number of children in school for that year was 5,108,975 (209,966 in private, international, religious schools). Using international norms it is expected that 15% of all children will have disabilities, which works up to 766,346 children. Hence the majority of children that require support are either missed or parents have used alternative education options or parent have chosen to remain silent about the issues so as to avoid segregation.

What Inclusion Is and Is Not

This study clearly shows that many educators fail to understand what inclusion means. In an inclusive setting, students are not expected to work at grade level or “keep up” with the other students. Instead, they are asked to “keep learning”. Inclusion is not about the child with disability fitting in and meeting mainstream education targets but about the system adapting to include her/him. Understanding this fundamental component of inclusion will guide educators in teaching all kinds of learners. Inclusion is best achieved when education administrators, teachers and the community believe that it is the right of every child to be included with her/his peers in mainstream education – “we are better together than we are apart”. Education is not a race to acquire facts or a degree but an opportunity for self and other exploration and growth in meaningful ways.

Unanswered Questions and Future Research

This study mainly explored parents' experiences with inclusive education in Malaysia. There is a need to understand the experiences of teachers in implementing inclusive education, especially factors that enable or hinder them. This is to address gaps, such as capacity building, resourcing support, amending restrictive policies, etc. The study has highlighted parental concerns of bullying of children with disabilities in schools. Future studies should look at this and the need to instil acceptance of diversity in children; effective ways for teachers to be equipped with skills to handle bullying – not only handing down a code of practice but shift to employing trauma-informed practice in schools. Finally, the study could be used as a benchmark of inclusion success from parent's perspective and be repeated in time to monitor progress. The quality of the inclusion currently enabled also need to be seriously evaluated.

Conclusion

While we have made some small strides in inclusive education we continue to place obstacles in the path of children and families. There is a need for the national and private education systems in Malaysia to grow-up and join the developed world in providing meaningful opportunities for children with disabilities to be included in mainstream education.

Recommendations

1. There is an urgent need to review the inclusive education programme and ethos run by the Ministry of Education. To enable inclusive education it is important to transform the Special Education Unit (Unit Pendidikan Khas) to the Inclusive Education Unit (Unit Pendidikan Inclusive). This will change the entire focus of educating children with special needs in MOE from one of segregation classes (pendidikan khas) to inclusion in mainstream. The resource of special education teachers must be deployed to mainstream classes to support children and teachers.
2. Implement a national shadow aide programme not just in name but in reality. We urgently require a shadow aide programme to support teachers. MOE has not put this vital resource in place and parents who try to make available the provision are often hindered by local authorities. Shadow aides are a major way forwards to enable inclusion. This is an immediate measure while we work to getting sufficient numbers of well-trained teachers and resource personnel to aid and educate children with special needs in mainstream education classes.
3. Under enrolment mainstream schools should be considered as an option to implement inclusive education. Currently in Malaysia as documented in the Education blueprint, 34 % of Malaysian primary schools have fewer than 150 students and are officially classified as under enrolled schools. Differentiated instruction, peer-support and shadow aide for a meaningful inclusion is more feasible to implement in under enrolment schools because the number of student enrolment is low. The small size classroom enable educators to focus better on students with disability compared to regular schools which has large size class. Modifications such as placing the child with special needs near to the teacher's table, placing the child in the front row, preparing a different worksheet for the child are some behaviour support plans possible to apply in small size classrooms.



It is time that the system changes its outlook at children and people with disability as passive recipients in a charity model to active participant in a rights model.

Parents of children with disabilities have much to offer. It is vital that educators and the education system work in partnership with parents to enable inclusion success.

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