

TEACHERS' READINESS TO IMPLEMENT INCLUSIVE
EDUCATION IN PRIMARY SCHOOL CLASSROOMS IN
SELANGOR

BY

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ABSTRACT

This study was aimed at investigating the readiness of teachers to implement inclusive education in primary school classrooms in the state of Selangor. For this purpose, their knowledge, beliefs, attitudes and confidence pertaining to teaching in an inclusive setting were examined. The researcher also delved into the teachers' perceived school readiness to implement inclusive education. As the researcher was keen to examine the beliefs and attitudes of a great number of participants scattered over a large geographical area, it was necessary to use a questionnaire to collect the data because the questionnaire also consists of an open-ended section in which the teachers were given the opportunity to express their feelings freely about teaching children with learning disabilities in mainstream classrooms. The questionnaires were administered to a total of 1027 primary school teachers from 14 schools in the state of Selangor. Although only 925 of them participated and returned the completed questionnaires, this number is considered sufficient, as it is equivalent to a 90% return rate. Overall, the results of this study revealed that the teachers were knowledgeable about inclusive education, but they were not conversant with the needs of children with learning disabilities. With regard to their beliefs concerning inclusion, the majority of them anticipated the possibility of learning-disabled children being discriminated by teachers. It was also discovered that most of the teachers were not in favour of learning-disabled children being placed in mainstream classrooms and they were not mentally prepared to teach the children. In addition to those findings, it was also found that administrators of the schools in which the teachers teach, are quite accommodating and supportive of inclusive education as they constantly encourage the teachers to enhance their professional development. However, one of the obstacles to school readiness for inclusion as indicated by the teachers, is the lack of trained specialist teachers in schools who can help guide regular teachers through the teaching of learning-disabled children in mainstream classrooms. On the other hand, several implications emerged from the findings of this study. One of the major implications of inclusive education is that since the teachers were not in favour of the placement of learning-disabled children in inclusive classrooms, these children would not be able to receive equitable education as emphasised by the UNESCO. Last but not the least, as the teachers were not mentally ready to include learning-disabled children in mainstream classrooms, the children may not be able to learn comfortably alongside their abled peers. Thus, it is recommended that teachers be provided with more training in the field of inclusion to help them cope with learning-disabled children, better.

خلاصة البحث

هدف هذا البحث إلى التحقيق في مدى استعداد المعلمين لتطبيق التعليم الشامل في فصول المدارس الابتدائية بولاية سلنجنور. ولهذا الغرض تم فحص معارف هؤلاء المعلمين واعتقاداتهم واتجاهاتهم وثقتهم بأنفسهم فيما يتعلق بالتدريس في بيئة شاملة. كما تعمقت الباحثة كذلك فيما يعتقدونه المعلمون عن مدى استعداد المدارس لتطبيق استراتيجية التعليم الشامل. وبما أن الباحثة حرصت على فحص اعتقادات واتجاهات عدد كبير من المستجوبين الذين ينتشرون في مناطق جغرافية واسعة فقد كان من الضروري استخدام أداة الاستبانة لجمع البيانات، ولأن الاستبانة أيضا احتوت على قسم يتكوّن من أسئلة مفتوحة الإجابة يستطيع المعلمون من خلالها أن يعبروا عن مشاعرهم بحرية حول تعليم الأطفال الذين يعانون من صعوبات التعلم في الفصول الدراسية العادية. وقد تم إرسال الاستبانات إلى ١٠٢٧ معلم في المرحلة الابتدائية في ١٤ مدرسة بولاية سلنجنور. وعلى الرغم من أن ٩٢٥ منهم فقط شاركوا وأرسلوا إجاباتهم عن أسئلة الاستبانات، فإن هذا العدد يعتبر كافيا لأنه يعادل نسبة ٩٠%. وبشكل عام، أشارت نتائج هذا البحث إلى أن المعلمين كانوا يملكون معرفة كافية بالتعليم الشامل إلا أنهم لم يكونوا ملمين باحتياجات الأطفال ذوي صعوبات التعلم. وبالنسبة إلى اعتقاداتهم المتعلقة بإدماج الأطفال ذوي صعوبات التعلم، توقع معظمهم احتمال تعرض هؤلاء الأطفال للتمييز من قبل المعلمين. كما تم اكتشاف أن معظم المعلمين المستجوبين لا يؤيدون وضع الأطفال الذين يعانون من صعوبات التعلم في الفصول الدراسية العادية، وأنهم غير مستعدين عقليا لتعليم هؤلاء الأطفال. بالإضافة إلى هذه النتائج، فقد اكتشفت أيضا أن مديري المدارس التي يقوم المعلمون بالتدريس فيها يتكيفون ويدعمون التعليم الشامل، وأنهم يشجعون المعلمين مرارا على تحسين قدراتهم المهنية. ومع ذلك فإن واحدة من العوائق التي تحول دون استعداد المدارس لفكرة الإدماج التي أشار إليها المعلمون تتمثل في قلة المعلمين المتخصصين المتدربين في المدارس الذين يمكنهم توجيه المعلمين العاديين ومساعدتهم على تعليم الأطفال ذوي صعوبات التعلم في الفصول الدراسية العادية. ومن جهة أخرى فإن نتائج هذا البحث قد خلّفت عددا من الآثار المتعلقة بالتعليم الشامل، ومن تلك الآثار الرئيسية أنه وبما أن المعلمين المستجوبين لا يوافقون على وضع الأطفال الذين يعانون من صعوبات التعلم في الفصول الدراسية الشاملة بحجة أن هؤلاء لن يحصلوا تعليم عادل كما تؤكد عليه اليونيسكو. أخيرا، وبالنظر إلى عدم جاهزية المعلمين عقليا لإدراج الأطفال الذين يعانون من صعوبات التعلم في الفصول الدراسية العادية فلن يتمكن الأطفال من التعلم بشكل مريح جنبا إلى جنب مع زملائهم العاديين. وبالتالي فمن المستحسن تزويد المعلمين بمزيد من التدريب في مجال الإدماج لمساعدتهم على التعامل بشكل أفضل مع الأطفال الذين يعانون من صعوبات التعلم.

APPROVAL PAGE

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Irrespective of colour, creed, religion and ability, every child has the right to education. Nevertheless, contrary to this belief, in year 2005, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) reported that 140 million children did not receive schooling and were marginalised due to poverty and gender discrimination. Of that figure, children with disabilities constituted the majority.

Born with certain impairments or defects, individuals with disabilities had always been subject to stereotypes and stigmatisation. Not only were they humiliated for their physical and mental impairments in social gatherings, they were also denied the right to equitable education by being segregated from their non-disabled peers in educational institutions (Gunnþórsdóttir, 2014; Mambo, 2011; McKay, 2012;). This negative attitude towards the underprivileged group led to social ostracism resulting in high dropout and illiteracy rates among children with disabilities in developing countries (Rajovic & Jovanovic, 2013; Schwartz, Blue, McDonald, & Pace, 2010; UNESCO, 2005). In order to curb illiteracy and provide education for children with disabilities, some countries started to develop special schools (Mngo, 2017; Rajovic & Jovanovic, 2013) which gained ground at the end of the 19th century in the Europe and America (Gunnþórsdóttir, 2014; Peters, 2004).

These special education schools were built with the sole purpose of fulfilling the needs of children with disabilities and helping them reach their academic potential. With the establishment of special schools, only certain segments of the disabled population were able to receive education, however the dropout rates remained high because not

all families were financially stable to afford special education services that were expensive and in the outskirts of most developing countries, inaccessible (Peters, 2004; Rajovic & Jovanovic, 2013; UNESCO, 2005). Besides that, when placed in special schools, children with disabilities continued to face further discrimination (Schwartz et al., 2010; UNESCO, 2005) as certain ethnic groups only were seen receiving education in special schools (Schwartz et al., 2010). This problem of ostracism in special schools was exacerbated by their curricula which were not up to par with those used in regular schools and the teachers teaching in those schools who underestimated disabled children's academic achievement (Gunnþórsdóttir, 2014; Rajovic & Jovanovic, 2013). Moreover, explaining further the flaws in the special education system, Rajovic and Jovanovic (2013) stress that children with severe impairments (visual, physical, auditory and mentally- challenged) only were served in those schools but those who had emotional and development or language problems did not have any special schools to cater to their needs.

Because all the above-mentioned drawbacks in special education resulted in constant discrimination and ostracism towards children with disabilities, parents and human rights groups began to question the relevance of such schools (Gunnþórsdóttir, 2014; Mngo, 2017; Schwartz et al., 2010) and protest against the partial system. They insisted that their children be afforded the equitable education they deserved, alongside their non-disabled peers in mainstream schools. Following the pleas from various human rights activist groups, numerous summits, congresses, conventions and conferences were held (Peters, 2007) to champion the right of children with disabilities to equitable and affordable education in regular schools. One such impactful and famous congress in the history of education was the World Conference on Special Needs Education held in Salamanca, Spain in the year 1994 (Ahsan & Burnip, 2007; Ainscow,

2005; Gunnþórsdóttir, 2014; Moran, 2007) to defend the rights of disabled children in the realm of education.

During the conference, a total of 92 countries, assenting to the notion of education for all, signed the Salamanca Statement. The nations were urged to adopt the concept of inclusive education. Inclusive education means children with learning disabilities would learn alongside their non learning-disabled peers in the same classroom eliminating all forms of discriminatory attitudes towards the former and breaking all the barriers that deprived them of their right to equitable education. Thus, with the issuance of the Salamanca Statement, all the nations pledged their unwavering support for inclusive education and vowed to implement this education system in their respective countries to do justice to scores of disabled children who had for years, been out of school. Although the disabilities mentioned in the Salamanca Statement include all types of disabilities ranging from mild to severe (i.e. learning disabilities to impairments), it is important to note that for the purpose of this study, the researcher focused only on teachers teaching high-functioning children with learning disabilities such as dyslexia, mild autism and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Those dealing with children who have physical disabilities such as visual and auditory impairments, were not included in the study. Thus, the following discussion on the strengths and concerns related to the inclusive education system focuses on the teachers teaching children with learning disabilities only.

1.1.1 Inclusive Education System: Strengths and Issues with Implementation

Scholars have discussed myriad advantages of inclusive education and in this section, some of them are highlighted. To begin, lauded for its bright side, inclusive education seeks to promote equality among children regardless of creed, gender, religion, skin

colour or disability. This is due to the nature of inclusive education, which benefits all children (Leatherman, 1999; Peters, 2004) including those with learning disabilities, by affording them the opportunity to study alongside their abled peers in the mainstream classroom. If implemented duly, inclusive education would be able to eradicate discrimination and teach children to respect and appreciate diversity in a common classroom. By overcoming prejudice and accepting children from all walks of life, it would also help promote the democratisation of education which, is grounded in the principles that education should be available to everyone without any form of persecution by granting one equal learning opportunities (Powell, Kuzmina, Cwick, Khalid, & Sofo, 2016) and providing him or her with the right to access education at any level of studies (Bondarenko & Kozulin, 1991). Thus, through inclusion, education can be democratised further when learning-disabled children learn freely in the same classroom setting as their non learning-disabled peers and utilise the same instructional materials, which are also used to teach the latter.

Moreover, a learning atmosphere that suits children with learning disabilities is yet another benefit such children may enjoy in an inclusive education setting. Downing, Eichinger and Williams (1997), through their investigation found that, besides encouraging the acceptance of learning-disabled children into the classroom by their abled friends, inclusion sets a conducive environment for the former to learn in. Such a condition would further boost the morale of these children and motivate them to learn without feeling intimidated and this is especially possible when aided by their fellow peers in the common classroom.

Besides, under the inclusive education system, a child with learning disabilities has the opportunity to build or rather improve his or her character. Downing et al. (2007) assert that this education system helps learning-disabled children develop proper

conduct. Because character building has always been emphasised in education and a learning-disabled child is often associated with class management issues, it is significant to implement inclusive education as an appropriate measure that could help curb disciplinary problems as these children, in terms of behaviour, may emulate their peers who do not have any learning disabilities.

In addition, children with learning disabilities if placed in an inclusive classroom, would not feel out of place. Mogharreban and Bruns (2009) explain that being in an inclusive classroom would lead the learning-disabled children to accommodate to their new inclusive surroundings, albeit gradually, thus, eventually leading to their adaptation to the classroom. As soon as they adapt to the new environment, the children, as claimed by Gunnþórsdóttir (2014), feel that they belong there. This is because in mainstream classrooms, there are chances for such children to mingle with one another and enjoy the learning process in a fun environment with no fear of discrimination or prejudice.

In spite of its benefits, inclusive education continues to be a topic of concern among scholars as it is believed to be surrounded by certain issues. The main issue is that teachers are generally unready to implement inclusive (Hargrove, 2010; Mhlongo, 2015). The prime reason for their lack of readiness seems to be their insufficient knowledge of and exposure to inclusive education (Nedellec, 2015). The deficiency in teachers' knowledge and exposure, compounded by their lack of expertise and experience are some of the reasons Amr (2011) contends that children with special needs cannot study in the mainstream classrooms because mainstream teachers feel that only special education teachers should teach learning-disabled children and that it is not under the purview of a mainstream teacher to do so (Meglemre, 2016).

Teachers' fears related to the lack of knowledge are understood because research (Berbaum, 2009; Cha & Ahn, 2014; Goodnough, 2010; Kiley, 2011; Subban, 2006) in the field of inclusive education highlights that they are required to use their knowledge and expertise to adapt their teaching activities to suit both groups of children (abled and learning-disabled) in an inclusive classroom. Adapting the curriculum, or using what is more commonly termed, 'differentiating instruction' (Brown, 2015; Weber, Johnson, & Tripp, 2013), is one of the greatest implications of inclusive education for teachers. This adaption of instruction, or 'differentiated instruction', helps accommodate the learning needs of diverse populations of children (King, 2006) as it is a method that can be employed with not only learning-disabled children but all the children in a classroom (Srivastava, de Boer, & Pijl, 2015). If teachers are deficient in the knowledge of inclusive education (DeSutter, 2015; Mngo, 2017), they would not be able to assist children with learning disabilities in terms of mastering the curriculum content because without adaptation to the curriculum and teaching strategies, these children would not be able to cope with the lessons taught in a mainstream classroom. This may result in a possible discrimination (Maizam et al., 2016) against children with learning disabilities for they may not be able to receive the equitable education stressed in the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994).

To address this issue, the researcher believes that professional development is of utmost importance. If trained intensively (Agbenyega & Klibthong, 2014) and supported adequately in terms of resources and materials (McMillan, 2011), teachers would be able to acquire the knowledge and expertise to teach inclusive classrooms or rather children with learning disabilities, effectively. Nevertheless, extensive research has reported that, limited professional development (training, seminars, workshops) opportunities seem to be yet another issue that teachers have with regard to their

preparation for inclusive education. It is due to the lack of training that they are inadequately prepared for inclusive education or more specifically, the task of teaching children with learning disabilities (Amr, 2011; Tortu, 2015; Zulfija, Indira, & Elmira, 2013). With more professional development opportunities, teachers would not only be equipped with knowledge on inclusive education, but they would also be able to change their attitudes to and beliefs concerning inclusive education (Elias, 2014; Maiorca-Nunez, 2017) which, are also part of the main issues surrounding inclusive education. This change in beliefs and attitudes would greatly impact the success of the system because if they had negative views, inclusive education is doomed to failure (Tkachyk, 2013; Wiggins, 2012) as their attitudes and beliefs affect their readiness for inclusive education.

Because those inclusive education implementation issues generally affect most of the countries in the world that ratified the Salamanca Statement in the year 1994, it was of special interest to the researcher to examine the implementation of inclusive education in Malaysia, which, is also one of the 92 countries that agreed to implement inclusive education. Therefore, in the following section, the researcher provides an overview of the development of the system in Malaysia.

1.1.2 Inclusive Education in Malaysia

The development of inclusive education in Malaysia gained impetus gradually. It commenced when ratifying the UNESCO Salamanca Statement (1994) to provide equitable education for all children irrespective of colour, creed, gender and disability, the government enacted the Malaysia's Persons with Disabilities Act 2008 (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013) marking a paradigm shift in the education system of the country in which, the needs of special children began to receive attention. In a recent

endeavour to promote inclusive education and raise its awareness among Malaysian schools, the Ministry of Education in year 2012, developed the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025. It clearly highlights that access to education is the birth right of every child and that by year 2020, the Ministry of education envisages that all children including those with learning disabilities, will be receiving formal schooling at all academic levels, ranging from preschool to upper-secondary (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013).

In addition, as Malaysia crusades for children's educational rights, the needs of children with disabilities are held in high regard in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025. This is manifested through the four common targets it plans to achieve by 2020; Early identification of and intervention for children with learning disabilities; increase in the supply of trained teachers; efficient allocation of financial resources and the development of support infrastructure and; increase in endeavours to promote awareness of inclusive education among teachers, schools, students, parents and members of the public (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). With all those efforts in the pipeline, the Ministry of Education projects that student enrolment in inclusive programmes will reach 75% in 2025 (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). These aims prove Malaysia's commitment to support and develop the inclusive education system in the country.

Although the education ministry constantly steps up efforts to promote inclusion in Malaysian schools through the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025, the fact that the responsibility for its implementation rests solely on the shoulders of teachers teaching in mainstream classes, is worthy of notice. Nonetheless, prior to entrusting teachers with the obligation to implement inclusive education, a few questions must be addressed. How ready are the teachers? How much do they know about inclusive

education or rather what is their understanding of inclusive education? What are their perceptions of inclusive education? What do they know about students with special learning needs?

1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Teachers are an indispensable part of an inclusive classroom. The role teachers play in the class determines the direction of the teaching and learning process because teachers who have learning-disabled children in the classroom are expected to adapt their instructional approaches to cater for the needs of such children. Hence, it is crucial to find out if Malaysian teachers are ready to accept these children into mainstream classrooms and teach them differently. This is imperative because teachers' acceptance and readiness would ensure learning-disabled children's right to equitable education. If their views are not examined, it would not be possible to discover the challenges they face when teaching children with learning disabilities in an inclusive classroom and render them the necessary assistance to help them cater for the children better.

1.3 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to find out how prepared teachers were for the implementation of inclusive education in their schools.

1.4 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The following research objectives were formulated for this study:

1. To assess mainstream teachers' knowledge of inclusive education.
2. To investigate how ready teachers are to teach children with learning disabilities.

3. To investigate how prepared schools are to implement inclusive education, as perceived by teachers.

1.5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How much do mainstream ESL teachers know about inclusive education and what it entails? Specifically:
 - a) What do they know about the needs of children with learning disabilities?
 - b) What do they know about teaching children with learning disabilities?
 - c) What do they know about the implications of inclusive education
2. How ready do teachers feel about teaching in an inclusive education setting? Specifically:
 - a) What are their beliefs regarding inclusive education?
 - b) What are their attitudes to inclusive education?
 - c) How confident are they to teach inclusive classes?
3. How prepared are schools to implement inclusive education, as perceived by teachers?

1.6 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

To successfully place learning-disabled children in mainstream classrooms, the role of teachers as well as non learning-disabled children cannot be undermined. As described earlier in this chapter, the United Nations' initiative to promote Education for All (EFA) lent impetus to inclusive education, which, is aimed at providing all children, including those with learning disabilities, with equitable educational opportunities. This system of education recommends that children of mixed-abilities work collaboratively in

inclusive classroom activities, which are conducted by teachers, so that the more able children could help their less able peers as a peer-tutoring strategy (UNESCO, 2009). The role of teachers, therefore, is instrumental as it is incumbent upon teachers to ensure the synergy between both groups of children and to ensure that they comprehend all the lessons taught.

Resonating with UNESCO's concept of inclusive education which, stresses on the role of teachers and peer interaction, is Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory. A proponent of cooperative learning, Vygotsky believes that a social context comprising teachers and peers is the best environment for intellectually disabled children to learn in as their bond with them would facilitate their development tremendously (Porto, dos Santos, & Teixeira, 2018). This happens when they become 'scaffolds' that assist learning-disabled children in solving certain problems because Vygotsky claims that children with learning disabilities are guided better by adults (in this case teachers) and brighter peers whom they engage with in collaborative tasks (Van der Veer, 2007) until they become independent enough for the 'scaffolds' to be removed.

In the present study, Vygotsky's Sociocultural theory is deemed relevant and important as this study also considers the role of inclusive classrooms, comprising of regular teachers and abled children, to be vital in assisting learning-disabled children to learn better. It would greatly benefit these children, as through the guidance from teachers and interaction with more able peers, their academic performance would be boosted, as contended by Vygotsky.

1.7 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study will contribute to the field of education. After examining teachers' readiness for inclusive education, pre-service teachers' syllabi at universities can be tailored to encompass fundamental knowledge about inclusive education and learners with special needs to foster their understanding of the inclusive education concept. Besides that, the findings of this study will be able to inform the relevant authorities of the necessity and number of training sessions required to train teachers to teach in inclusive settings.

While it is acknowledged that studies on inclusive education have been conducted in Malaysia, most of the studies were centred on special education teachers or special education trainees teaching in secondary schools. Little research has been done at the primary school level to investigate the readiness of mainstream teachers who may or may not be dealing with learning-disabled children in their classrooms. Therefore, the present study seeks to investigate the readiness of primary school teachers to implement inclusive education in primary schools in Selangor.

On the other hand, the ministry of education will be informed of teachers' current level of knowledge about inclusive education, their readiness level and their concerns with regard to inclusion. This would aid the government's efforts to conduct training sessions and awareness campaigns to educate teachers about the inclusive education concept and to prepare them better to embrace the changes. Additionally, this study will be able to reveal the type of support (if any) rendered to teachers by school administrators for the smooth implementation of inclusive education so the Ministry of Education would be able to allocate its financial resources for schools and provide other forms of support deemed necessary.

Some stakeholders in the inclusive education system are also expected to benefit from this study. Teachers, especially, would be able to address their concerns, grouses