

Disability – Education in Malaysia for Children with Special Needs Progress, Critical Gaps, Efforts under Way and Policy

Introduction

Education services for children with disabilities have slowly improved in Malaysia, evolving from services for children with physical disabilities to encompass those with learning disabilities. It has moved from being civil society organisation (CSO)-led to greater involvement and service provision by Government. In Malaysia, we have seen the growth of policies and services to all States. However, implementation is still an issue, especially of inclusive education. This paper outlines the growth of services, the policies in place and the challenges facing inclusive education for children with disabilities in Malaysia. It offers suggestions on how the process can be hastened and improved.

I. Historical Account of Education Services for Children with Special Needs (Amar 2008, Amar 2012, Lee & Low 2014)

Services for children with disabilities began largely as acts of charity in the 1960s and 1970s. They were started as an extension of the compassion of religious groups, predominantly Christian, and were often expatriate-initiated. Many took the form of residential homes for persons with physical disabilities and were run by voluntary groups. Most were managed based on public donations and visits to them were viewed as ‘social concern’ for the less fortunate. The earliest service was started by the St. Nicholas’ Home for the Blind in Penang in 1926. Other examples (not comprehensive) include the Cheshire Homes for the Disabled (Johore, started in 1960; Selangor, 1963; Sarawak, 1969), The Selangor Spastic Children’s Association (1960) and the Bethany Home (1966), originally for children with epilepsy and subsequently providing other disability support services, including early intervention. Over the years, the Government and service clubs, such as the Rotary Club and Lion’s Club, were among key sources of support for these services.

From 1970s to 1990s, growth was slow with services primarily focused on those with cerebral palsy, severe intellectual disabilities or visual/hearing impairment and were largely led by CSOs. Many were still residential and based on a charity model. One notable exception was Peter Young who helped to start Malaysian Care – the models he helped develop were empowering and advocacy-based. He was one of the earliest voices of advocacy for persons with disabilities in Malaysia. He pioneered a ‘model’ special needs people’s home in 1981 (Rumah Rahmat) and Malaysian Care has been involved in setting up early intervention programmes (EIPs) in Malaysia since 1988. CSOs emerged in various parts of the country to meet felt needs and many were focused on EIP service provision. The majority were provider-led, rather than parent-led or led by persons with disabilities. Education for deaf persons and blind persons were catered for by the Education Department since the 1970s, but education for persons with learning disabilities was only considered in the late 1980s, after a group of parents met up with the Minister of Education.

With improvements in healthcare, disability and developmental problems in childhood have become more important health problems in society and emerged on the national agenda. Data from international studies suggest that 10% of all children have developmental

problems in the pre-school period and that, with age, the rate of detection increases to 15%. This was the beginning of the development of services led by government agencies. A recommendation from a Cabinet Committee Report (1979) stated that the Government should be the main provider of education for children with special educational needs. In 1986, the Ministry of Health, through the Family Health Development Division, moved from detecting children with special needs and offering hospital-based rehabilitation, to training public health nurses in managing children with special needs in the community. Provision of rehabilitation services at health centres for children with special needs began in 1996.

Although the Ministry of Education established a Special Education Unit in 1964 and an Inter-Ministerial Committee on Special Education (Welfare, Health, Education) was formed in 1981, the growth of school special education services was slow until the 1990s.

The Welfare Department has long been involved in offering residential care for persons with extensive disabilities, although the growth of these centres has been limited. The community-based rehabilitation (CBR) model was adopted by the Welfare Department in 1983 and this saw the growth of EIPs in many rural settings by 1995.

II. International Initiatives, Malaysian Policy Documents and Education Services for Children with Special Needs

Valuable documents have appeared over the past 30 years that have advocated for improved education services for children with special needs, in particular inclusive education for all children. These have helped craft changes in Malaysia in recent years.

A. International Initiatives

The most useful international initiatives include the following:

1. United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989)

"States Parties recognize the right of the child to education (including with disability) ... on the basis of equal opportunity," (UNCRC, Article 28)

"States Parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to ... (a) The development of the child's personality, talents, mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential" (UNCRC, Article 29, 1 (a))

The UNCRC in this and its other Articles advocates for the rights of children with disabilities and non-discrimination against children with disabilities.

2. Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (1994)

The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (1994) reaffirmed the right to education of every individual, including children with special needs, as a basic human right and pledged to ensure that right for all regardless of individual differences. Thus, children with special needs were recognised as having the same rights to education as their peers.

Furthermore, the Salamanca Statement included the call for inclusive education and specified that educational policies from national to local levels should stipulate that children with special needs or disabilities attend their neighbourhood schools (the schools that would be attended if the children did not have a disability). In other words, children with or without special needs should learn together, and from each other, in the same classrooms, in their own communities.

3. **United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) (2006)**

The CRPD is much stronger:

“States Parties recognize the right of persons with disabilities to education. With a view to realizing this right without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity, States Parties shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning directed to: (a) The full development of human potential and sense of dignity and self-worth, and the strengthening of respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms and human diversity; (b) The development by persons with disabilities of their personality, talents and creativity, as well as their mental and physical abilities, to their fullest potential;” (CRPD, Article 24. Education, 1 (a), (b))

Furthermore, “... States Parties shall ensure that: (a) Persons with disabilities are not excluded from the general education system on the basis of disability, and that children with disabilities are not excluded from free and compulsory primary education, or from secondary education, on the basis of disability; (b) Persons with disabilities can access an inclusive, quality and free primary education and secondary education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live; ... (d) Persons with disabilities receive the support required, within the general education system, to facilitate their effective education;” (CRPD, Article 24. Education, 2 (a), (b), (d))

4. **United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), as contained in the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2015)**

The SDGs have a number of goals related to disability. In particular, Goal 4, *“Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promotion of life-long learning opportunities for all”* focuses on eliminating gender and other disparities in education and ensuring equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities. Goal 4 calls for action to “Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all.” (2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Goal 4.a)

5. It is noteworthy that, in 1992, the concluding year of the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons, Asia-Pacific led the world in proclaiming the first regional decade of persons with disabilities. The Asia-Pacific region is now in its third regional decade of commitment to the rights of persons with disabilities. Malaysia has participated in and endorsed via intergovernmental fora all key regional disability strategies and commitments. Those include the regional decade action plans and frameworks, the present one being the Incheon Strategy to “Make the Right Real” for Persons with Disabilities in Asia and the Pacific (Incheon Strategy). At the ASEAN level, Malaysia is committed to the ASEAN Enabling Masterplan 2025: Mainstreaming the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (ASEAN Enabling Masterplan 2025).

B. Malaysia's Domestic Legislation and Policies

Malaysia's engagement in multilateral treaties, as well as international strategies and statements of commitment, has influenced the shaping of its domestic legislation and policy documents.

Regarding human resource development, the key Malaysian initiatives include the following:

1. Education Act 1996

Malaysia's Education Act 1996 underscores that primary education is compulsory for all children:

"Every parent who is a Malaysian citizen residing in Malaysia shall ensure that if his child has attained the age of six years on the first day of January of the current school year that child is enrolled as a pupil in a primary school in that year and remains a pupil in a primary school for the duration of the compulsory education." (Education Act 1996, Section 29A-2)

2. Persons with Disabilities Act 2008 (PwD Act 2008)

"Persons with disabilities shall not be excluded from the general education system on the basis of disabilities, and children with disabilities shall not be excluded from pre-school, primary, secondary and higher education, on equal basis with persons or children without disabilities..." (PwD Act 2008, Section 28. Access to education, (1)

Section 28-2 states that:

"The Government and private educational providers shall, in order to enable persons and children with disabilities to pursue education, provide, among others, infrastructure, equipment and teaching materials, teaching methods, curricula and other forms of support that meet the diverse needs of persons or children with disabilities".

3. Two Memorandums by the National Early Childhood Intervention Council on Early Childhood Intervention (2006) and on Inclusive Education (2012)

These memorandums state:

"Parents, carers and families should be recognized, and empowered, as positive partners in all aspects of screening, diagnosis, assessment and intervention...."

"Our education system should focus on building an inclusive culture in ALL schools, where diversity is embraced, respected and valued. This commitment must first be clearly and firmly espoused by the policy makers themselves who must promote this policy to school stakeholders at all levels – namely heads of schools, teachers, as well as the school administrative staff, students and their family members...."

4. The Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025

When the Malaysian Education Blueprint was first released in September 2012, it was a disappointment for students with special educational needs (SEN), giving only superficial attention to this group and went against the principles of good practice and inclusive education. The National Early Childhood Intervention Council (NECIC) made a public statement on the Blueprint from the perspective of children with SEN:

“The Blueprint acknowledges that SEN make up an estimated 10% of every cohort. For a 268-page document with 91,800 words, outlining the nation's educational direction over the next two decades, only a mere 1,070 words (spanning three pages) are devoted to SEN. One wonders how a national blueprint could fail to provide due attention to such a significant proportion of Malaysian students.” (NECIC, 2012)

The Blueprint was extensively revised with the assistance of many individuals and organisations (including the NECIC), to ensure inclusive education for children with disabilities.

Section 4-18 of the updated Malaysian Education Blueprint now reads:

“The aim is to give every child with special needs access to a high quality and relevant education that is tailored to his or her particular needs, and to have 75% of students with special needs enrolled in inclusive programmes by 2025”.

The updated Malaysian Education Blueprint also has a sizeable section outlining the provision of resources for children with special needs.

5. **Education (Special Education) Regulations 2013 (added under Education Act 1996)**

The Education (Special Education) Regulations 2013 were added to the Education Act of 1996 and defined inclusive education as “an educational programme for a pupil with special educational needs which is attended by a pupil with special educational needs together with other pupils in the same class in a government school or government-aided school.” Also defined in the Regulations is the Special Education Integrated Programme: *“an educational programme for a pupil with special educational needs which is only attended by pupils with special needs in a special class in a government school or government-aided school.”*

While well-meaning, the definition for inclusive education is limited and hinders its implementation.

In addition, the Regulations give powers to the education authorities to decide, without parental involvement, on the child's placement after a three-month probation period. This could mean deciding that the child is not suitable for the inclusive and integrated education programmes and placing the child in a CBR centre, instead of a school.

6. **Zero Reject Policy, Ministry of Education, 2018**

The Zero Reject Policy confirms the right of parents to choose the school (in their neighbourhood) and type of class for their children. It does not allow any school to refuse to accept a child with SEN into mainstream class (inclusive education). While not a legal document, this policy overrides the 2013 Special Education Regulations.

7. **Administrative documents dealing with specific issues**

The abovementioned legislation/policies, together with selected administrative documents, deal with specific issues, such as the following:

- 7.1 Teacher Assistant (shadow aide) for a child with SEN in mainstream class (inclusive education).
- 7.2 Support for teaching visually-impaired students.
- 7.3 Support for (students with) physical disability and students with mobility access issues.
- 7.4 Extra time and support for a child with SEN during examinations.
- 7.5 Extra support for a child with SEN in mainstream class (inclusive education).

For example:

- (a) Panduan Pengurusan Peperiksaan, Lembaga Peperiksaan, Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, edisi 2018 (especially pages 22-23);
- (b) Panduan Pengurusan Pusat Peperiksaan Bertulis, Lembaga Peperiksaan, Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia 2016 (especially pages 58-62, Section 7.4 Calon Berkeperluan Khas, CBK);
- (c) Panduan Pengurusan Peperiksaan Bagi Calon Bekeperluan Khas;
- (d) Surat Pekeliling Ikhtisas Bilangan 1 Tahun 2018 - Garis Panduan Penglibatan Ibu Bapa, Penjaga dan Komuniti Sebagai Sukarelawan Di Dalam Kelas.

8. **Complaints to the Ministry of Education**

An online mechanism to make complaints to the Ministry of Education is also available: <<https://moe.spab.gov.my/eApps/system/index.do>>.

The quality, confidentiality and responsiveness of this mechanism is uncertain. Many parents are afraid to make complaints as their child and school would be identified and they fear reprisals.

III. **Key Limitations of Local Legislation and Policy**

The key limitations of local legislation and policy are that it does not hold the Government and specifically the education service providers, including private ones, accountable for failure to fulfil the requirements inherent in legislation and policies. While complaints can be made, these often do not always result in constructive change or action.

On the ground, parents are often denied inclusive education. As most parents are not aware of their rights, they are often 'bullied' by the system. There was a recent attempt to take a school principal and teachers to court for failing a child with autism – negligence, bullying and failure to offer sufficient education support. However, the ongoing court proceedings do not appear favourable for the child and family.

IV. **Situation of Education Services for Children with Special Needs in Malaysia**

Under the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (Preschool to Post-Secondary Education), the Ministry of Education (MOE) target is for SEN students to be in the inclusive programme (mainstream education) at a rate of 30% by 2015 and 75% by 2025 (this would mean a rate of approximately 48% by 2019). The tables below show the achievement of inclusive education for SEN children based on MOE data (Quick Facts 2019). A representative of MOE at a 5 December 2019 presentation (High-level Government & Civil Society Roundtable: Moving Together, Leaving No Malaysian with Disabilities Behind!) held in Kuala Lumpur to mark International Day of Persons with Disabilities 2019 stated that the inclusive education achievement for SEN children for 2019 was 60.9%.

A review of MOE data shows that 14,704 children with disabilities are in mainstream schools, but without being included in the Special Education Integration Programme (SEIP) - a programme for students with disabilities in regular schools, i.e., integration but not

inclusion. Of children in the SEIP programme, 1,328 are said to be in full inclusion and 24,998 in partial inclusion (no definition of partial inclusion is provided). The total number of children with disabilities identified in MOE schools is 79,920. This gives a total inclusion rate (any type of inclusion) of 51.3% (41,030 out of 79,920) and a full inclusion rate of 20.0% (16,032 out of 79,920).

Table 4.2 Number of Classes, Enrolment and Teachers in Special Education Integration Programme (2017-2019)

	2017			2018			2019		
	Pre-school	Primary	Secondary	Pre-school	Primary	Secondary	Pre-school	Primary	Secondary
Class	206	3,048	2,518	178	5,350	4,112	179	5,653	4,278
Enrolment	1,122	27,231	21,745	808	33,174	28,244	764	35,761	29,455
Teacher	204	8,083	5,308	176	8,193	5,497	179	8,191	5,694

Notes : Special Education Integration Programme refers to a programme for students with disabilities in regular schools
Source : Special Education Division, MOE

Table 4.4 Enrolment of Inclusive Programme in Regular Schools and Special Education Integration Programme (2019)

	Regular Schools	SEIP	
	Full Inclusion	Full Inclusion	Partial Inclusion
Pre	167		
Primary	7,162	485	11,621
Secondary	7,375	843	13,377
Total Inclusive	14,704	1,328	24,998

Note : Data included enrolment in regular schools
Source : Special Education Division, MOE

The problems with the inclusion rates presented here are:

- The true full inclusion rate from MOE data is only 20.0%, far below targets even for 2015.
- There is no clear idea of what partial inclusion means. On the ground, parents of children with SEN and some teachers have indicated that even involvement in art, music or physical activities classes are considered inclusion. This not in the spirit of true inclusion.
- The Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 recognises that at least 10% of children have special needs (international sources suggest the rate of detection increases to 15% with age). Using 10% and the school enrolment figures for 2019, there should be 473,426 children with disabilities in MOE schools. Hence MOE has only identified 16.9% of the children with SEN (79,920 out of 473,426). It may be noted that, in April 2019, the Deputy Education Minister was quoted as saying that “*only 14% of special-needs children are estimated to be registered in special education programmes in government schools.*”
- Reasons for the gross underestimation of the number of children requiring special education are many. Parents are reluctant to inform MOE staff, to minimise the risk of their children being discriminated against. Furthermore, at least 12% of all primary school enrolled children are not in MOE schools (actual rate may be higher). They are

in private, international, religious or home schools. Some parents of children with disabilities prefer private, international or home schools, as experience to date shows that those seem relatively better at accepting and educating children with SEN.

One recent national study on inclusive education experiences of parents in Malaysia in all types of schools (National Family Support Groups, Malaysia 2018) showed that, of parents who had recently attempted inclusive education in primary schools, only 52% of schools were supportive and only 41% of children were successfully included. MOE schools were significantly less supportive or successful than other types of schools. The study showed that the major obstacle to inclusion was an education system, especially its human resource component, which was not supportive. 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 study found continued and widespread denial by mainstream school authorities of permission for shadow aides to support inclusive learning and victimising of children holding Government-issued disability registration cards (OKU cards).

A study by UNICEF (2019) in Sabah, with a diverse ethnic composition, a vast, diverse and challenging geographical terrain and relatively poor rural household access to basic amenities, showed that more than half of the registered children with disabilities did not attend school at all levels of education. In addition, children with disabilities were at least four times more likely not to attend school.

Hence, currently the majority of children who require special education support have been either missed or excluded, or parents have used alternative education options, or parents have chosen to remain silent about the issues so as to avoid discrimination and segregation.

V. Quality of Inclusive Education, Support and Resources

To enable meaningful inclusion, there has to be adequate resources for the child and support for the teacher and the class. For a total of 10,208 schools under MOE, there are only 25 specialised staff members available for all of Malaysia (per. comm. MOE 2019):

- 5 occupational therapists;
- 5 speech therapists;
- 5 audiologists;
- 6 psychologists;
- 4 peripatetic staff.

For children in the MOE Special Education Integration Programme (SEIP, integration not inclusion) there are 14,064 teachers for 65,980 students (including pre-school), a ratio of 1 teacher to 4.7 children.

In addition, there are 6,082 teacher-helpers (Pembantu Pengurusan Murid, PPM).

Extra human resource support for children included in mainstream classes is not specified.

The Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 acknowledges that Malaysia faces an “*acute shortage of qualified teachers and special education specialists.*”

It also states plans “*to train all teachers on the basics of handling special education needs students*”

How many teachers are qualified with special education training is uncertain.

However, the Director of MOE’s Special Education Division, Datuk Dr Yasmin Hussain, was quoted in January 2019 as saying that “*there are some states that do not have sufficient special education teachers*”

A Malaysian study by Hussin and Hamdan (2016) examined the effect of knowledge, readiness and teaching technique in inclusive practices among mainstream teachers. The study highlighted that, while many were receptive to having children with special needs included in mainstream classes, the majority had limited understanding of inclusive education, lacked readiness for such children in mainstream classes and expressed a critical need for training.

Although there is a directive from MOE for a shadow aide (teacher assistant) programme to support the inclusion of SEN children (and their teachers) in mainstream education, this policy appears to be hampered by reluctance on the ground. When a shadow aide is available, that availability is usually paid for by parents at their own expense. In addition, shadow aides are only allowed by MOE to assist the child with SEN in behavioural and self-care related issues. Therefore, minimal support is available to the child and mainstream teacher for making accommodation and lesson modifications, to enable the child’s learning and participation in school.

There is no data available on what percentage of children in the inclusive education and the SEIP programmes have an individual education plan (IEP), which is mandated by MOE and the Special Education Regulations 2013. The IEP should be shared with parents and revised jointly with parents on a yearly basis. Anecdotal reports from many parents suggest that the majority have not seen the IEP and are unsure if it is available.

The Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 also acknowledges that “*Current mainstream schools lack disabled-friendly facilities such as ramps, railings, handicap toilets and lifts,*” and mentions plans to review and upgrade these facilities, as well as the provision of appropriate technical aids. The Government, under Budget 2020, has a RM23 million allocation for schools to build facilities for children with SEN.

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 aides for meaningful inclusion are more feasible to implement in under-enrolled schools. Teacher-student ratio per class is lower, allowing for better opportunities to hone teaching and class management skills. However, it is uncertain to what extent MOE is using under-enrolled mainstream schools as an option to implement inclusive education.

With limited MOE progress, there has been an unhealthy rise in profit-motivated (money-making) professionals and education services for SEN children. These are beyond the reach of many parents. It is of particular concern that services are even more limited in rural communities, with some pockets of the population (indigenous communities) having no access to services.

VI. Response and Acceptance of the Public to Disability and Inclusive Education

For inclusive education to take place, not only are policies, structures and resources required, but also community acceptance.

A UNICEF (2017) study on knowledge, attitudes and practices concerning childhood disability in Malaysia revealed the prevalence of community-level negative perceptions of children with disabilities. Forty per cent of the respondents agreed that it would be disruptive to be in school with children with disabilities. More than 70% believed that children with mental disabilities should not be in the same school as children without disabilities. Ten per cent asserted that children with disabilities need not attend school.

A study by the National Family Support Groups (2018) revealed that parents of children without disabilities, in the same school, were also obstacles (8% of the time) to enabling inclusive education for a child with disabilities. A common experience was *“Other children went home and complained to their parents ... Angry parents complain in the class WhatsApp group shaming my child & pointing out his/her short-comings.”*

Some commented that *“bullying of our special needs children is common and often not addressed by the teachers or school authorities.”*

This negative outlook and opposition from parents of children without disabilities and the general public suggest that many are unaware of disabilities and require support to change their heart-sets and outlooks.

VII. What Inclusive Education Should Look Like

The table below shows the ideal inclusive environment and current practices.

Inclusive education means removing barriers to education (barriers to access, learning and social participation) for all children, by providing individualised support and valuing the diversity that they bring to the school community.

Inclusive education for children with SEN implies that the student participates, with individualised support, in the general classroom. The student is able, with some accommodation and modification, to access the same curriculum and engages and interacts with peers. The student is an independent, valued and respected member of the class. Hence, the essential elements of inclusion are not only academic, but also social. Inclusive education implies that helping the child to cope with the syllabus is a shared responsibility between school and parents.

Table: Inclusion of children with disabilities: Ideal vs Common Practice in Malaysia

Ideal Inclusion	Common Practice
Student participates, with individualised support, in the general classroom	Student must demonstrate the same set of abilities as his/her peers to participate in the general classroom
Student is able, with accommodation and modification, to access the same curriculum	Student must demonstrate ability and is expected to keep up with existing curriculum
Student is engaged and interacts with peers	Student has no meaningful interaction with peers
Student is an independent, valued, and respected member of the class	Student is looked upon as helpless, needy and dependent

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.

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

VIII. Benefits of Inclusion

The benefits of inclusion are extensive, as evidenced by data. Inclusion benefits not just the child with disabilities, but also students without disabilities. From the early work of Bunch and Valeo (2004) and Staub and Peck (1995), there is evidence that inclusion of children with special needs in the mainstream fosters meaningful friendships and caring relationships, as well as enhances awareness, acceptance and appreciation of individual differences and diversity. It enables more meaningful participation in school and community, for both children and families with disabilities. Early classroom inclusion enables greater inclusion in future environments, such as the work place or in the community.

A recent summary of the evidence on inclusive education by Hehir and colleagues (2016) provide updated data and reports on the benefits of inclusive education (evidence from more than 280 research studies conducted in 25 countries). They find that inclusion consistently confers “*substantial short- and long-term benefits for children’s cognitive and social development.*” Inclusion improves the academic output and social and emotional development of both students with and without disabilities. More importantly, inclusion challenges teachers to change the way they teach and *no longer “target the curriculum toward the average student.”* It encourages schools and teachers to practise Universal Design for Learning (UDL), “*providing students with multiple ways to engage with classroom material, multiple representations of curricular concepts, and multiple means for students to express what they have learned ... This type of thoughtful, universally designed approach to learning benefits disabled and non-disabled students alike.*”

IX. **Suggestions for Making Inclusive Education Happen**

In this section, it is important to appreciate that the lessons learned in the Malaysian context, while often universal, may occasionally be more applicable to the local setting. Initiatives are required from both policy makers and leaders (top-down), as also from civil society and family advocacy groups (bottom-up). A summary of the key steps to be taken include the following:

1. Pursue initiatives to **change the long-standing misconceptions of the community** regarding the capabilities of children with all types of disabilities.

This is best done by using the media, sharing stories of personal journeys and public advocacy. A change in media perception of disability is needed. It is time that the system changes its view of children and adults with disabilities as passive recipients of charity to respect them as active participants, with rights to access education and other services on an equal basis with others in Malaysian society.

Equally needed is a dramatic shift away from all non-inclusive behaviours and policy in all aspects of society (e.g., gender relations, social class, income level, urban-rural access to services). In recent years, teaching has become a less valued and chosen profession. There is a critical need for greater recognition and enhancement of the status of the teaching profession for the development of Malaysian children and society.

2. **Strengthen inclusion policies and legislation** to establish inclusive education as normative public policy.

In Malaysia, both the Education Act 1996 and the Persons with Disabilities Act 2008 require revision to better define inclusion, encourage and uphold its universal implementation and stipulate penalties for those that, through omission or commission, obstruct its implementation. In line with this, administrative documents and standard operating procedures, especially in education (government or private), need to be revised and updated.

An important policy decision must be the transformation of the MOE Special Education Unit (Unit Pendidikan Khas) to the **Inclusive Education Unit** (Unit Pendidikan Inclusive). Another must be the transformation of Malaysia's education framework to one that is inclusive, and covering fully from the early years to tertiary education. This would change the entire MOE focus of educating children with SEN: from one of segregation to inclusion. Accordingly, MOE must stop focusing on achievement KPIs and instead focus on inclusion KPIs. It is expected that the Government should allocate sufficient budgetary resources for implementing and sustaining inclusive education.

3. Incorporate **Universal Design for Learning (UDL)** into teacher training curricula for all levels (pre-school to college/university). This would prepare educators with the tools to seamlessly implement inclusive education. The goal should be for all children, with and without disabilities, to be taught to fulfil their potential. In addition, it would be necessary to conduct in-service training for teachers on the basics of supporting

special education needs students. NECIC has developed a course for inclusion training for the pre-school period. (NECIC, 2019)

4. **Promote short-term** measures (low-hanging fruit) to implement inclusive education, including **using under-enrolled mainstream schools and implementing a shadow aide programme** (aides provided by parents or CSOs) to support teachers throughout Malaysia.
5. **Introduce long-term** solutions: policies and programmes to specify and support plans to develop **sufficient numbers of well-trained special education teachers and resource personnel** (e.g., speech and language therapists, educational psychologists, occupational therapists) to support and educate children with special needs in mainstream education classes. Reduce mainstream class sizes to 20-25 students, to provide a better learning environment for all children.
6. Make schools and classrooms welcoming environments for all students, with and without disabilities, where they learn to embrace and celebrate diversity.

There is a need to **foster in students without disabilities:**
 - (a) Attitude change towards acceptance of children, peers and adults with disabilities;
 - (b) Realization of the benefits of an inclusive system and society.
7. Encourage educators and the education system to work in **partnership with parents**, to enable inclusion success, as parents of children with disabilities have much to offer. Achieve a level of transparency in sharing and working together on individual education plans, listening to and accepting ideas and support from families.
8. Construct and renovate all schools and universities (all aspects of the education-related built environment in general) according to **universal design principles**, to make them accessible for all people, regardless of age, disability or other factors. Provide classrooms and schools that are not just barrier-free, but also have enhanced accessibility for learners, parents, teaching staff members and other employees. Mandate via legislation adherence to the universal design of education-related infrastructure and make that compulsory in the training of planners, architects, building contractors and engineers.
9. Harness the power of families (**parent empowerment**) as one of the most effective mechanisms to make inclusion happen. Empower parents to know their rights and request inclusion, while the system is being developed and strengthened. Encourage parents to use the detailed advisory written by the National Family Support Group for Children and People with Special Needs (Amar, Shyielathy & Alvin 2019) that quotes specific policy documents and outlines strategies to enable inclusion.

10. Persist in **continuous advocacy** for inclusive education in all forms, including via the media, memorandums, civil action and parliamentary debate. Recognize that change takes time and education policies and focus tend to shift with political and governmental changes. Keep the focus of education on the child's needs and not those of the adults.

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 public and private education systems in Malaysia to mature and join those of APEC economies that provide meaningful opportunities for children with disabilities to be included in mainstream education.

X. **Suggestions for an APEC HRD WG project: 'APEC 2020 for Inclusive Education'**

Here are five suggestions for consideration by the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Human Resources Development Working Group (HRDWG) on using resources that it could mobilize, to conduct disability-related projects and initiatives focused on inclusive education.

1. **Learn** from the successes and failures of member economies regarding their experiences in implementing inclusive education. This would require **networking** and **sharing of experiences** specifically on inclusive education.
2. **Document** the development and implementation of APEC members' policies and legislation that facilitate and support inclusion. In particular, undertake a comparative analysis of each APEC member's education legislation and its alignment with the inclusive education goals of UNCRPD, SDG4, the Incheon Strategy (especially Goals 3, 5, 8 and 10) and the ASEAN Enabling Masterplan 2025.
3. **Build capability** focusing on 'on-the-ground-learning' through technical field visit programmes involving 'good practice' universally-designed inclusive schools. **Structure** these 'on-the-ground-learning' experiences to facilitate the development of inclusive education by piloting the establishment of universally-designed inclusive schools and curriculum frameworks in member economies, and as a catalyst for scaling up progress.
4. **Introduce a common APEC framework** for an annual score card system, to facilitate mutual support in learning and action on inclusive education in terms of policy, implementation and outcomes.
5. **Work** as a community to **advocate for change** with leaders of member economies, to expedite the implementation of inclusive education.

It is important that we keep our hearts always focused on the child's need, not the needs of the organisation or the system.

Inclusion is not about examination success of the few, but about acceptance of diversity as social wealth.

Dato' Dr Amar-Singh HSS

MBBS (Mal), MRCP (UK), FRCP (Glasg), MSc Community Paeds (Lond, dist.), Cert Theology (Aust, Hons)

Senior Consultant Paediatrician

Adviser, National Early Childhood Intervention Council (NECIC), Malaysia

February 2020

Email: amarhss@gmail.com

Acknowledgement

I am deeply indebted to Yuenwah San, formerly Senior Advisor (Disability-inclusive Development) to the Social Development Division/United Nations ESCAP, for requesting this paper, actively supporting its development/direction and providing extensive editorial support. Lai-Thin Ng, Project Officer for the National Early Childhood Intervention Council (NECIC), and Dr. Shyielathy Arumugam, Special Education Teacher and Parent Advocate, were both instrumental in providing resources and ideas, as well as kindly proof-reading the document.

References (in order of appearance in the text):

1. Amar-Singh HSS (2008). Meeting the Needs of Children with Disability in Malaysia, Med J Malaysia Vol 63 No. 1.
2. Amar-Singh HSS (2012). Whither (Wither?) Services for Children with Disability in Malaysia. National Early Childhood Intervention Council (NECIC) Conference, Sibul, Sarawak, Malaysia.
3. Lee, L.W., Low, H.M. (2014). Evolution of Special Education in Malaysia. British Journal of Special Education, Volume 41(1).
4. Cabinet Committee Report (1979). Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia (1979). Laporan Jawatankuasa Kabinet Menkaji Pelaksanaan Dasar Pelajaran (Report of the Cabinet Committee Reviewing the Implementation of the Educational Policy), Kuala Lumpur, Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia (Otherwise known as Cabinet Committee Report, 1979).
5. UNICEF (2001). United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. General Comment No. 1. Article 29 (1): The Aims of Education. CRC/GC/2001/1 (available here: <https://www.unicef-irc.org/portfolios/general_comments/GC1_en.doc.html>).
6. The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (1994) (available here: <<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000098427>>).
7. United Nations (2006). Department of Economic and Social Affairs – Disability. Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) Article 24 – Education (available here: <<https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities/article-24-education.html>>).
8. United Nations SDGs (2015). The Sustainable Development Goals and Disability (available here: <<https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/about-us/sustainable-development-goals-sdgs-and-disability.html>>)
9. ASEAN Enabling Masterplan 2025 : Mainstreaming the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (available here: <<https://asean.org/asean-enabling-masterplan-2025-mainstreaming-rights-persons-disabilities/>>)
10. Education Act 1996 (Act 550), especially Section 29A-2.
11. Persons with Disabilities Act 2008 (Act 685), especially Section 28.
12. National Early Childhood Intervention Council (NECIC) 2006. Memorandum on Early Childhood Intervention adopted by delegates to the first Malaysian National Conference on Early Childhood Intervention, Penang, Malaysia.
13. National Early Childhood Intervention Council (2012). Memorandum on Inclusive Education as National Policy for Children with Special Needs. Malaysia. Signed by 57 organisations.
14. The Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025. (available here: <<https://www.moe.gov.my/dasar/1207-malaysia-education-blueprint-2013-2025/file>>)

15. Amar-Singh HS, Khor Ai-Na, Tan Liok Ee (2012). National Early Childhood Intervention Council (NECIC) press release: "Education blueprint: Little for special needs students" (available here: <<https://www.malaysiakini.com/letters/209876>>)
16. Education (Special Education) Regulations 2013 (added under Education Act 1996).
17. Ministry of Education Malaysia (2018). Zero Reject Policy. (available here: <http://jpnperak.moe.gov.my/ppdbagandatuk/attachments/article/3643/SURAT_PELAKSANAAN_ZERO_REJECT_POLICY.pdf>)
18. Quick Facts 2019. Malaysia Educational Statistics. Educational Planning and Research Division, Ministry of Education Malaysia. ISSN: 1985-6407.
19. Amar-Singh HSS, Alvin Teoh, Shyielathy Arumugam, Sarini Bujang, Edmund Lim, Ng Lai Thin (2018). Inclusive Education Experiences of Parents in Malaysia. National Family Support Groups, Malaysia.
20. United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Malaysia (2019). Children Out of School – Malaysia: The Sabah Context. In collaboration with the Ministry of Education Malaysia (available here: <<https://www.unicef.org/malaysia/reports/out-school-children>>).
21. Muhamad Khairul Anuar Hussin and Abdul Rahim Hamdan (2016). Effect of Knowledge, Readiness and Teaching Technique in Inclusive Practices among Mainstream Teachers in Malaysia. International Journal of Early Childhood Special Education (INT-JECSE), 8(1), 1 – 15. (available here: <<https://doi.org/10.20489/intjecse.239573>>)
22. United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Malaysia (2017). Childhood Disability in Malaysia - A Study of Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices (available here: <<https://www.unicef.org/malaysia/media/281/file/Childhood%20Disability%20in%20Malaysia.pdf>>).
23. Bunch G. & Valeo A. (2004). Student attitudes toward peers with disabilities in inclusive and special education schools, Disability & Society, 19:1, 61-76.
24. Staub D. & Peck C. A. (1995). What Are the Outcomes for Nondisabled Students? The Inclusive School Pages. Vol 52 (4), 36-40.
25. Hehir T, Grindal T., Freeman B., Lamoreau R., Borquaye Y., Burke S. (2016). A Summary of the Evidence on Inclusive Education. Prepared for the Instituto Alana, São Paulo (available here: <<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED596134.pdf>>).
26. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) resources: <<https://udlresource.ca/>> and <<https://www.understood.org/en/learning-thinking-differences/treatments-approaches/educational-strategies/universal-design-for-learning-what-it-is-and-how-it-works>>
27. National Early Childhood Intervention Council (2019). Inclusion training course for the pre-school period. (see: <<https://www.newsarawaktribune.com.my/inclusive-preschool-course-attracts-26-participants/>>)
28. Amar-Singh HSS, Shyielathy Arumugam, Alvin Teoh (2019). Support for Parents of Children with Special Needs to obtain their Rights in Inclusive Education. National Family Support Group for Children & People with Special Needs (Version 1.1).

Citation for this document:

Amar-Singh HSS (2020). Education in Malaysia for Children with Special Needs Progress, Critical Gaps, Efforts under Way and Policy. Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Human Resources Development Working Group (HRDWG). 11 February 2020, Malaysia