



Special education for children with disabilities in Malaysia: Progress and obstacles

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Abstract

In recent years the inclusion of persons with disabilities has become a development agenda for many countries. One of the channels to achieve inclusivity for this social group is through educational provision for children with disabilities. Malaysia has a long history of providing education for children with various categories of disabilities, especially in terms of primary and secondary education. This study evaluated the progress and status of Malaysia's special needs education. Three qualitative research methods were used for this research; qualitative systematic review, focus group discussion and interviews. Despite positive development such as the formulation of adapted curriculum for primary students with special needs and an introduction of early detection programmes, a lot more challenges still needed to be acknowledged and surmounted as in the case of adequate appropriate resources, early intervention programmes, essential facilities, readiness and adequate teaching materials all of which underlined the imperative of multi-stakeholder participatory collaboration in planning, implementation, monitoring and impact evaluation.

Keywords: categories of disabilities, children with disabilities, human rights, inclusivity, special education, special needs

Introduction

Special education is a term which has a broad scope, which not only concern with any necessary service or approach for children with various forms of disabilities, but also concern with the learning of gifted children and other marginalized children. However, this paper focuses on the special needs education for children with disabilities in Malaysia context. Starting from the pledges made by Malaysian government on special education planning at international level, Malaysia has shown progress in local special education provision, especially in policy development (Lay & Hui, 2014: p. 54). However, policy development is merely "tips of the iceberg" and most of the challenges is what form and how do we translate those policies. Through this paper, researchers intend to explore the current situation, challenges and ways to improve inclusivity through education for children with disabilities in Malaysia.

Methodology

In this paper, researchers employ three qualitative methods; qualitative systematic review, focus group discussion and interview. A qualitative systematic review was done by reviewing all journal articles related to research in special needs education for children with disabilities in Malaysia, published in the Journal of Special Needs Education Volume 1 for year 2011 until Volume 3 for year 2013. This journal

was selected since it is a local journal which specialising in special education. Hence, choosing this journal will ease researchers' task in reviewing existing research related to special education in Malaysia.

A focus group discussion was conducted which comprised of 5 individuals to discuss the challenges and ways to improve inclusivity in education sector for persons with disabilities. The focus group members comprise of academicians and representatives from different Disabled People Organisation (DPO). Purposive sampling was used in getting the research participants. Views from these individuals are important to represent the grass root's reality regarding local special education sector. Rich input gathered from this focus group discussion will then help researchers in structuring recommendations for the purpose of advocacy.

Lastly, an interview was conducted with an high ranking officer at the Special Education Division at one of the Federal Territory. Purposive sampling was also used in getting the respondent for this interview. Researchers view that conducting an interview with a high ranking officer at the Special Education Division is also important, not only to seek different perspective regarding this topic from the viewpoint of a policy implementer, but also to get a better picture on current situation of local special education sector. Both findings from the interview and the focus group discussion can serve as an evidence-based advocacy materials for researchers in addressing this issue.

Literature review

Education plays a huge role in individual development and nation building. Today, education is not only important in developing one's intellectual and personal quality, but also an influential factor in seeking employment. For persons with disabilities, education is a vital part of their lives and enabled them to read and write, to speak in English language, to find a job and involved in making decisions along with their family members (Singal, Salifu, Iddrisu, Casely-Hayford & Lundebye, 2015; p. 919). In addition, education is important as it able to give one's a better life, respect from others, realize one's rights and gain interpersonal skills (Singal et. al. 2015, p. 920). In academic sphere, special education research has evolve from just a "disciplinary research" to "pedagogic research" (Vulliamy and Webb 1993).

From a human rights perspective, education is an inherent rights which possessed by every individual regardless of his or her status and background. In discussing central rights aspect in education, it does not only involve providing and ensuring children's access to education, but it also concerns with the aims and roles of education to facilitate full development of each child (Quennerstedt and Quennerstedt 2014, p. 116). However, Quennerstedt and Quennerstedt (2014, p. 117) argues that previous studies on children's rights in education are grounded on low level of theorizing and they emphasize on the need to advance level of theorising to replace this low level theorizing which merely reflects the consensus that based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

To bring the field of children's rights research to a more theoretical and critical-oriented field, Quennerstedt and Quennerstedt (2014) suggest a theoretical framework which combines insights from the field of sociology of childhood and John Dewey's educational theory that: (a) views children is a active and creative agents situated in a certain social, cultural, historical and political settings which can influence and being influenced by their surroundings; (b) rejects the "being"- "becoming" dichotomy altogether; (c) views education as a continuous process of growth and does not end by one's reaching adulthood; and lastly, (d) addresses children's rights as central point for analytical framework in theorizing and researching children's rights in educational context.

In realizing inclusivity in education sector for children with disabilities, inclusive education must be seen as tool for educational equality, capability equality, justice and well-being of these children (Terzi, 2014). However, a plural practice of educational provision for children with disabilities, for example special schools and inclusive schools, can lead to divided focus in mainstreaming educational inclusivity for these children and hence initiatives in special education must be redesigned to achieve the aims of inclusive education practice as well the need for integration of special education and mainstream education funding (Al-Obaidi & Budosan, 2011; p. 38). Other related services and programmes must also

be established and provided to ensure children with disabilities can be included in society. Those are early childhood development programmes, community-based rehabilitation programmes, teacher development initiatives, inclusive schools and programmes to facilitate education for children with mental health problems (Al-Obaidi & Budosan, 2011; p. 39-41).

Despite the existence of international and regional instruments such UN's conventions and ASEAN's declarations, full and effective implementation of universally accessible education for children with disabilities is still encountering a lot of lag especially in developing countries like Malaysia. Conflicting definitions of disability by different agencies, mistranslation of educational philosophy for children with disabilities and discriminatory policy are among the reason that resulting in producing a disabling educational environment for these children (Adnan & Hafiz, 2001). In war-affected countries such as Afghanistan, universal access to education for disabled children is hindered by sense of insecurity, continuous fighting and poverty as well as cultural and traditional attitudes towards disabled people, especially girls (Trani, Bakhshi & Nandipati, 2012; p. 347). Even so, macro level issues such as international and regional instruments and strategies can affect the micro level of implementation such as national programmes, plan of action and schooling system. Hence, the existence of global and regional instruments and strategies should not be seen as "just a picture frame on the wall", instead these instruments and strategies must be properly translated in the local context.

Instruments for disability inclusivity in education

Education has been long recognized as a human rights and equality issues since the adoption of United Nation Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and has been affirmed by the following international treaties (UNESCO, 2007). In the following subsections, researchers discusses education for children with disabilities from the lens of human rights, through both international and regional human rights documents.

International instruments

Children with disabilities like their non-disabled counterpart, are entitled to right to education as stated in sub article 1 of Article 26 in Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1948). In that sub article, it clearly states that everyone has right to free and compulsory education, at least in the elementary level, and other types of education such as vocational and professional education must be generally available as well as equal accessibility to higher education on the basis of merit. The same recognition is also expressed through Article 13 of International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (UN, 1966), Article 28 of Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989) and Article 7 and Article 24 of Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2006).

Regional instruments

At ASEAN level, every person's right to education is recognized through sub article 1 of Article 31 of the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration (ASEAN Secretariat, 2012). Furthermore, the declaration also recognizes primary education is a compulsory and should be available to all citizens, including children with disabilities. To support the needs of children of various categories of impairment as well as gifted children, ASEAN as a regional body established a regional centre for special education or also known as Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization Special Education Needs (SEAMEO SEN). The establishment of this regional centre was proposed by Malaysian government in March 2008 during the 43rd SEAMEC Conference at Kuala Lumpur. Now, SEAMEO SEN is operating temporarily at the Malay Women Melaka Teachers' Training Institute under its first director, Datin Dr. Yasmin Hussain.

Special needs education sector in Malaysia

In Malaysia, special education has grown progressively since its introduction into this country. In terms of professional teacher training, besides the Special Education Teachers' Training Institute in Cheras, there are several public universities which offer various level of degree in special education such as Sultan Idris University of Education (UPSI), University of Science Malaysia (USM), National University of Malaysia (UKM) MARA University of Technology (UiTM), International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) and University of Malaya (UM). This section intends to give an overview of special needs education sector in Malaysia by discussing its historical background and policy development.

Lay and Hui (2014, p. 43) discusses the progress of special education sector in Malaysia in four stages of period. Those stages are: (a) before and during the early colonial period (before 1900); (b) pre-independence (from 1900-1957); (c) post-independence (from 1957-1990); and, (d) modern Malaysia (after 1990). In the first period, there is no opportunity for people with disabilities to enter school except in the traditional Malay shed school (*Sekolah Pondok*) (Lay & Hui, 2014; p. 44). In 1948-1950, the first special school was built by British Strait Government in Johor Bahru, called Princess Elizabeth Special Education School for students with visual impairment and the first school for students with hearing impairment was in Penang, named the Federal School for Deaf Children (Lay & Hui, 2014; p. 44). In this period of time, the education for persons with disabilities was provided by non-governmental organisations (NGOs), thus most of the time it relied heavily on the contributions from NGOs and missionary groups (Lay & Hui, 2014; p. 44).

After independence, the task to provide education for students with disabilities fall under the Ministry of Education. At that time, the schools used the curricula for Braille and sign language learning from western countries and subsequently accept western conceptualisation of disability and special education as well as for their expertise (Lay & Hui, 2014; p. 45). In this period, the dominance of western influence can be seen through the adoption of policy and practice from the lens of bio-medical model which finally resulted in the use of welfare and charity approach in service or facilities provision to Malaysians with disabilities (Lay & Hui, 2014; p. 45).

During the early years of Independence, the planning process for special education was inactive and there was a separation of responsibilities between Ministry of Education (which was tasked to cater for children with visual, hearing and mild mental impairment) and Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (which tasked to cater for children with physical and moderate to severe degree of mental impairment) (Lay & Hui, 2014; p. 46). Among the initiatives by Ministry of Education in this period was integration programme which was made compulsory for all states in Malaysia in 1987 and teacher training through in-service professional courses and overseas research degrees from 1980s to 1990s (Lay & Hui, 2014; p. 46). However, the global paradigm shift from medical and welfare model of disability to social model of disability brings a major change in Malaysian special education philosophy in the following period (Lay & Hui, 2014; p. 47).

From the year of 1990, Malaysia has shown a rapid progress on special education. This progress includes the development of segregated teacher preparation programme for mainstream and special educators, the establishment of the Special Education Department in 1995 (currently known as Special Education Division), a chapter on special education was included in the Education Act 1996 and the introduction of the Education Rules (Special Education) by the Ministry of Education in 1997 (Lay & Hui, 2014; p. 47). In the Education Rules (Special Education), there are three special education programmes, namely the special school, integrated programme and inclusive programme (Lay & Hui, 2014; p. 47). Besides that, all students who registered with the special education programmes are eligible to receive monthly allowance since 2006 (Lay & Hui, 2014; p. 48).

Plus, the adoption of the Persons with Disabilities Act in 2008 not only has bring a paradigm shift from welfare model to human rights model, but also precisely emphasized that persons with disabilities are not to be excluded from the formal education system simply because of their physical, sensory or cognitive impairment (Lay & Hui, 2014; p. 49). Five years later, the new education regulations for special education was introduced by Ministry of Education to replace the Education Rules (Special Education)

1997 and the inclusion of special education in the Preliminary Report of the National Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (Lay & Hui, 2014; p. 49). In short, Malaysia has shown a remarkably fast pace development in special education in recent years. However, there is a lot of challenges and dilemmas that need undivided attention and careful actions to realize inclusive education for all citizens in Malaysia.

Findings

For this section, the discussion is based on data collected from the three research methods used in this research. There are four subsections; research related to special needs education in Malaysia, current situation of special needs education sector in Malaysia, today's challenges faced in Malaysia special needs education sector and suggested recommendations.

Research related to special needs education in Malaysia

To closely investigate the topic on inclusivity in education sector for children with disabilities, researchers employ qualitative systematic review on Journal of Special Education Volume 1 to Volume 3 for data collection. Researchers also need to note that the qualitative systematic review only involves research related to special education which have done in Malaysia context. From the systematic review, there are several themes emerges in special needs education research in Malaysia. Those themes are learner's characteristic, instructional approach, learning materials, ICT for special needs and teacher training.

Under the theme of learner's characteristic, Kang and Saad (2011) carried out a single subject study which involved a sixteen years old female student with dyslexia from a Kuala Lumpur Chinese Independent School. In their research, they found that self-intervention methods such as using 'ABC' song, sign language, flag semaphore, computer-assisted writing, as well as asking help from friends, enable the respondent to memorise alphabetical sequence and minimise spelling errors (Kang & Saad, 2011; p. 12). The respondent also reported of using mental images especially in learning biology and physics (Kang & Saad, 2011; p. 16). From this research, not only that we are able to identify the characteristics of a student with dyslexia, in fact, we can adopt different methods used by the respondent in facilitating the learning process for this group of students.

For the theme of instructional approach, there are three research have been done. Cheng and Loh (2011) studied pre-school special educators' and parents' perception towards learning method through playing. In Cheng and Loh's (2011, p. 32) research, even though both pre-school special educators and parents showed positive perception towards the definitions of play in general, but pre-school special educators showed less favourable perception towards "children making their own rules" as the definition of play. Besides that, this study revealed the intersection between free choice and children's safety (Cheng & Loh, 2011; p. 32). Furthermore, the research reported a confusion in play intervention among pre-school special educators and parents although they have a positive perception towards learning through play, which they still prefer to use a director-style approach (Cheng & Loh, 2011; p. 33).

The second research was done by Zainol and Majid (2013) which looked into the implementation of occupational therapy to develop soft motor skills among students with special needs. In their research, soft motor skills such as holding a pencil, cutting, colouring and writing are among the most difficult soft motor skills to be acquired by the respondents (Zainol & Majid, 2013; p. 88). Besides that, there is no direct and formal occupational therapy in special education classes since there is no collaboration network with the occupational therapists in hospital and lack of law enforcement (Zainol & Majid, 2013; p. 89). Last but not least, Loke, Zakaria and Lau (2013) studied the effectiveness of art therapy in assisting the development of children with autism in terms of communication, socialization, psychomotor and emotion (Loke, Zakaria & Lau, 2013; p. 104). All four research described above proves that educators and parents should think of and employ alternative approach in facilitating the learning process of children with disabilities to ensure their full development.

As for the theme of learning materials, Adiyodi and Loh (2011) studied the selection criteria and preparation of instructional materials by three pre-school teachers for pre-schoolers with learning disabilities. In this research, researchers found that these three pre-school teachers taken into account criteria such as whether the instruction materials is in line with the theme of the week, material suitability with the students, quality and safety, aligned with the objective of the activity, multi-dimensional, cost effective and time saving (Adiyodi & Loh, 2011; p. 54-58). Findings from this research enable us to set up principles for pre-school education for children with disabilities to be followed by other pre-school special teachers.

There are three research that can be categorised under the theme of ICT for special needs. Mazlan and Daud (2011) attempted to understand the language learning method using an electronic signing storybook, named CALL (Computer-Assisted Language Learning). Respondents from this research reported that they preferred language learning using pictures and the learning environment is flexible and fun (Mazlan & Daud, 2011; p. 70). Another research by Ismail and Zaman (2011) introduced self-voicing browser as accessibility tool for blind learners in accessing virtual learning environment. Through this research, more serious attention will be given in terms of accessibility in designing and developing self-voicing browser (Ismail & Zaman, 2011; p. 83). Lastly, a research which have been done by Rahman, Umar and Saleh (2011) explored the use of new technology for students with dyslexia through an application called D-Mic. Result showed that respondents were able to use the application comfortably and managed to perform all tasks required, hence promoted mobile learning as an innovative approach for students with dyslexia (Rahman, Umar & Saleh, 2011; p. 98).

There are two research can be grouped under the theme of teacher training. The first is the research done by Zainon and Ghani (2012) which aimed to identify the level of emotional distress and factors causing emotional distress among 100 randomly selected special education teachers in one of the districts in a northern state of Peninsular Malaysia. In their research, 15% of the respondents showed a low level of emotional distress, 65% showed moderate level of emotional distress and the rest 20% showed a high level of emotional distress (Zainon & Ghani, 2012; p. 142-143). Some of the main factors that cause emotional distress among these special education teachers are infrastructure, internal conflict, challenging behaviour among students with special needs, perception from mainstream teachers and administrators' leadership (Zainon & Ghani, 2012; p. 143).

The second research under this theme is a research done by Saimi and Amat (2011). They studied the readiness and the need for training among counselors at integrated programme school. From the interview with six counselors in the selected school, they found that all of them are readied to provide counseling services to students with disabilities (Saimi & Amat, 2011; p. 135). All respondents also reported that there is no specific training given in handling client with disabilities (Saimi & Amat, 2011; p. 137). Hence, both Zainon and Ghani's (2011) and Saimi and Amat's (2011) research can lead to a proper support system and training for teachers whom will be sent out to teach in special or integrated programme.

From the findings in the qualitative systematic review discussed above, we can conclude that special education sector in Malaysia has grown progressively in terms of intellectual and professional discourse. However, more research are needed to identify and solve different obstacles faced by different categories of students with disabilities and education provider.

Current situation of special needs education sector in Malaysia

Interview conducted with the high ranking officer from the Special Education Division, which afterward will be referred as Mr. D, reveals that there are two main achievement can be shared for the purpose of this paper. The first one is the introduction of early detection programme in schools. Mr. D informed that this programme is conducted at the early level of primary education among local students to detect specific learning disabilities among these children. After evaluation, if there is a case, the student together with his or her parents will be consulted to the suitable school to accommodate the child's learning needs. In addition, the Ministry of Education also recently introduced a adapted primary education

curriculum for special needs education in 2013. However, in this research, researchers did not analyse the content of the new curriculum.

Today's challenges faced in Malaysia special needs education sector

From the interview and the focus group discussion, six main themes emerged. Those themes are facilities, readiness, resources, lacking in provision of appropriate teaching materials, early intervention programme and equitable accredited examination for students with learning disabilities. The following chunks provide detailed discussion for each of these themes.

a. Facilities

In terms of facilities, the barriers to special needs education exist in forms of infrastructural obstacles and lack of special devices provision. More school buildings must be made accessible and disabled-friendly, especially for students with physical impairment. Universal Design application must be practiced widely and as a compulsory part of any school buildings, either public schools or private schools. In terms of technology and assistive devices, there is still a lot of lacking in its provision to enable children and adolescents with impairment to facilitate their learning process in schools. Assistive devices play a huge role and bring a significant impact to persons with disabilities in their education, as well as in other aspects of their daily lives (e.g. employment, socializing etc). Hence, government must enlarge the provision of assistive devices to all schools that have students with special needs.

b. Readiness

As for readiness, research participants pointed out barriers such as incorrect conceptualization or understanding on the terms of disability, lack of motivation among students with disabilities, unequal opportunities for persons with disabilities in taking subject in university and participating in any activities, stigma and stereotyping, preparedness among educators and support staffs, and support system in education sector. These dilemmas give us a clear signal that we still need to tackle barriers related to perception and attitude amongst educators, administrators, policy makers and even disabled community themselves. The conflict of readiness, if not addressed and solved quickly, can hinder our efforts in bringing inclusivity for persons with disabilities in local education sector.

c. Resources

Resources is also among the main challenges faced in current special needs education sector in Malaysia. Resources issues such as financial constraint, lack of interpreter service, lack of teacher who have skill in sign language and contradictory teaching practices for students with hearing impairment. All of the issues above call for effective human capital development and management so that enough resources can be employed to fulfill the inclusivity goal. National budgeting must also include a clear budgeting for inclusive education provision, development and research.

d. Lack in appropriate teaching materials

Besides that, challenges also occur in terms of insufficient provision on teaching materials. Problems such as content of courses for teacher trainee which do not incorporate necessary conceptual understanding on disability, heavy syllabus for students with hearing impairment, lack of training for the teachers and capacity of the resources of the teachers. The issues pointed above are interrelated with the resources problem. Thus, a systematic strategy must be developed and implemented in order to tackle both problems.

e. Early intervention programme

Research participants also emphasize on the need for a structured early intervention programmes in Malaysia. A systematic and holistic early intervention programme is vital to persons with disabilities, especially for the children, to make sure they get the habilitation and rehabilitation services needed. Early intervention can greatly one's academic achievement as well as overall human development. Therefore, Malaysian government must develop and implement a systematic and holistic early intervention programme that include all categories of impairment and medical condition.

f. Equitable accredited examination for students with learning disabilities

Lastly, Malaysia is still fail to develop and implement a comprehensive guidelines for an equitable examination system and procedures for students with learning disabilities. This problem greatly affects this group of students, especially for those who have moderate and severe level of learning disabilities, since they are unable to compete with the current standard of meritocratic evaluation. Due to this fact, they cannot enjoy their rights to a decent living. It is clear that this issue cannot be taken lightly and must be solved quickly.

Suggested improvement

Besides asking for current situation and challenges in Malaysia special needs education, researchers also ask for respondents' recommendation to improve inclusivity for children with disabilities in education sector. Suggestions in this subsection is a combination of suggestions collected from the interview and the focus group discussion. There are several recommendations can be made in order to ensure inclusivity of children and adolescents with disabilities in education. Those recommendations are as follow:

- (a) Developing a comprehensive standard operating procedure on examination and evaluation that suits the needs and potential of children of various category of impairment, especially for children and adolescents with learning disabilities;
- (b) Establishing the National Council of Education for Persons with Disabilities to look into the education affairs of the student with disabilities in pre-school, primary and secondary education;
- (c) Providing a clear indication of financial allocation for special education in national budgeting;
- (d) Developing a clear and structured guidelines on implementation for early intervention programme in Malaysia;
- (e) Encorporating Disability Equality Training (DET) in teacher training courses and standard syllabus for students in primary and secondary education;
- (f) Urging Malaysian government to sign Marakesh Treaty and accelerate all efforts to comply with the treaty;
- (g) Reviewing the Education Act to include comprehensive clauses related to the affairs in providing accessible and equitable education to all persons with disabilities in Malaysia; and,
- (h) Producing an official instruction regarding the provision and usage of sign language interpreter.

Conclusion and future research

Undoubtedly, Malaysia has shown a positive development in providing education for children and adolescents with disabilities since Independence. Furthermore, Persons with disabilities' right, especially children, to education is recognised in local legislation. In terms of scholarship, a lot of research have been done by local scholars, either regarding instructional approach, learning materials, ICT or even teacher training. However, there is still abundance of challenges that need to be faced and quickly solved by different stakeholders, namely Ministry of Education, teachers and school management. Among these

challenges include unsupervised and unstructured early intervention programme, poor infrastructural and technological accessibility, financial constraint, low level of readiness among special and general educators and individual self-conflict.

Only by acknowledging and seriously addressing these challenges will then lead us to think about the practical solutions for these obstacles. At the same time, there is a need for a multi-stakeholder participatory collaboration to efficiently plan, implement, monitor and evaluate steps taken to achieve inclusivity for persons with disabilities in local education sector. Through active multi-stakeholder participation and collaboration, different obstacles faced by different party can be properly addressed, thus effective coordination between all parties involved can be achieved. On the other note, all recommendations made by research participants in this paper should be taken up by Ministry of Education and other related bodies for implementation.

As emphasised by Lay and Hui (2014), Malaysia lacks in terms of large-scale psychopathological research to effectively identify the exact number and geographical position of persons with special learning needs. Besides that, Malaysia also lacks in terms of multi-level and multi-stakeholder research regarding local education sector. A systematic and large-scale research is needed, not only to identify barriers and its solutions for each level of education (e.g. early education, primary education, secondary education, vocational education and tertiary education), but also to connect these educational levels with each other and to other life intersections such as employment and economic well being.

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