

# Perspectives of Special Education Senior Assistant Teachers on Policies of Inclusive Education Programs in Schools

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## Abstract

This study aims to explore the perspectives of Special Education Senior Assistant Teachers in terms of their knowledge, perceptions and challenges on the implementation policies of the Inclusive Education Programs (IEP) in schools. This is a case study that uses a qualitative approach involving 3 study participants who are Senior Assistant Teachers of Special Education in primary schools in Kapit, Sarawak. A set of structured interview protocol was used as the research instrument. Data from the interview was analysed verbatim. The findings show that Special Education Senior Assistant Teachers positively perceive implementing IEP's policies. This is because they feel there is not much workload support from the school community, especially school administrators and students with special needs who can learn with mainstream students. The study also found that Special Education Senior Assistant Teachers have good knowledge in the implementation of IEP's policies in schools. However, they have challenges implementing IEP policies in schools, such as lack of infrastructure facilities, teaching staff and the covid-19 pandemic. This study gives the impression that the existing IEP's policies in Malaysia have positive impact in providing quality educational opportunities, inclusive and fair to all children, especially children with disabilities.

**Keywords:** Perspectives, Policies, Special Education Senior Assistant Teachers, Inclusive Education Program, Knowledge

## Introduction

Special Education Senior Assistant Teachers is one of the senior assistant positions available in schools in Malaysia that have an Integrated Special Education Program in primary and secondary schools (Ministry of Education, 2013). The Ministry of Education (MOE) created the position of Special Education Senior Assistant Teachers to help administrators manage the Integrated Special Education Program (Professional Circular Letter No. 15 of 2010). They are also responsible for the success of the Inclusive Education Programs (IEP) in schools (Saiful Azam, 2017). Among their roles in the success of the Inclusive Education Programs (IEP) is to work with other Senior Assistants in implementing the Inclusive Education Programs (IEP) in schools according to the provided guidelines. In addition, they also need to identify students with special needs who can follow the IEP and monitor the progress of achievement of Special

Educational Needs (SEN) in the IEP. The Special Education Senior Assistant Teachers need to ensure that all activities related to the implementation of IEP in schools are documented and the need for SEN in inclusive classrooms are provided accordingly (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2018).

### **Formation of Inclusive Education Policy in Malaysia**

The formation of policies of the Inclusive Education Programs in Malaysia is generally influenced by the borrowing of ideas from the policies of the Inclusive Education Programs in the United Kingdom (UK). This policy borrowing refers to when a country borrows with its policy borrowing country to adopt policies in their country (Portnoi, 2016). The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (1994) is the mainstay in forming Inclusive Education Programs in Malaysia. The Salamanca Statement supports education for all, supporting Special Educational Needs (SEN) who have the right to receive the same education as other mainstream students in the Inclusive Education Programs (IEP). In addition, Persons with Disabilities Act, 2008 in Article 28, recognizes that students with special needs should be given support and assist them in achieving *“full participation and equality in education”*. Based on this legislation, Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE) is committed to encouraging more students with special needs to be included in IEP and to improve the overall quality of IEP provision. In 2019, the MOE implemented the Zero Rejection Policy as a new commitment to inclusive education, particularly for children with disabilities, with a similar definition set out in the Special Education Regulations 2013 (Special Education Division, 2018).

### **Special Education Senior Assistant Teachers’ Perception of Inclusive Education Programs in Schools**

A positive perception of Special Education Senior Assistant Teachers is essential for successfully implementing the Inclusive Education Programs (IEP). According to Neves et al (2019), the positive perceptions of administrators, their vision and leadership are an essential part of shaping an inclusive school environment. Supported by Yang et al (2021), Special Education Senior Assistant Teachers having a more positive perception of the inclusion of special needs students are indirectly associated with many experiences with students with disabilities. Alasim (2020) also reported that perception is a critical factor in the success of inclusive education programs. Special Education Senior Assistant Teachers with positive perceptions are more willing to provide opportunities for students with disabilities to remain in a mainstream educational environment (Harris, 2009). This is because they agree that students with special needs should be included in the inclusive educational environment in the mainstream as recommended by inclusive education policies. Therefore, the effectiveness of participation is highly dependent on the Special Education Senior Assistant Teachers.

The enacted Zero Reject Policy made a significant change to the Inclusive Education Programs (IEP) for Special Educational Needs (SEN) in Malaysia (Special Education Division, 2018). With this Zero Reject Policy, the Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE) intends to increase the inclusion of special needs students in mainstream classrooms from 50% to 75% by 2023 (Special Education Division, 2018). In this regard, Special Education Senior Assistant Teachers are tasked with implementing the Zero Rejection Policy by creating an inclusive and learning-friendly atmosphere for SEN students in the Inclusive Education Programs (IEP) at school (Chin, 2020). However, many Special Education Senior Assistant Teachers have mixed

perceptions and feelings about implementing the Inclusive Education Programs in school, causing them to implement inclusive practices in their context (Kauffman & Hornby, 2020). This is because their perception of inclusive education policies depends on their interpretations of the meaning of inclusive education (Graham & Spandagou, 2011). Kimbrough & Mellen (2012) stated that administrators negatively perceive the Inclusive Education Programs (IEP). According to them, pupils with special needs, regardless of their level of disability, should not be educated in the same classroom as mainstream students. In addition, their lack of knowledge of IEP's policies makes it difficult for poor administration to implement such inclusive education programs in schools despite well-enacted policies and acts (Kauffman & Hornby, 2020).

### **Special Education Senior Assistant Teachers' Knowledge of Inclusive Education Programs**

A knowledgeable Special Education Senior Assistant Teachers is also the key to implementing the policy mandate and policy of inclusive education in schools. They must have knowledge, pedagogy, law, and culture (Arlinwibowo et al., 2020). According to Alasim (2020), Special Education Senior Assistant Teachers are responsible for successfully implementing inclusive education programs (IEP). A study conducted by Ahmad (2014) shows that knowledgeable Special Education Senior Assistant Teachers will create a positive behaviour, attitude, and school climate regarding students with special needs and special education. An acceptance climate for all students can only be created when they know about students with special needs admission to inclusive education programs (Subbey, 2020). The success or failure of inclusive education depends on the knowledge and belief of Special Education Senior Assistant Teachers in running Inclusive Education Programs in schools (McKelvey, 2008). Their knowledge is a variable that is often discussed that a Special Education Senior Assistant Teachers must have sufficient experience and knowledge to run an inclusive education program. According to Mohd Amin & Yasin (2016), administrators' knowledge of inclusive education programs (IEP) is essential to ensure the inclusive education programs are effectively implemented. The lack of knowledge in inclusive education for school administrators challenges their ability to succeed in running the Inclusive Education Programs (Howser, 2015). Unfortunately, some administrators do not know the policies for implementing the Inclusive Education Programs (IEP) (Alasim, 2020).

### **The Challenges of Special Education Senior Assistant Teachers in Implementing Inclusive Education Programs**

Special Education Senior Assistant Teachers have various challenges in implementing Inclusive Education Programs for students with special needs as formulated in the IEP's policy. Due to the ever-changing bureaucracy in the improvement of IEP policies, they must follow the pace of change even though inclusive education implemented in schools has not been able to keep up with attempts to change into a practical, inclusive education approach (Subbey, 2020). This is because the reality of the implementation of Inclusive Education Programs (IEP) in most schools is not as on the actual vision enacted in the policies of inclusive education programs (IEP) made for SEN (Kauffman & Hornby, 2020). They also experience pressure from superiors, a lack of support and guidance on planned adaptations, limiting them to implementing Inclusive Education Programs in schools (Kaufman & Hornby, 2020). Implementing the Inclusive Education Programs (IEP) can be hampered by bureaucracy (Warman, 2021). Challenges from this ever-changing bureaucracy may deterred the changes as schools may

not been able to keep up with attempts to change into a practical, inclusive education approach (Subbey, 2020).

The next challenge is the difficulty of Special Education Senior Assistant Teachers in providing awareness and knowledge to the school community, especially to other administrators and primary teachers, in implementing inclusive education programs in mainstream classrooms (Azam, 2017). Special Education Senior Assistant Teachers is challenging to implement IEP due to a lack of involvement and awareness of the school community in implementing IEP (Alasim, 2020). According to Parveen & Qounsar (2018), some Headmasters and other administrators do not support inclusive education programs and focus more on mainstream education. They feel that the Special Education Senior Assistant Teacher is adequate in managing IEP for SEN in schools (Govindasamy, 2018). Disability-friendly infrastructure facilities for SEN are also very limited in mainstream classrooms, which is a challenge to Special Education Senior Assistant Teachers in the success of the Inclusive Education Programs in schools (Alasim, 2020). Parveen & Qounsar (2018) state that inadequate and limited facilities influence the successful participation of students with special needs in Inclusive Education Programs. Most mainstream classes do not have Disability-friendly facilities such as elevators, toilets close to classes, ramps and so forth. Kamaliah (2010) found no changes and physical adjustments in the IEP made by the parties involved. Without such adjustments, it complicates the teaching and learning process in the classroom of inclusive education programs. Therefore, this paper analyzes the following questions:

1. What is the knowledge of the Special Education Senior Assistant Teacher on the implementation of policies in inclusive education programs (IEP) for students with special needs conducted in their schools?;
2. What are Special Education Senior Assistant Teachers' perceptions on implementing Inclusive Education Programs (IEP) policies for students with special needs in their schools?; and
3. What are the challenges of Special Education Senior Assistant Teachers in implementing the policies of the Inclusive Education Programs for Students with Special Needs in schools?

### **Methodology**

This study is a case study that uses a qualitative approach. The case study in this study uses an intrinsic case study where the researcher wants to explore and understand in depth the perspective of Special Education Senior Assistant Teachers on the policies of IEP conducted in schools. The case study method is descriptive, where the researcher has no control over the informants and only documents what happened.

The participants in this study were three Senior Assistant Teachers of Special Education of three primary schools with the Integrated Special Education Program (ISEP) in Kapit, Sarawak. The selection criteria for the three participants of this study are based on their position as Special Education Senior Assistant Teachers with at least three years experience, and their school must have an Integrated Special Education Program (ISEP). The three participants were identified as Participant 1 (P1), Participant 2 (P2), and Participant 3 (P3).

Data collection was carried out using a structured interview protocol. The data were transcribed verbatim and after that the researchers asked the study participants to review the final transcript of the interview to ensure that the data obtained for this study were accurate and reliable as presented by the participants.

## Findings

### **Knowledge of the Special Education Senior Assistant Teacher on the implementation of policies and policies of inclusive education programs for students with special needs conducted in their schools**

Based on the findings, all participants have good existing knowledge in policy implementation of IEP in their schools. They all stated that they knew the existing policies through their readings, courses attended, and materials sent to the school. Among the existing IEP policies known to the participants include the Special Education Act, Special Education Regulations 2013 and the Zero-Reject Policy 2019. P2 says:

*"We were told the policies and acts that we need to follow in implementing inclusive education programs in schools. Ordinary policies such as the Special Education Act, Special Education Regulations 2013 and the latest Zero Reject Policy as part of the inclusive policies."*

In addition, the findings also found that P1, P2 and P3 gained knowledge in the policies of the Inclusive Education Programs through three ways, I) courses/workshops, II) policy documentation in the IEP File and III) The Partnership / Professional Learning Community (PLC). Nevertheless, the existing knowledge of the study participants on the policies of the Inclusive Education Programs was excellent. However, its implementation could not be implemented as enacted in the policies of the IEP for specific reasons. According to P2, he could not implement the IEP's policy well due to students with special needs. Then the annual target by the State Education Department (SED) on the percentage of students with special needs to be included in the Inclusive Education Programs is difficult to achieve by the school. P2 said:

*"...However, we will not be able to implement it one hundred percent because we must consider our SEN students. If we follow State Education Department (SED), we must make sure we reach the percentage target that SED wants us to achieve in that year. From year to year, there will probably increase the percentage of SEN students into inclusive education programs (IEP). I think that is a bit difficult to achieve if we follow the correct data and do not cheat (on the data)".*

### **Perception of Special Education Senior Assistant Teachers on implementing policies in Inclusive Education Programs (IEP) policies for students with special needs in their schools**

All participants positively perceived the implementation of IEP policies in their schools, especially for students with special needs. The three main reasons why study they had positive perceptions in implementing IEP policies in their schools were opportunities for students with special needs, school community support and manageable workload. The participants felt a positive perception of implementing IEP policies in schools because it provides students with special needs opportunities to learn together with other students without special needs in the mainstream class. According to P1, with the implementation of this policy, SEN will be able to socialize and make friends not only among themselves but with other students together in the mainstream class. P1 explained:

*"I think it is good that this policy is implemented. We include of our (SEN) students and mainstream students. Students can also have more fun... (SEN) do mix among themselves only, and its (IEP) implementation in schools is encouraged".*



In addition, the participants found implementing IEP policies in schools is not a burden, thus, making them have a positive perception of IEP. For example, according to P1, despite holding the special education senior assistant teacher position, implementing IEP policies in schools is not difficult even though there is a slight increase in her workload. Similar perception is shared by P2. Meanwhile, for P3, she is very grateful because there is no burden in implementing the policy of IEP as she has the school community's support, mainly primary teachers and administrators.

The support from the school community plays a big role in ensuring IEP is adequately implemented. This is because school administrators and primary teachers provide strong cooperation and support to Special Education Senior Assistant Teachers in all activities related to the Inclusive Education Program. An example of such support is when the administrators request that the Special Education Senior Assistant Teacher share IEP planning with the school community and with the parents during the Parent-Teacher Association meeting. P3 shared her experience of the support she received from the administrators:

*"Okay, in my opinion, I am very grateful. Okay, I am a very thankful to my Head teacher, no problem...my school administrator is very supportive, as I told you earlier. During the parent-teacher association meeting, he called me to speak (about IEP).*

### **Challenges of Special Education Senior Assistant Teachers in implementing the policies of the Inclusive Education Programs for Students with Special Needs in schools**

Special Education Senior Assistant Teachers have challenges in implementing policies of Inclusive Education Programs in schools for students with special needs. Based on the findings, the study found that the main challenges of Special Education Senior Assistant Teachers face in implementing IEP policies in schools are inadequate facilities/infrastructure, human resources/teaching staff and pandemics.

In relation to the lack of facilities or infrastructure, the participants shared that they had to use the existing facilities available on their schools in implementing IEP. For example, students with special needs must use typical student toilets which is not suitable to the nature of their disabilities. These students had to go to the special education classes to use suitable disabled friendly toilets. This makes it difficult for SEN students because the inclusive class is far from the special education classes. In addition, lack of facilities such as handrails, walkways for the disabled, directional lanes, and ramps making it difficult for these SEN students to be included along with other typical students in the mainstream class.

Apart from the lack of provision of infrastructure facilities in schools, the participants also found that uncondusive classes made it challenging to implement IEP policies for SEN. This is because the crowded and poorly ventilated primary class inconvenience SEN to study in the mainstream class with other students. They may create negative behaviours due to their discomfort in the class. P1 says:

*"His class should be a comfortable and big making it easy for special education students. Conducive classes fit our students along with other students. If the class is crowded, it may not give comfort to the (SEN) student".*

Apart from the challenges in terms of lack of facilities or infrastructure, the participants also experienced challenges in implementing IEP policies in terms of lack of human resources

or teaching staff exceptional education teachers. All participants stated they did not have enough special education teachers in their schools to support IEP. These teachers are just enough for the special education classes. At the same time, they also must be support teachers to SEN in the mainstream classes. According to P1 and P2, it is difficult for this IEP class to run because the same teacher must manage the special education class and the IEP class simultaneously resulting in challenges in managing both teaching and learning process in special education classes and IEP classes. The following is highlighted by P1:

*"The lack of teachers is obvious, Sir. If the inclusive program is carried out by teachers who teaches the special education classes they may have to leave their classes behind and attend to the SEN in the mainstream class. So, the running of inclusive education programs in our schools is indeed at a moderate level".*

The pandemic also became one of the challenges to the participants in implementing IEP policies in their schools. The Pandemic that hit our country, namely Coronavirus disease (Covid-19), has made it difficult to carry out this Inclusive Education Program since last year. The participants explained that during the Pandemic, IEP classes were not conducted. The home teaching and learning conducted during the Pandemic making it more difficult for inclusive education programs to be conducted. P2 explained:

*"Because of Covid-19, due to the lack of face-to-face classes in schools and IEP cannot be carried out..."*

## **Discussion**

In-depth knowledge of the policies of inclusive education programs is the key to the Special Education Senior Assistant Teacher in implementing IEP in schools. Supported by Field (2015), Special Education Senior Assistant Teachers' knowledge of inclusive education produces positive results for inclusive education in schools. Apart from knowledge on IEP, the positive perception of Special Education Senior Assistant Teachers in implementing policies is also essential for the success of Inclusive Education. As stressed by Alasim (2020), perception is a critical factor in the success of inclusive education programs. The support and cooperation of the school community, especially administrators and teachers allow for the Inclusive Education Programs to run smoothly. Students with special needs learn with mainstream students in mainstream classes as stipulated in the policy IEP.

There are challenges faced by Special Education Senior Assistant Teachers in implementing IEP policies in their schools, such as the lack of provision of infrastructure facilities. Disabled -friendly infrastructure facilities for special-needs students are very limited in mainstream classrooms (Alasim, 2020). Apart from the lack of infrastructure, less conducive classrooms such as overcrowded and poorly ventilated classrooms lead to SEN having difficulty in their study. Kamaliah (2010) stresses that when no changes and adjustments in the IEP class made by the parties involved, it may impact the teaching and learning process in the inclusive class. In addition, the shortage of teaching staff, especially special education teachers also impacts on the implementation of IEP.

## **Conclusion**

The perspective of Special Education Senior Assistant Teachers, especially in terms of knowledge, perceptions, and challenges, influences them to implement inclusive education

programs (IEP) policies in their schools. The knowledge and perception of Special Education Senior Assistant Teachers in implementing IEP policies in schools have been positive. The challenges they face in implementing IEP policies need to be addressed because it affects the effectiveness of successful implementation of IEP in schools. Relevant parties like the Ministry of Education Malaysia are requested in providing adequate infrastructure facilities and teaching staff, namely special education teachers, especially to schools in rural areas. At the same time, the administrators must help and assist Special Education Senior Assistant Teachers in implementing IEP policies in schools so that inclusive education programs positively impact students with special needs, as stipulated in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025.

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