

# Moving forward or standing still? A reflection of “special” educational provision in Malaysia

---

**Pei Wen Chong**

*Department of Education, Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool, United Kingdom*

Liverpool Hope University, Taggart Avenue, Hope Park, Liverpool, L16 9JD, United Kingdom.

chongj@hope.ac.uk

**DRAFT! Please, do not quote!**

DRAFT

## Abstract

This paper investigates influential discourses embedded within policy documents and interview data of educational policymakers to trace special education development in Malaysia. With a heavy reliance on the medical model, the binary distinction of the “educable” and “ineducable” based on self-care abilities is incongruent with inclusive ideals that support learner diversity. In effect the diagnosed disability types of students bear a strong influence on their educational settings and learning pathways, leading to many students with physical impairments relegated to community care centres outwith the schooling system. Inclusive aspirations are also hampered by neoliberal policies such as the competitive centralised examinations and inflexible curricular standards; which inexorably put “able-bodied” students from privileged backgrounds and families of better socio-economic status at an advantage. Proportion of special school cohort remains statically low yet special classes are expanding exponentially with high demands resulting from diagnoses of various kinds of learning disabilities, particularly standing out is the category termed “slow learners”. This calls into question whether the expanding special classes shows an improvement of support provision or the growing failings of the Malaysian general education system.

**Keywords:** Special/ Inclusive Education; policymaking; discourse analysis; Malaysia

## Introduction

Malaysia is a developing country in Southeast Asia with a centrally governed and multicultural federation of 13 states. Governmental intervention to promote social cohesion and welfare provision to all layers of society, although fractionalised and scattered, has increased in the last decade. More than 92% of Malaysians are literate since 2005 and universal primary education has been maintained since 1990 (UNDP, 2005). Inconsistent with these positive developments in Malaysia, disability is still largely perceived in the light of abnormality, so much so that most interaction with the handicapped is based on sympathy (Haller, 2009). The public facilities are not designed to the convenience of the disabled who consequently seldom mingle in society on public transports or at other communal localities. *Orang Kurang Upaya* (Persons with less abilities) concentrates in the poor sector of the society as “beggars” according to the Destitute Persons Act 1977 (FAO, 2004). In 2008, 220,000 disabled persons were registered with the Malaysian Community Welfare Department to receive welfare support due to unemployment. They are largely seen as “an underclass without chance of escaping from the poverty trap” (Jayasooria, Krishnan & Ooi, 1997, p. 456). Even though social

benefits have improved for this population, much needs to be done to create a disability-friendly environment in Malaysia.

The disadvantage of the disabled cohort extends to the issue of equal educational access and quality. There remain huge bureaucratic barriers for students with a disability to enter the formal schooling system, and those who satisfy the admission criteria face even greater challenges to gain a place in the mainstream classrooms. Schooling structures which are not disabled friendly vastly reduce physical accessibility while the emphasis on academic achievement and the inflexible teaching convention inhibits inclusive learning (Adnan & Hafiz, 2001). This situation is strongly reflected in the 2009 Programme for International Student Assessment where Malaysia was ranked at the 54th position in the low quality/ low equity quadrant as the long tail of low achievement was over-represented by students with learning disabilities (Walker, 2011). With only 56% of the student participants above the PISA baseline reading competency, the focus has been shifted to not just increase top performers but also tackling the wide attainment discrepancy towards building a more productive workforce to compete in the fierce global economy through education (Ismail & Awang, 2009).

*Moving Forward* (2011-2020) is the new aspiration adopted by the Malaysian Special Education Department aiming at reducing the academic gap, improving inclusiveness and multi-agency coordination within support provision as well as harnessing employability and marketability of children with disabilities. It denotes departing from past developments and venturing into new spheres with fresh ideas and renewed strategies, towards better educational landscapes and opportunities for children with disabilities. With such positive imagery, there is a need to reflect on the reformation that has taken place, whether inclusive discourse has grown in recent policies and schooling practices have changed to embrace student diversity. The arguments are supplemented with the wider literature, statistical analysis and policymaker quotes which were obtained from a three-year doctoral research presented through the multi-level “Russian” doll approach (Chong & Graham, 2013).

The nested approach involves the examination of national and supranational trends affecting education policy-making at the *macro* level, the discursive review of policy frameworks in the past 15 years at the *meso* level and *micro*-level interview data analysis. Five highly experienced policymakers situated at the top hierarchy of four divisions in the Ministry of Education were interviewed in-depth to provide a “real time” perspective of policy development when conceptualising the aim and structure of student support services in Malaysia. To secure anonymity, the participants are randomly referred to as

MP1 (Malaysian Policymaker 1) to MP5 from the Curriculum Development, Competence Development and Assessment, School Management and Special Education Divisions. The following section covers a discursive review of policy development in the area of disability rights and special education in Malaysia. The embedded discourse is shown to have a strong influence on system-wide educational governance and student composition in the continuum of segregated, integrated and inclusive settings.

### **Conflicting discourses within Malaysian “special” education policies**

Policy ideas from the United Kingdom have a prime influence on educational decisions made in Malaysia especially in the first few decades of post-independence from the British colonial rule since 1957 through the process of policy learning and borrowing. The term “special education” has long been adopted following the Warnock Report (UK) in 1978 (Tomlinson, 1985). The United States, another long-standing economic powerhouse, is also an influential yardstick for Malaysian educational development. The disability rights movement, which sprung from activism by the disability community of the United States in the 1960s, had created awareness about educational rights of children with special needs. The movement triggered the initiative to lay out Section 10 of the Malaysian Education Act 1961 in combining ministerial effort and medical professionals to define “the several categories of pupils requiring special educational treatment and the method appropriate for the education of pupils in each category in special schools or otherwise”. This Act marked a great progress as such services were previously established through private effort which were lacking in funding, structural consistency, accountability and legal obligations. However, implementation was lax due to financial restrictions and scarcity of experts which then prompted the publication of the Cabinet Committee report in 1979 to improve resources and facilities of education for the blind, introduce formal schooling for the deaf at age 6 and incorporate remedial education in primary schools.

Over the period of 1980-2000, a series of official policy endorsement had significantly garnered acknowledgment of equal educational entitlements relating to children with a disability in Malaysia; yet concrete actions remained poorly elaborated. Emulating the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of the United States, the MOE adopted the “least restrictive environment” policy in 1981 but has not been adhered to in practice with the rigidly dichotomised system segregating formal schooling and institutionalised rehabilitative welfare services based on students’ degree of disability. This discriminatory practice which denies a considerable amount of children of school-based learning has

persisted to date even though Malaysia has signed the UNESCO's appeal towards "Education for All" (EFA) in 1990 followed by the Proclamation on Full Participation and Equality of People with Disabilities in the Asia and Pacific Region in 1994. The medical discourse was further strengthened under the Education Act 1996 and the 1997 Special Education Regulations by drawing a line between the "educable" and the "ineducable". Eligibility for special education placement is strictly determined by medical personnel to cater for educable children who are "able to manage themselves without help" (MoE, 1998).

Huge divides also exist between the clear affirmation of rights in the Persons with Disabilities Act (PWDA) 2008 and federal constitution against the discriminatory educational Acts which encumber the accessibility of education for students with additional needs. Section 28 of the PWDA postulates general responsibilities of the government and educational providers to "provide reasonable accommodation suitable with the requirements of persons and children with disabilities" to preclude their exclusion "from the general education system on the basis of disabilities" (Malaysian Government, 2008, pp. 23). This strong statement governing inclusive treatments is contradicted by the replete absence of accountability when action or legal proceedings cannot be "brought, instituted or maintained in any court against the government" (section 41) under any circumstances. Article 8 of the Constitution equally speaks of equality of treatment and entitlement to rights for "all people" but protection against discrimination is not extended to the disabled cohort (Velloo Pillay, 2009). Unethical standards which violate the democratic principle are particularly pronounced when facilities for the disabled are still deficient in schools and public facilities although the Uniform Building By-Laws has been gazetted nearly three decades ago in 1984. When 80% of physically-impaired children are pressured to drop out from primary schools, the rights-based discourses in dysfunctional long-standing laws are merely policy rhetoric to protect the interests of the prudent government.

As the notion of *educability* has introduced a contentious paradox towards the support for *Education for all* by the government, the newly gazetted 2013 Special Education Regulations has reworded the judgment of student placement based on *suitability*. Despite the terminological change, a deeper look shows that the implications remain the same; the prerequisite ability to self-manage still stands for the eligibility to enrol within the schooling system as stipulated in the principle Education Act of 1996. A much needed paradigm shift from the medical to social model of disability is found wanting as the 'problem' still adheres to the individual student with a disability. Discourses relating to diagnosis, treatment, normalisation and cure as anchored in the medical model (Sailor & Roger, 2005)

are evident when support provision is only eligible for the “pupil who is certified by a medical practitioner, an optometrist, an audiologist or a psychologist” (MoE, 2013, p. 9). Conflicting melange of discourses are observed as whilst inclusion education is branded as the goal (MoE, 2004; 2006; 2008a; 2008b; UNDP, 2005), it is sidelined by segregatory measures and cluttered bureaucracies more indicative of the medical discourse through screening, admission evaluation and a stringent 3-month probation in “determining the suitability of the pupil with special educational needs” (MoE, 2013, p.10) in the assigned setting along the continuum of educational services from rehabilitative centres, special schools, the Special Education Integration Programme (special classes) and Inclusive Education Programme (mainstream classrooms) in the *arus perdana* (prestigious stream).

This *suitability* “depends on the special children” (MP1) on their ability to assimilate to the norms and required academic standards. The probation period is used to gauge such *suitability* followed by approval or the decision of transfer to a more specialised and less inclusive educational setting. Instead of deliberating what can be improved to enable the child to be educated in the *least restrictive environment*, this system is founded on whether the child can adapt to fit into the inflexible norms and is rigorously evaluated. The voice of the parent or the child in need of additional support is absent throughout all policy documents, signifying disempowerment as “the determination of the Registrar is final” (MoE, 2013, p. 11). While inclusion paints a student-friendly learning culture that is responsive to diverse needs and conducive to equal participation (Ferguson, 1995), policy readings and the interview data show interchangeable use of “inclusion” with “integration” in the Malaysian context; both focus on placements in mainstream schools without any reference to wider organisational transformation to establish “schools for all” as proclaimed by the Salamanca Statement in 1994. The predominant medical discourse directly influences Malaysian special educational management and its schooling practices.

### **A medicalised approach: ‘compartmentalising students to where they seem fit’**

Special education in Malaysia is still managed in a rigidly compartmentalised and segregative manner depending on the type of diagnosis a student receives by channelling those with lower self-care and cognitive abilities to other “viable options and alternatives” (MoE, 2004, p. 25) instead of mainstream learning. The categories of special needs have expanded to visual, hearing, speech and physical disabilities, learning difficulties and any combination of multiple disabilities in the 2013 Special

Education Regulation. The deficit discourse dominates the mindset of education policymakers while medical experts act as the gatekeeper for student support (Adnan & Hafiz, 2001). Special provision which is rehabilitative in nature emphasises the physical and intellectual deficiencies of children as they “are always incapable of responding to the normal process of teaching and learning” (SED, 1999). Students are reduced wholly to the diagnosed deficiencies to the extent that their abilities are stifled; the case where students with physical disabilities and severe intellectual impairments who are incapable of interacting and carrying out daily routines independently and “normally” are institutionalised under the Department of Social Welfare to receive rehabilitative and therapeutic interventions (DoSW, 1999).

A strict adherence to the medical model is thus observed when these students with higher level of support requirements are previously considered *ineducable* and currently rephrased as being *unsuitable* for entering the schooling system to receive special education support. Placement prescriptions further extend to students with visual and hearing impairments in special schools with limited access to mainstream educational settings. The integrated special education classes are introduced primarily for students with mild or moderate impairments to “gain enough social skills to blend into the mainstream environment” (MP3) in order to fit into “the normal society after the completion of basic education” (MP4). This system acts as a dehumanising sorting device to diagnose, discriminate and segregate students with additional needs who are socially constructed as academic outcasts with “innate learning problems” (MP5). Even when integration takes place, MP2 describes such as the process of “normalisation where students adapt to the new environment” especially in the intensive probationary period. Normalisation in this context projects a sense of correcting irregular behaviours and modifying learning habits to conform to what is essentially “normal”. This concept carries disparagement of their original attributes and identity, rather contradictory to the concept of inclusion which celebrates diversity. Ineffective governmental intervention, the lack of public awareness and widespread apathy of the “able-bodied” jointly contribute to construct the notion of *ineducability* or *unsuitability for education* within students with special needs.

In addition to the lack of policy support and inaccurate comprehension of inclusion, other inhibiting factors are identified as inadequate funding and low supply of “specialist expertise” (MP1). The Department of Special Education mainly invests on training “special” teachers for “special” types of disability but the cultivation of inclusive measures such as classroom diversity, pedagogic flexibility, individualised learning environment and organisational creativity remain minimal. Multidisciplinary

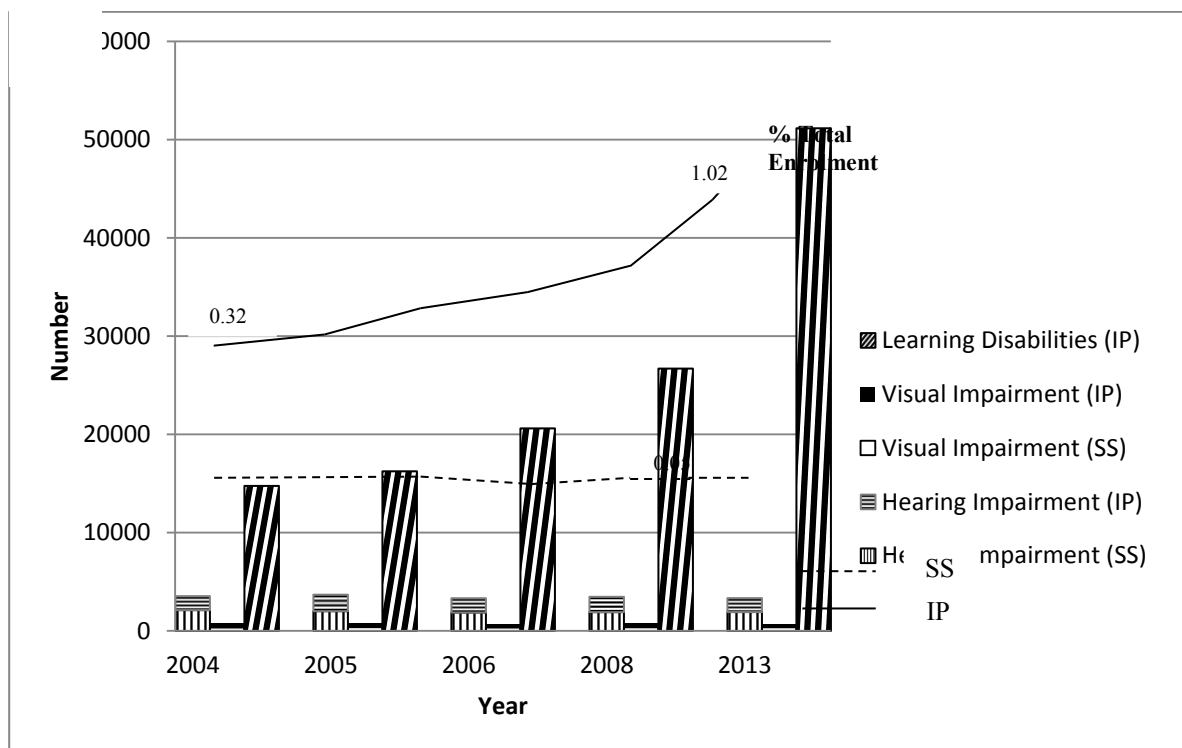
intervention exists but teamwork is not evident; students are sent for diagnosis and treatment with the medical professionals when educational specialists are deemed untrained and unauthorised to provide any “practical learning diagnosis to date” (MP2). If the diagnosed defects are not too unmanageable in the schooling context, teachers in special schools or classes then regain the authority to educate the students in a *suitable* environment relative to the severity of the diagnoses; yet individualised education plan is only available for students with visual and hearing disabilities (Bong, 2011). The disconnection between educational and medical services is problematic, as shared by an experienced Malaysian special education teacher, with many instances of misdiagnosis due to the unselective authority granted to all doctors who “might not possess any knowledge whatsoever in special education... unsurprisingly some students from the category of slow learners are marked as mentally retarded” (Sue, 2012). As a partial welfare state with limited legal recourse to secure educational rights, coupled with low trust in teachers’ capacities, Malaysia is still short of an early intervention and functional collaborative system consisting social services, qualified school-based support teachers and healthcare professionals to prevent drop-out and learning failures. Having discussed special education management at a systemic level, the next section attempts to uncover student composition of Malaysian special classes with the overall enrolment trend explained.

### **Policy in Action: Emerging Themes and Trends**

Figure 1 below illustrates a contrasting dual trend from 2004 to 2013 where the proportion of special school cohort remains statically low yet special classes established through the integration programme are expanding exponentially with high demands resulting from diagnoses of various kinds of learning disabilities. The minute 0.05% placement in special schools for the entire student population is not a representation of successful inclusion or integration but the incapacity of the Malaysian education system to incorporate students with disabilities into formal schooling. “Ineducable” children who were denied proper learning experiences and relegated to care services exceeded 10,866 in number in 2006 which did not take into account the much larger pool in costly private centres (RM132000 a year) and neglected homes. The “disabilities” of children with additional requirements are shaped by a complex form of institutional discrimination as “segregation is the essence of teaching and learning for these students” (MoE, 2008b, p. 9).



**Figure 1: Students with special needs in special schools (SS) and integrated program (IP) 2004 - 2013**

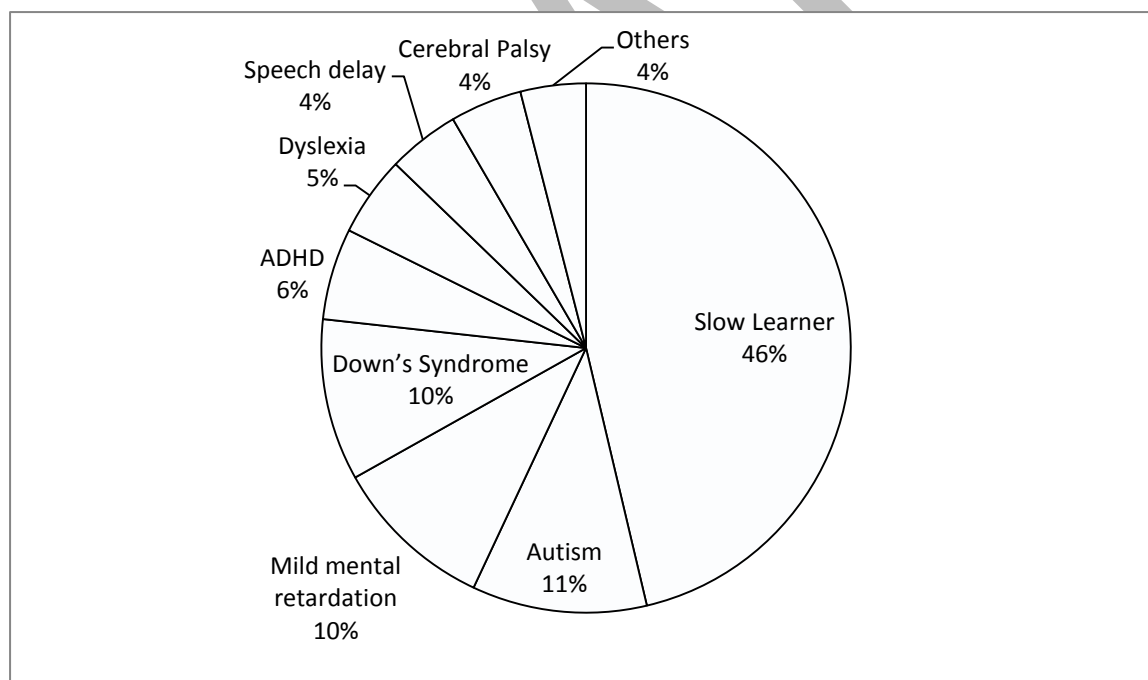


Sources: BPPDP, 2010; MoE, 2008a; 2008b; UNESCO IBE, 2009; EPRD, 2013

Integration programme enrolment was recorded at around 51157 students in 2013 which was almost thrice the number of 14535 placements in 2002 (MoE, 2008b; EPRD, 2013). Whilst placing limited number of “blind” and “deaf” students into mainstream schools reflects integration (Bong, 2011), the more common practice of transferring students diagnosed with learning disabilities from regular classrooms into “integrated” classrooms either through individual identification or system-wide grade level screening is a form of segregation. Malpractices are observed in some schools where the integrated students attend different recess (lunch break) and activity hours which greatly limit inter-group interaction and defeat the purpose of integration to foster social cohesion among all children. The integration programme has additionally garnered some negative logistical and organisational feedbacks as the learning environment is a noticeable downgrade from the mainstream as basic amenities are deficient in unmodified old buildings and support materials are lacking for the recruited untrained teachers (Mohd Yasin et al., 2013); a stark contrast to government provision of the all-round best to the Cluster Schools of Excellence.

There is truth in the consideration that the Ministry “cannot wait until a time that all the facilities are ready only then we can have the integrated approach which will take years” (MP3); nevertheless the integration programme leaves much to be desired as a considerable majority of the pupils diagnosed with learning disabilities could be taught in regular classrooms if provided with necessary equipments, pedagogic modification and individualised learning plans. Through new accountability-based policies such as the New Deal and High Performing Schools, education funding tilts heavily towards the investment on schools demonstrating high academic achievement (Sani, 2011). Schools in rural areas, special schools and those occupied by students from less privileged backgrounds still lack basic amenities and good teachers (UNDP, 2005). Inequity in resource distribution exacerbates the polarities between well-equipped elite schools and rural or low-achieving schools facing considerable logistic barriers which hinder the development of inclusive learning conditions (PEMANDU, 2010).

**Figure 2: Enrolment Category in Special Classes**



Sources: Combined PPKI databases of Selangor and Perak State Schools (n=100)

The data was compiled through counting individual students in the Integration Programme online register through the participating schools. The category of slow learners is particularly contentious and striking at 46% of total enrolment, surpassing by far other medically constructed diagnostic categories. This pattern even more strongly calls into question the validity of the medical model, as to how medical

professionals perform clinical tests or psychometrics to profile *slow learners* which exemplifies an act of pinning down all learning inefficiency and non-compliance with individual deficit regardless of family, environmental or schooling influence (SEU, 2013). The silver lining for the “integrated” provision for slow learners is that teachers can afford giving more individualised attention to them who otherwise would have remained in remedial classes, neglected in ordinary classroom or worse dropped out of school. On the other side of the coin, why are teachers increasingly eager to get slow learners diagnosed? This category seems to be the most pertinent example of the social construction of in particular a learning disability. The rise in integrated placements shows that special education also has a quick relief function for teachers to get rid of students who could not follow the fast pace of instruction and intensity of assessment in a competitive classroom (Graham and Jahnukainen, 2011). Psycho-medical diagnosis, apart from complementing the categorical approach to educational provision, has also blended with neo-liberal performativity schooling culture to streamline the student cohort.

My suggestion is to streamline students at a very early age of 13, rather than 16, form four. In order for you to become a developed nation, you have to develop your human capital at a very early age. And we also have to realise that there are also students who cannot read, write in one of the three areas, 3Ms, *menguasai membaca, mengira, menulis* (mastering reading, arithmetic and writing). In 2009 I think there are around 12,000 who cannot master all these. Handicapped in one of these three areas. We just put them in the mainstream and you know by end of the day the 12,000 still fail. Still fail. So why wait? (MP3)

There is a big misconception deeply ingrained in the society that the inability to learn lies with the student and it is the job of school personnel to evaluate the problems of those children and direct them to a suitable track, curriculum and environment fitting to their learning abilities. High inflexible standards and academic streaming encourage the establishment of segregated educational provision as the viable placement solution for students unfitting to mainstream education within the competitive assessment-oriented educational triage (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000). Disability labels and “special” placements in the Malaysian context are the manifestation of exclusion from the competitive norm, unsympathetic towards those with additional support needs. Furthermore, the highly-differentiated and dualistic system of general and special education is difficult to expunge. A gap exists between the inclusive rhetoric and reality where the boundary between mainstream and special settings is almost insurmountable as the verdict of educational panel and registrar acts as the major roadblock to

inclusion along with strong abnormality stigma associated with the diagnostic labels. Only a meager 0.23% of students with visual or hearing impairments were channelled into school integration programs in 2010, while the rest entered special schools as per normal screening procedure, which did not reflect a wide practice of inclusion.

High-stakes assessments are “unfortunately the only measuring criterion for us to get the results” (MP1) which carry detrimental consequences to students who are incapable of learning at a competitive speedy pace; those who are unmotivated to study for examinations or culturally too different to follow test questions designed for the average population. When children from under-privileged backgrounds and those with disabilities do not have equal stakes in academic competition; selective tracking, segregated instruction and exclusion become the by-products of national examinations. The educational triage strengthens the link between socioeconomic status and educational outcomes. This competitive performativity inflicts much stress among school employees as they are obliged to abide by stringent bureaucratic regulations, meet demands of enormous paperwork load, face frequent inspections, rush through assigned curriculum syllabus with students and answer to school performance. Malaysian policymakers should resist adopting the globalised neoliberal approaches to education management which has failed to consolidate social and educational cohesion but enlarging the achievement gap between advantaged and underprivileged students.

If we put them in the inclusive model, the children, it's very difficult for them as well as very difficult for the teachers and the mainstream children. It will take some time, maybe years of adjustment. (M4)

The Ministry clearly does not aim to place every child with special needs in the general education classroom. The rationale of the policy restriction of “suitability” is to ascertain that integration must be functional and viable. The child must demonstrate “their ability to accommodate and assimilate into the mainstream” (MoE, 2004, p. 26) academically and socially without posing disruptive behaviours, and only then would limited adjustment and provision of facilities be made available. The inherent deficiency of children is prominent while their needs and potentials are given secondary consideration. Another major drawback is the absence of a systematic review process to gauge the readiness of students for integration, aggravated with the notion of student deficiencies instead of school incapacities.

Nothing much can be done to assess the people but to teach these people how to fend for themselves later. So that basically they know how to cope, basic food for breakfast. For

example how to tidy up themselves, I mean to... how to fend for themselves, to survive in this kind of world so that they can lead their lives better. We don't assess these people, we just see whether they improve in certain skills. (MP4)

Discrimination also exists when the system establishes integrated arrangement for vocational learning but segregated special school placement for students with a disability opting for academic subjects in secondary schools. The education received by students with special needs is primarily vocational at the upper secondary level or uses the alternative special curriculum which consists of all general subjects as well as the additional life skills module, all highly adapted to become more reduced in content in order to impart rudimentary knowledge and skills. Both offer limited pathways and employment prospects or further education. The vocationalisation of special education in secondary schools has occurred since 1999; a major shift aiming at “total rehabilitation” (Mohamad Taib, 2013, p. 65) by “giving the children special skills so that when they go out, they can survive in the society” (MP3). The Department of Social Welfare (1999) states that special education should focus on “pre-vocational, vocational and labour training so that students can attain perfection according to their limited abilities” (Adnan & Hafiz, 2001, p. 660). In most cases, students with visual or hearing impairments commence learning in mainstream special classes only at the secondary level due to administrative and educational convenience when students in all categories of disabilities are combined for vocational learning with good opportunities to participate in lessons with their “normal” peers. Vocational options are likely to shape their transition from schools to low-paid services or manufacturing sectors which are described as “jobs that they can handle” (MP2). Students who are visually impaired should acquire high-level mastery of basket weaving and reflexology massage, while those with hearing impairments are prepared to become tailors, motorcycle assemblers and furniture makers; lastly students with learning difficulties can opt for food catering, hairstyling, beautician and personal attendant courses (MoE, 2014). The two major aims include imparting employable skills in order to reduce economic burdens caused by the disabled population on their family and community, as well as fulfilling the manpower needs of the country (UNDP, 2004).

The Ministry repeatedly stresses that the future of special education should veer towards vocational and technically oriented studies with the support of industries (MoE, 2004). MP2 clarifies that a clear division in schooling pathways is embedded in the system so that “high achievers pursue higher education, the middle should do their best to survive, the weak and those with special needs should be identified and directed to the vocational track”. The job-matching approach oriented on types

of impairment denigrates their intellectual worth and dehumanises individuality, learning process and outcomes. This situation could perpetuate the low position experienced by the disabled in Malaysian society. This discriminatory educational system actively locates students with additional needs at the peripheries of the mainstream society which contravenes the seventh challenge of the Vision 2020 of developing a caring culture. In reality, the status and prospect of special education is far from being equivalent to general education. In short, this branch is perceived as an educational dead-end which sets much lower attainment goals. This disability classification and instruction have persisted but the voice of those children remains rarely heard. Their destiny still lies in the hands of those who possess the power to make important political decisions.

## Conclusion

The decade of 2000-2010 has witnessed rapidly ascending student enrolment numbers in the Special Education Integration Programme (PPKI) in Malaysia. In the evaluation of its progress, there is no question that policy guidance for school-level implementation, structural organisation of the system, teacher education and overall leadership have improved significantly since the notable era of 1980s where the concept of integration first sprung. From this stage of development, to satisfactorily gauge how much has evolved requires a reflection of whether the undertaken policy changes, paradigm shift and solid actions are driving Malaysia closer to the goal of inclusion. Three observations emerge: 1) policy rhetoric regarding inclusion is essentially integration 2) the conceptual understanding of inclusion departs from the deficit view of disability; rendering the strive towards the 'goal' unpromising 3) the fundamental causes deterring inclusive growth stemming from neo-liberal forces in education have to be proactively dealt with.

Since the national endorsement of the Salamanca statement and the commencement of integrated programs, the terminologies of "inclusive education" and "inclusion" have been adopted relating to educational provision for students with a disability, seemingly indicate that the discourse of inclusion has infiltrated the Malaysian education system. In practice, inclusion does not differ distinctly from integration which signifies educational placements of students with special needs in mainstream special classes. This does not fit with the definition given by UNESCO (1994) that emphasises collective learning in regular classrooms and flexible schooling arrangements. Even with the adoption of more normalised terms, inclusive discourses are restricted to the sphere of special education without reference to other general education policies which impedes sustainable organisational transformation

for diverse learning. Current educational strategies, placement statistics and discourses emerging from interview data show that Malaysia has not progressed beyond integration in the strive for better educational opportunities for children with special needs. “Inclusion” as interpreted from the Malaysian education system is not merely highly conditional upon physical and intellectual academic suitability, also instituted is the obligation to assess whether the students are capable of compensating for their impairments in the normative fast-paced learning environment. This raises the question how does the government aim to move forward towards educational equality that is true to the real sense of inclusion while holding firmly to the deficit model of disability where the “less-than-normal” and “irregular” student has to blend into the “normal” and “regular” school (Slee, 2011). Inclusion disapproves the belief that some children are less educable than others, instead it shows the way of how schools can be restructured, how deep-rooted attitude can be changed, how the society can be more accepting and what teachers can do to make learning relevant to all.

Another powerful force hampering the growth of inclusion in Malaysia is the concurrent policy initiatives that draw on neoliberal theory such as the competitive centralised examinations and inflexible curricular standards; which inexorably put “able-bodied” students from privileged backgrounds and families of better socio-economic status at an advantage. Recent educational policies and strategies in the 10<sup>th</sup> Malaysia Plan display many features of neoliberalism. The introduction of New Deal, standard-based curriculum, key result areas, autonomous cluster schools and various incentives attached to high-performing schools based on school ranking is evidence to the spread of neoliberal ideas in the Malaysian education system. To secure quality and equity in educational provision, Malaysia should take up inclusive strategies conducive to meaningful learning through wider school-based assessment and the establishment of stronger network of support for diverse students to build true comprehensive schools without discrimination towards the “ineducable disabled”, a label created to absolve the failings of the schooling system. In effect, the unaccommodating, competitive schooling environment and disabling policy discourses cancel out any positive initiatives that have been undertaken, thus bringing Malaysian special educational progress to a standstill.

## References

- Adnan, A.H. & Hafiz, I.A. (2001). A Disabling Education: the case of disabled learners in Malaysia. *Disability & Society*, 16(5), 655-669.
- Bahagian Perancangan Dan Penyelidikan Dasar Pendidikan (BPPDP). (2010). *Chapter 1: Enrolment*. Putrajaya: EMiS Portal Sistem Maklumat Pengurusan Pendidikan. Retrieved January 17, 2012, from [emisportal.moe.gov.my/emis/emis2/emisportal2/doc/.../BAB\\_1.pdf](http://emisportal.moe.gov.my/emis/emis2/emisportal2/doc/.../BAB_1.pdf)
- Bong, M.S. (2011). *Special Education: Critical Success Factors & Efforts Towards Inclusion*. Putrajaya: Special Education Department, Ministry of Education.
- Chong, P.W. & Graham, L.J. (2013). The 'Russian doll' approach: developing nested case-studies to support international comparative research in education. *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 36(1), 23-32.
- Department of Social Welfare (DoSW). (1999). *Welfare Institutions*. Kuala Lumpur: Department of Social Welfare. Retrieved July 2, 2011, from <http://www.jkm.gov.my/>
- Educational Planning and Research Division (EPRD). (2013). *Quick Facts 2013*. Putrajaya: Ministry of Education, Malaysia. Retrieved August 13, 2013, from [http://emisportal.moe.gov.my/emis/emis2/emisportal2/doc/fckeditor/File/Quickfacts\\_2013/quickfacts2013.pdf](http://emisportal.moe.gov.my/emis/emis2/emisportal2/doc/fckeditor/File/Quickfacts_2013/quickfacts2013.pdf)
- Ferguson, D.L. (1995). The Real Challenge of Inclusion: Confessions of a 'Rabid Inclusionist'. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 77(4), 281-287.
- Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). (2004). *Fact Sheet Malaysia: Rural Women in the Malaysian Economy*. Bangkok: The United Nations. Retrieved June 15, 2011, from <ftp://ftp.fao.org/docrep/fao/008/ae549e/ae549e00.pdf>
- Gillborn, D. & Youdell, D. (2000). *Rationing Education: Policy, practice, reform, and equity*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Graham L. J. & Jahnukainen, M. (2011). Wherefore Art Thou, Inclusion? Analysing the development of inclusive education in New South Wales, Finland and Alberta. *Journal of Education Policy*, 26(2), 263 - 288.
- Haller, B.A. (2009). *Disabled people in Malaysia say they need access, not sympathy*. Retrieved October 8, 2012, from <http://media-dis-n-dat.blogspot.co.uk/2009/07/disabled-people-in-malaysia-say-they.html>



- Ismail, N.A. & Awang, H. (2009). Mathematics Achievement among Malaysian Students: What Can They Learn from Singapore? *International Education Studies*, 2(1), 8-17.
- Jayasooria, D., Krishnan, B. & Ooi, G. (1997). Disabled People in a Newly Industrialising Economy: Opportunities and Challenges in Malaysia. *Disability and Society*, 12(3), 455-463.
- Malaysian Government. (2008). Laws of Malaysia: Act 685 Persons with Disabilities Act 2008. Percetakan Nasional Malaysia Berhad, Kuala Lumpur.
- Ministry of Education (MoE). (1998). *Education Act 1996 (ACT 550) and Selected Regulations*. Kuala Lumpur: International Law Book Services.
- Ministry of Education (MoE). (2004, September 8–11). *The Development of Education: National Report of Malaysia*. Paper presented at the International Conference on Education, Geneva.
- Ministry of Education (MoE). (2006). *Pelan Induk Pembangunan Pendidikan 2006–2010* [Master plan for educational development 2006–2010]. Kuala Lumpur: Bahagian Perancangan dan Penyelidikan Dasar Pendidikan.
- Ministry of Education (MoE). (2008a). *Malaysia Education for All: Mid-Decade Assessment Report 2000-2007*. Putrajaya: The Ministry of Education.
- Ministry of Education (MoE). (2008b, November 25-28). *The Development of Education: National Report of Malaysia*. Paper presented at the International Conference on Education, Geneva.
- Ministry of Education (MoE). (2013). *Education (Special Education) Regulations 2013*. Kuala Lumpur: Attorney General's Chambers.
- Ministry of Education (MoE). (2014). *Buku Panduan Permohonan Penempatan Murid Berkeperluan Khas ke Tingkatan 4* [Application Guide for the Placement of Students with Special Needs in Form 4]. Putrajaya: MoE. Retrieved January 3, 2014, from [http://apps.moe.gov.my/jpkhas/permohonan/panduan\\_ting4.pdf](http://apps.moe.gov.my/jpkhas/permohonan/panduan_ting4.pdf)
- Mohamad Taib, M.N. (2013). *Malaysia*. Putrajaya: Special Education Department. Retrieved October 12, 2013, from [http://www.nise.go.jp/kenshuka/josa/kankobutsu/pub\\_d/d-279/d-279\\_15.pdf](http://www.nise.go.jp/kenshuka/josa/kankobutsu/pub_d/d-279/d-279_15.pdf)
- Mohd Yasin, M.H., Toran, H., Mokhtar Tahar, M., Bari, S., Nadirah Ibrahim, S.N. & Zaharudin, R. (2013). Current Special Education Classroom and its Limitations towards Teaching Process. *Asia Pacific Journal of Educators and Education*, 28, 1-9.
- Performance Management & Delivery Unit (PEMANDU). (2010). *Government Transformation*

*Programme: The Roadmap - Executive Summary*. Putrajaya: Prime Minister's Department.

Sailor, W., & Roger, B. (2005). Rethinking Inclusion: Schoolwide applications. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 7, 503-509.

Sani, A.H.A. (2011). *Muhyiddin Gives RM18m in 'New Deal' to Teachers*. Putrajaya: Insider. Retrieved October 2, 2011, from <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/muhyiddin-gives-rm18m-in-new-deal-to-teachers/>

Slee, R. (2011). *The Irregular School: Exclusion, schooling and inclusive education*. London and New York: Routledge.

Special Education Department. (1999). *Sejarah Perkembangan Pendidikan Khas [Historical Development of Special Education]*. Kuala Lumpur: Special Education Department. Retrieved May 20, 2011, from <http://www.moe.gov.my/bpkhas/>

Special Education Unit, Perak (SEU). (2013). *Special Education Program*. Ipoh: Perak Education Department. Retrieved October 11, 2013, from <http://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=6&ved=0CFUQFjAF&url=http%3A%2F%2Fpendidikanperak.gov.my%2Fperak%2Fattachments%2Fspspk%2F18102013%2FMaklumatUPKhas.ppt&ei=bRzmUt-UHebe7Abx9ICADQ&usq=AFQjCNHteJa25bzUE6piilxOwBl6ySILSA&bvm=bv.59930103,d.ZGU>

Sue. (2012). *ISU PENEMPATAN MURID PENDIDIKAN KHAS*. Retrieved December 12, 2013, from <http://cikgusuepkhas.blogspot.co.uk/2012/02/isu-penempatan-murid-pendidikan-khas.html>

Tomlinson, S. (1985). The Expansion of Special Education. *Oxford Review of Education*, 11(2), 157-165.

United Nations Development Program (UNDP). (2004). *MDG 2 Achieve Universal Primary Education*. Kuala Lumpur: the United Nations Country Team, Malaysia.

United Nations Development Program (UNDP). (2005). *Malaysia Achieving the Millennium Development Goals Successes and Challenges*. Kuala Lumpur: The United Nations Country Team, Malaysia.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). (1994). *The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education*. Spain: UNESCO/Ministry of Education: Spain.

UNESCO International Bureau of Education (IBE). (2009, November 3 - 5). *National Report on the Provision of Inclusive Quality Primary and Secondary School Education: Sub-regional Workshop on "Building Inclusive Education System to Respond to the Diverse Needs of Disabled Children"*. Paper presented at the International Conference on Education, Jakarta.

Veloo Pillay, V.S.N. (2009, December 11-13). *Right to Education under the Federal Constitution of Malaysia*. Paper presented at the Napsipag International Conference, Kedah, Malaysia.

Walker, M. (2011). *PISA 2009 Plus Results: Performance of 15-year-olds in reading, mathematics and science for 10 additional participants*. Camberwell: Australian Council for Educational Research Ltd.

DRAFT