

Cultural Sensitivity in the Implementation of Integrated Special Education Programs in Chinese National Type Schools: An Analysis

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Abstract

This study explores the role of cultural sensitivity in implementing Integrated Special Education Programs (PPKI) in Chinese National Type Schools (SJKC) in Malaysia. Using a qualitative approach, this case study involved in-depth interviews with seven special education teachers in SJKC. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, and inter-rater reliability was measured using Cohen's Kappa statistic. Key findings highlight the significance of Mandarin language usage and integration of Confucian values in teaching, as well as challenges in balancing universal special education needs with cultural identity preservation. Culturally sensitive approaches were found to enhance program acceptance by the school community, student engagement, and family support. The study concludes that cultural sensitivity is a vital component in special education at SJKC and suggests developing more culturally responsive curricula and assessment methods. Implications for educational policies and teacher training are also discussed.

Keywords: Cultural Sensitivity, Integrated Special Education, Chinese National Type Schools, Inclusivity, Multicultural Education

Introduction

In an increasingly challenging and diverse educational landscape, the issue of cultural sensitivity in special education has become increasingly important, particularly in Malaysia's ethnically and culturally rich context. Chinese National Type Schools (SJKC) in Malaysia hold a unique position in the national education system, offering education in Mandarin while maintaining Chinese cultural elements. The implementation of Integrated Special Education Programs (PPKI) in SJKC presents distinct challenges, especially in integrating special education needs with sensitivity toward Chinese community norms and culture.

What makes this research particularly compelling is the unprecedented opportunity it provides to examine how cultural elements can be leveraged to enhance special education outcomes. While previous studies have explored either special education implementation or

cultural sensitivity in education separately, very few have investigated the crucial intersection of these domains within the unique context of Chinese vernacular schools. This study addresses this critical knowledge gap by examining how cultural sensitivity shapes the effectiveness of special education programs in these distinctive educational environments.

This study aims to explore and understand aspects of cultural sensitivity in PPKI implementation at SJKC from special education teachers' perspectives. We seek to understand how Chinese cultural elements are integrated into special education programs, the challenges faced, and their impact on program effectiveness and school community acceptance.

The significance of this study extends far beyond its immediate context. While focused on Malaysian Chinese schools, its findings have broader implications for special education in culturally diverse settings worldwide. This research makes several key contributions to the field:

1. It provides one of the first comprehensive analyses of how cultural elements influence special education implementation in vernacular schools
2. It offers practical insights into successful strategies for integrating cultural sensitivity into special education programs
3. It develops a framework for understanding how cultural factors can enhance rather than hinder special education delivery
4. It presents evidence-based recommendations for policy makers and educators working in culturally diverse educational settings

Furthermore, this research comes at a crucial time when educational systems worldwide are grappling with questions of cultural integration and inclusive education. The findings are expected to not only aid in improving special education policies and practices but also contribute to broader discussions about cultural sensitivity's importance in inclusive education. By examining these issues within the unique context of Malaysian Chinese schools, this study offers valuable insights that could inform similar initiatives in other multicultural educational settings.

Literature Review

Cultural sensitivity in special education has become a significant focus in global educational literature over recent decades. Gay (2018) introduced the concept of 'culturally responsive teaching,' emphasizing the importance of utilizing students' cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and learning styles to make learning more relevant and effective. In Southeast Asia, several studies have explored the importance of integrating local cultural values into special education (Thaver & Lim, 2014; Forlin & Sin, 2017).

Banks and Banks (2019) assert that multicultural education is crucial for ensuring educational equity for all students, including those with special needs. They urge educators to consider how culture influences student learning and behavior, and how it can be used as a resource to enhance teaching and learning.

In the Malaysian context, Jelas and Mohd Ali (2014) found that special education teachers face challenges in adapting curriculum and teaching methods to their students' cultural

needs. They suggest that teacher training should place greater emphasis on cultural competency to improve teaching effectiveness in multicultural environments.

However, specific research on cultural sensitivity in special education at SJKC remains limited. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring in depth how special education teachers at SJKC integrate Chinese cultural elements into their teaching practices and the challenges they face.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This study is grounded in three main theoretical and conceptual frameworks: Fullan's Educational Change Theory, Glasser's Choice Theory, and the Input-Process-Output (IPO) Model.

1. Fullan's Educational Change Theory (2007): This theory emphasizes the importance of cultural context in implementing educational change. Fullan identifies three main phases in the change process: initiation, implementation, and institutionalization. In this study's context, Fullan's theory helps us understand how cultural sensitivity elements are integrated into each phase of PPKI implementation at SJKC. Fullan emphasizes that successful change requires a deep understanding of local context, including cultural and social norms.
2. Glasser's Choice Theory (1998): This theory provides a lens for understanding how meeting students' basic psychological needs, including cultural needs, can influence motivation and learning. Glasser outlines five basic needs: survival, love, power, freedom, and fun. In the context of special education at SJKC, this theory helps us understand how meeting students' cultural needs can enhance their engagement in learning.
3. Input-Process-Output (IPO) Model: This model serves as a conceptual framework for analyzing PPKI implementation at SJKC. In this model:
 - Input refers to resources and context, including students' and teachers' cultural backgrounds and existing PPKI guidelines.
 - Process involves teaching and learning strategies, teacher-student interactions, and curriculum adaptations that consider cultural sensitivity.
 - Output encompasses student learning outcomes, inclusivity levels, and program acceptance by the school community and families.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach, specifically case study methodology, to explore cultural sensitivity issues in implementing the Integrated Special Education Program (PPKI) at Chinese National Type Schools (SJKC) in Malaysia. A qualitative approach was chosen for its suitability in capturing participants' experiences, views, and subjective interpretations.

Research Design

A collective case study design was employed, examining PPKI implementation at seven different SJKCs. This approach enabled the collection of rich, in-depth data from various contexts, allowing for comparative analysis between cases.

Study Participants

The study sample comprised seven special education teachers serving at SJKCs across various Malaysian states. Sample selection was conducted using purposive sampling to ensure participant diversity in experiences and backgrounds. Selection criteria included:

- Minimum three years of PPKI experience at SJKC
- Active involvement in program implementation
- Geographic diversity of school locations (urban and rural)
- Diversity in teaching experience (junior and senior)

Data Collection

Data were collected through three main methods:

1. In-depth Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with each participant. Each session lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes. Interviews were conducted in the participant's preferred language (Malay or Mandarin) to ensure they could express their views comfortably and accurately.
2. Observations: Non-participant observations were conducted in PPKI classrooms to observe how cultural elements were integrated into teaching and learning. Each observation session lasted one teaching period (approximately 40 minutes).
3. Document Analysis: Relevant documents such as lesson plans, teaching materials, and school policies related to PPKI were analyzed to gain deeper understanding of how cultural sensitivity is integrated into the program.

Expert Agreement Analysis Data

Table 1

Cohen Kappa Expert Agreement Analysis

Item/Theme	Expert Agreement Percentage	Kappa Value (κ)	Agreement Level
Language Usage	92%	0.92	Perfect
Cultural Elements	89%	0.89	Perfect
Teaching Methods	87%	0.87	Perfect
Assessment Approaches	84%	0.84	Perfect
Resource Implementation	86%	0.86	Perfect

Table 2

Expert Validation Results by Category

Category	Number of Experts Who Agree	Total Experts	Agreement Percentage
Research Methodology	7/7	7	100%
Data Collection Methods	6/7	7	85.7%
Analysis Procedures	7/7	7	100%
Findings Interpretation	6/7	7	85.7%
Recommendations	7/7	7	100%

Table 3

Detailed Expert Agreement on Research Instruments

Research Instrument	Agreement Level	Number of Revisions	Final Approval
Interview Protocol	0.90	2	Approved
Observation Checklist	0.88	3	Approved
Document Analysis Form	0.85	2	Approved
Assessment Rubric	0.87	2	Approved

Table 4

Expert Background Information

Expert ID	Academic Qualification	Years of Experience	Field of Expertise
E1	PhD Education	15	Special Education
E2	PhD Psychology	12	Educational Psychology
E3	PhD Curriculum	18	Curriculum Development
E4	EdD	20	Cultural Studies
E5	PhD Education	16	Research Methodology
E6	PhD Special Education	14	Special Education
E7	EdD	17	Educational Assessment

Findings

The research findings revealed several significant patterns regarding cultural sensitivity in special education programs at Chinese National Type Schools. Through careful analysis of interviews, observations, and documentation, we identified key themes that highlight both the successes and challenges of implementing culturally sensitive special education.

One of the most striking findings was the crucial role of language in the educational process. All seven participating teachers emphasized how the use of Mandarin as the medium of instruction significantly impacted student engagement and comprehension. As one experienced teacher with 15 years of experience noted, "When I use Mandarin to explain complex mathematical concepts, I can see the 'light' turn on in my students' eyes. They become more confident in asking questions and participating in class discussions." This observation underscores how native language instruction can break down barriers to learning for special needs students.

The integration of Confucian values into special education practices emerged as another significant theme. Teachers reported successfully incorporating traditional values such as respect for elders (xiao shun) and perseverance in learning (qin xue) into their teaching methods. These cultural elements weren't merely superficial additions but formed the foundation of their pedagogical approach. One teacher shared how they use classical Chinese stories about renowned scholars to encourage students not to give up when facing learning challenges.

Cultural integration extended beyond language and values to include practical activities. Teachers reported incorporating traditional Chinese arts and crafts, such as calligraphy and paper folding (origami), into their lessons. These activities served multiple purposes: developing fine motor skills, reinforcing cultural identity, and making learning more engaging. During traditional festivals, teachers would creatively integrate cultural activities with academic learning - for instance, using lantern-making during the Mid-Autumn Festival to teach geometric concepts.

However, the implementation of culturally sensitive special education wasn't without its challenges. Teachers frequently faced the complex task of balancing universal special education requirements with cultural preservation. One participant expressed this challenge eloquently: "We often feel pulled between following the standard special education curriculum and ensuring our students don't lose touch with their cultural roots. Time constraints make it challenging to fully address both aspects."

The study also revealed interesting findings regarding community engagement and program acceptance. Schools that successfully integrated cultural elements into their special education programs reported higher levels of parent involvement and community support. Parents felt more comfortable approaching teachers and participating in school activities when they saw their cultural values being respected and incorporated into the educational process. This led to stronger school-family partnerships, which ultimately benefited the students.

Assessment emerged as another area requiring careful consideration. Traditional evaluation methods sometimes proved inadequate for measuring progress in a culturally adapted program. Teachers reported developing more holistic assessment approaches that could capture both academic progress and cultural learning. However, this created new challenges in standardizing evaluation methods and ensuring consistency across different schools.

The impact of culturally sensitive approaches extended beyond academic achievements. Teachers observed improved social integration among special needs students, enhanced self-confidence, and stronger cultural identity development. One teacher noted how students became more proud of their cultural heritage when it was actively incorporated into their learning experience.

Professional development emerged as a crucial factor in implementing culturally sensitive special education. Teachers emphasized the need for training that specifically addresses how to integrate cultural elements into special education practices effectively. This included understanding how to modify teaching strategies while maintaining cultural authenticity and meeting special education requirements.

The research also highlighted the importance of school leadership in supporting culturally sensitive approaches. Schools where administrators actively supported cultural integration showed more successful implementation of these programs. This support manifested in various ways, from allocating resources for cultural activities to providing flexibility in curriculum adaptation.

Perhaps most significantly, the study revealed that cultural sensitivity in special education is not merely an add-on feature but a fundamental component that can enhance educational outcomes. When cultural elements were thoughtfully integrated into special education programs, they created a more inclusive and effective learning environment that benefited all stakeholders - students, teachers, families, and the broader school community.

Table 5

Main Themes and Statistical Reliability

Theme Category	Subthemes	Frequency (n=7)	Cohen's Kappa (κ)
1. Cultural and Society Norms	1.1 Mandarin Usage	7	0.92
	1.2 Confucian Values Integration	5	0.85
	1.3 Cultural Elements in Teaching	7	0.89
	1.4 Cultural Identity Preservation	4	0.83
2. Inclusivity and Learning	2.1 School Community Acceptance	7	0.91
	2.2 Student Engagement	6	0.88
	2.3 Assessment Challenges	3	0.84
	2.4 Family Support	7	0.90

Research Implications

The implications of this research extend far beyond the immediate context of Chinese National Type Schools in Malaysia. The findings suggest several important considerations for educational policy, teacher training, and practical implementation of special education programs in culturally diverse settings.

From a policy perspective, the study highlights the need for more flexible educational frameworks that can accommodate cultural sensitivity while maintaining high standards of special education. Current policies often take a one-size-fits-all approach, which may not adequately address the unique cultural contexts of different school systems. The success of culturally integrated programs at SJKCs suggests that educational policies should provide more room for cultural adaptation while ensuring core special education objectives are met.

Teacher preparation and professional development emerge as crucial areas requiring attention. The study reveals that teachers need specialized training not only in special education methodologies but also in cultural integration techniques. This dual competency is essential for effectively serving students in culturally specific environments. Training programs should include components on cultural awareness, adaptation of teaching materials, and strategies for incorporating cultural elements into special education practices.

The research findings also point to the importance of assessment reform. Traditional evaluation methods often fail to capture the full range of student progress in culturally sensitive programs. There is a clear need for developing assessment tools that can measure both academic achievement and cultural learning outcomes. These tools should be flexible enough to accommodate different cultural contexts while maintaining reliability and validity.

Community engagement emerged as a particularly significant factor in program success. Schools that effectively incorporated cultural elements into their special education programs reported stronger parent-school partnerships and increased community support. This suggests that cultural sensitivity can serve as a bridge between educational institutions and the communities they serve. Future programs should consider ways to strengthen these community connections through cultural integration.

The study also revealed important insights about the role of language in special education. The use of mother tongue instruction (in this case, Mandarin) proved crucial for student comprehension and engagement. This finding has implications for language policies in special education, suggesting that native language instruction should be given more prominence, particularly in the early stages of learning.

Resource allocation also requires careful consideration. Schools need adequate support to implement culturally sensitive programs effectively. This includes materials for cultural activities, professional development opportunities for teachers, and time for curriculum adaptation. Educational authorities should consider these resource requirements when planning and budgeting for special education programs.

The research points to the need for more collaborative approaches in program development. The most successful programs were those where teachers, administrators, parents, and community members worked together to create culturally appropriate educational experiences. This suggests that future program development should involve all stakeholders from the planning stages onward.

Technology integration emerged as an area requiring further exploration. While the study didn't specifically focus on technology, observations suggested that digital tools could play a valuable role in supporting culturally sensitive special education. Future research might explore how technology can be used to enhance cultural learning while meeting special education objectives.

Long-term sustainability of culturally sensitive programs requires careful consideration. The study found that successful programs needed ongoing support and resources to maintain their effectiveness. This suggests the need for sustainable funding models and long-term commitment from educational authorities to support these initiatives.

The research also highlighted the importance of documentation and sharing of best practices. Teachers often developed innovative approaches to cultural integration, but these methods weren't always systematically recorded or shared with others. Establishing networks for sharing successful strategies could help improve program implementation across different schools.

Looking toward the future, several recommendations emerge from this study. First, there is a need for more comprehensive research into the long-term impacts of culturally sensitive special education. Longitudinal studies could help understand how these approaches affect student outcomes over time. Second, comparative studies across different cultural contexts could provide valuable insights into best practices for cultural integration in special education.

The development of specific guidelines for cultural integration in special education could help standardize good practices while maintaining flexibility for local adaptation. These guidelines should be developed collaboratively, drawing on the experiences of successful programs and input from various stakeholders.

Ultimately, this research demonstrates that cultural sensitivity in special education is not merely an idealistic goal but a practical necessity for effective education in multicultural societies. The experiences of Chinese National Type Schools in Malaysia offer valuable lessons for educational systems worldwide grappling with similar challenges of cultural integration in special education.

Conclusion

The conclusions drawn from this comprehensive study of cultural sensitivity in special education at Chinese National Type Schools offer valuable insights for both theoretical understanding and practical implementation. These findings point toward several key recommendations that could shape the future of culturally sensitive special education not only in Malaysia but in diverse educational settings worldwide.

When examining the practical implications, several concrete recommendations emerge for immediate implementation. First, schools should develop structured mentoring programs where experienced teachers who have successfully integrated cultural elements into their special education practices can guide newer teachers. This knowledge transfer is crucial for maintaining program consistency and quality. As one veteran teacher in our study noted, "The lessons we've learned through years of trial and error could save new teachers valuable time and help them avoid common pitfalls."

Professional development programs require significant restructuring to include specific training in cultural integration techniques. This training should be ongoing rather than one-off sessions, allowing teachers to continuously refine their approaches based on classroom experiences. Workshops should include practical demonstrations of successful cultural integration strategies, opportunities for hands-on practice, and regular feedback sessions.

The development of culturally appropriate assessment tools emerges as a critical priority. These tools should be designed to evaluate both academic progress and cultural learning, while remaining sensitive to the unique characteristics of students with special needs. Assessment methods might include portfolio-based evaluation, project-based assessments, and observational tools that can capture the nuanced ways students demonstrate their learning in culturally specific contexts.

For school administrators, the research suggests the need for more flexible scheduling systems that allow for the integration of cultural activities without compromising core

educational objectives. This might include designated time slots for cultural activities, team teaching opportunities, and collaborative planning periods where teachers can work together to develop integrated lessons.

Resource allocation requires careful consideration, with recommendations for establishing dedicated budgets for cultural materials, professional development, and community engagement activities. Schools should also consider appointing cultural liaison officers who can help bridge the gap between educational programs and community expectations.

Parent and community engagement strategies need systematic development. Regular parent workshops, cultural celebration events, and opportunities for community members to share their expertise can help strengthen the connection between school and home. These initiatives should be planned with sensitivity to working parents' schedules and community commitments.

Documentation and sharing of best practices should become standard procedure. The establishment of a centralized database of successful teaching strategies, lesson plans, and cultural integration techniques could benefit teachers across different schools. Regular inter-school meetings and professional learning communities could facilitate the exchange of ideas and experiences.

Looking toward the future, several long-term recommendations emerge. Education authorities should consider developing specialized certification programs in culturally sensitive special education. These programs would provide teachers with formal recognition of their expertise in this area and help establish professional standards for cultural integration in special education.

Research initiatives should be expanded to include longitudinal studies tracking student outcomes over extended periods. This would help establish the long-term effectiveness of culturally sensitive approaches and provide evidence for policy decisions. Comparative studies across different cultural contexts could also offer valuable insights into best practices. Technology integration strategies should be developed specifically for culturally sensitive special education. This might include the development of digital resources that incorporate cultural elements, online platforms for teacher collaboration, and tools for tracking student progress in culturally appropriate ways.

The study also points to the need for policy reforms at the national level. Recommendations include:

- Development of flexible curriculum guidelines that allow for cultural adaptation while maintaining educational standards
- Creation of assessment frameworks that recognize and value cultural learning
- Establishment of funding mechanisms for cultural integration initiatives
- Implementation of quality assurance measures that include cultural sensitivity as a key criterion

These conclusions and recommendations should not be viewed as final solutions but rather as starting points for ongoing development and refinement. The success of culturally sensitive

special education programs requires continuous evaluation, adaptation, and improvement based on emerging needs and experiences.

As we look to the future, it becomes clear that cultural sensitivity in special education is not merely an optional enhancement but a fundamental requirement for effective education in our increasingly diverse world. The experiences of Chinese National Type Schools in Malaysia demonstrate that when cultural sensitivity is thoughtfully integrated into special education programs, it creates powerful opportunities for learning and development that benefit all stakeholders in the educational process.

The path forward requires commitment, resources, and ongoing collaboration among educators, administrators, policymakers, and community members. However, the potential benefits - improved student outcomes, stronger community engagement, and more inclusive educational environments - make this investment worthwhile. As one teacher in our study eloquently stated, "When we honor both our students' educational needs and their cultural heritage, we give them the best possible foundation for success."

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