Moving forward or standing still? A reflection of 'special' educational provision in Malaysia

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This paper investigates influential discourses embedded within policy documents and policymakers' accounts 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. 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 education practices such as the competitive centralised examinations and inflexible curricular standards, which inexorably put 'able-bodied' students with a privileged socio-economic status at an advantage. The proportion of pupils in special schools remains low, yet special classes are expanding exponentially resulting from growing diagnoses of various kinds of learning disabilities, particularly the category of 'slow learner'. This calls into question whether the increasing use of special classes leads to 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, 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 for the convenience of disabled people who consequently seldom mingle in society, on public transport or at other communal localities. Orang Kurang Upaya (Persons with less abilities) concentrate 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 passive welfare recipients (Sinnasamy, 2010) and 'an underclass without chance of escaping from the poverty trap' (Jayasooria, Krishnan, & Ooi, 1997, p. 456).

The disadvantage experienced by disabled people extends to the issue of equal educational access and quality. The growth in primary education enrolment for students with visual and hearing impairments and those who are socioeconomically disadvantaged reveal some level of success with the Education for All (EFA) and Millennium Development Goals (MDG) strategic plans (MoE, 2008a; UNDP, 2005). However, there remain huge bureaucratic barriers especially for students with a physical disability or multiple disabilities to enter the formal schooling system, and those who satisfy the admission criteria face even greater challenges to gain a place in mainstream classrooms. Schooling structures which are not disability 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 PISA results (Programme for International Student Assessment) where Malaysia was ranked at the 54th position in the low quality/ low equity quadrant as students with learning disabilities were over-represented in the long tail of low achievement (Walker, 2011). With only 56% of the student participants above the PISA baseline reading competency, the Malaysian government is determined not just to improve performance at the top, but also to

tackle the wide attainment discrepancy with a view to 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 aimed 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 (Bong, 2011). It denotes departing from past developments and venturing into new spheres with 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 'Russian' doll approach

A multi-level approach is needed to build a thread across the Malaysian context, policy frameworks and schooling practices. The 'Russian' doll approach (Chong & Graham, 2013) was employed in a three-year cross-national doctoral research to examine 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 individually interviewed for 40–90 minutes in the federal administrative centre at Putrajaya, Kuala Lumpur to provide a 'real time' perspective of policy development when conceptualising the aim and structure of student support services. They were additionally asked to critique on the trend of student

support provision and the nature of the eligibility threshold. To secure anonymity, the participants are randomly referred to as MP1 (Malaysian Policymaker 1) to MP5 from the Curriculum Development, Competence Development and Assessment, Special Education and School Management Divisions.

Critical analyses of both policy and live interview texts were based on Strauss and Corbin's grounded theory approach (1990) which involved manual categorisation, coding and interpretation of data sets. Policy analysis involved determining the set of goals, actions and social change that was intended to be brought about in relation to educational inclusion, equality of rights and disability empowerment. As each interview participant could have 'many different voices' (Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984, p. 2), interviews were critically scrutinised in order to identify patterns of consistency and deviation. Those themes that emerged from policy documents and interview data were pieced together to form a comprehensive picture to uncover convergent lines of inquiry. The embedded medical 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 elaborated under the following four themes.

Conflicting policy discourses and inconsistent implementation

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 educational needs' has long been adopted following the Warnock Report (UK) in 1978 (Tomlinson, 1985). Disability rights movement in the 1960s, sprung from protest by disability specific groups towards the traditional institutionalised and welfare service

provision approach, had created awareness about educational rights of children with special needs (Jayasooria et al., 1997). 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 six 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. The MoE adopted the 'least restrictive environment' policy in 1981 (UNESCO IBE, 2009) 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 number of children of school-based learning has persisted to date even though Malaysia has signed the UNESCO's declaration towards 'Education for All' (EFA) in 1990. Discrimination was further reinforced under the Education Act 1996 and the 1997 Special Education Regulations by drawing a line between the 'educable' and the 'ineducable'; of which the

latter is ineligible for special education placement as children in this group are unable 'to manage themselves without help' (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 educational accessibility for students with additional needs. Section 28 of the PWDA postulates 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' (2008, p. 23). This strong statement governing inclusive treatment is contradicted by the complete 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 (Veloo Pillay, 2009). Unethical standards are particularly pronounced when facilities for disabled children and adults are still deficient in schools and public facilities although the Uniform Building By-Laws was gazetted nearly three decades ago in 1984. When 80% of physically impaired children are pressured to drop out from primary schools (Ariffin, 2012), 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* (MoE, 2014). Despite the terminological change, a deeper look shows that the implications

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remain the same; the prerequisite ability to self-manage still stands for the eligibility to enrol within the schooling system as stipulated in the overriding 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. 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). 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). 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 involving screening, admission evaluation and a stringent three-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).

A Medicalised Approach: 'Compartmentalising students to where they seem fit'

> These children which we segregate are the blind, the deaf. For the learning disability, we make an integrated programme in a normal school but now we are more for inclusion. We have two kinds of inclusion. One is full inclusion, one is partial inclusion. These two inclusions depend on the special children. If the children are [capable], we send them to full inclusion in normal school. But if the children cannot perform in the normal so we have to put partial inclusion for them. (MP2)

Suitability for education is contingent upon their ability to assimilate to the behavioural norms and required academic standards in 'normal' schools. A strict adherence to the deficit model is observed as students with higher level of support requirements are considered *unsuitable* for entering formal schooling to receive special education support (Adnan & Hafiz, 2001). Placement prescriptions, as described above, further extend to students with visual and hearing impairments in special schools with limited access to mainstream educational settings (UNDP, 2005). 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). The probation period is used to gauge such *suitability* with a decision to transfer the children either to a mainstream classroom (full inclusion) or an integrated special classroom (partial inclusion). Even when integration takes place, MP2 describes such as the process of 'normalisation where students adapt to the new environment' especially during 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'.

> Slowly after one week observation, a few days or a few months, they will be given opportunity to sit in a class for one or half an hour. If they come out with certain type of reaction, they will be withdrawn for one or two days and given behavioural modification again. And slowly they will be going to the class with a longer period of time and finally they will be integrated. (MP4)

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. Behavioural modification carries

disparagement of their original attributes and identity, rather contradictory to the concept of inclusion which celebrates diversity. 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 mainstream placements without any reference to wider organisational transformation to establish 'schools for all' as proclaimed in the Salamanca Statement. A depreciated understanding of inclusion is evident as MP2 comments that 'we don't practice diversity because we don't have [the] data or know the whereabouts of the children as the formal assessment framework screens the special children'; diversity is solely referred to the 'special' children determined to be identified for rehabilitation.

> Not all people have gone through preschool, so we have all sorts of achievement levels in the classroom. LINUS is literacy and numeracy [with] three phases of evaluation – monitoring, screening and intervention. Generally overall it shows an improvement, but we still have around 10% of students, even after LINUS intervention, are still not [up to the expected academic standard] but we are not sure these people whether they are normal student or whether they have learning difficulties. (MP1)

> What is your problem actually? When you are a slow reader for example, there must be a problem. This area of special need student, we don't have the specialist in education but we have in hospital and NGOs. (MP3)

The first excerpt above reveals a paradox between screening for intervention and diagnosing for anomaly. There is an increasing obsession in Malaysian education system to diagnose, discriminate and segregate 'less-normal' students with 'innate learning problems' (MP5), a process perceived as a notable progress emulating advanced Western countries such as 'England, Australia or New Zealand' (MP2). Special education in Malaysia is

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. 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 are institutionalised under the Department of Social Welfare to receive rehabilitative and therapeutic interventions (DoSW, 1999).
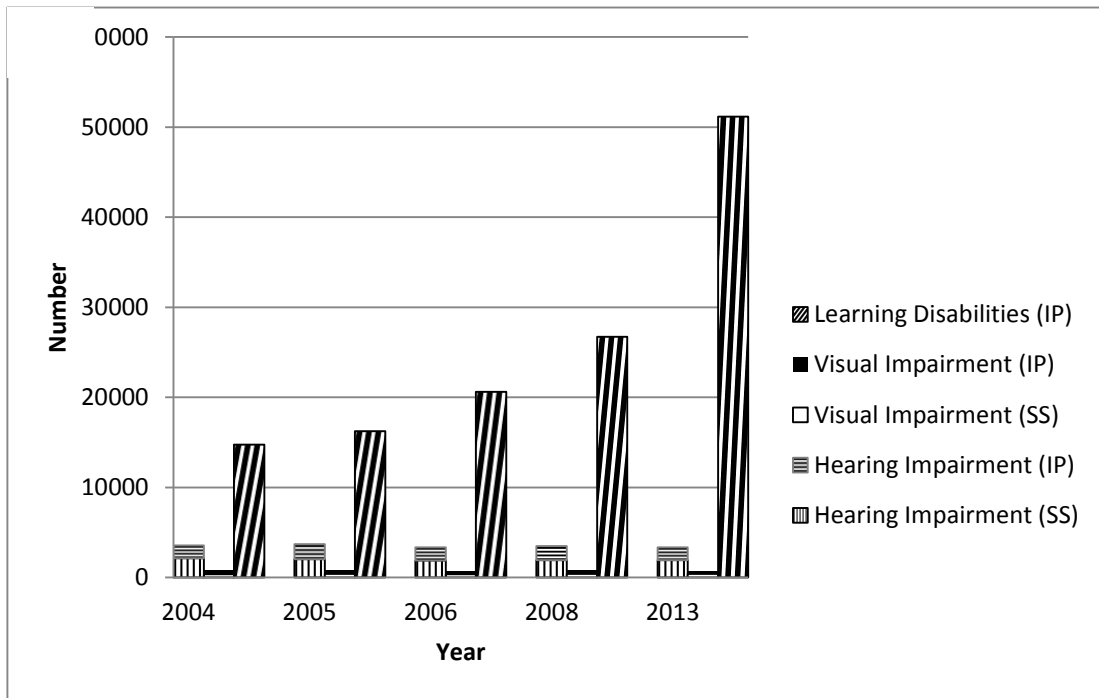
Multidisciplinary intervention exists but teamwork is not evident. Students are sent for diagnosis and treatment with the medical professionals when educational specialists are deemed untrained and unauthorised to provide any 'practical learning diagnosis to date' (MP2), and in the opinion of MP3 lacking the capacity to assist even the slow reader. 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, there are 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 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 to determine the overall enrolment trend.

Enrolment trend: Progression or reversion?

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 all students with disabilities into formal schooling, as MP1 asserts that increasing the number of special schools is favourable but too costly. 'Ineducable' children who were denied proper learning experiences and relegated to care services exceeded 10,866 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

Bar chart showing "Number" on the y-axis (0 to 0000, marked 0, 10000, 20000, 30000, 40000, 50000) and "Year" on the x-axis (2004, 2005, 2006, 2008, 2013). Legend categories: Learning Disabilities (IP), Visual Impairment (IP), Visual Impairment (SS), Hearing Impairment (IP), Hearing Impairment (SS).

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

Integration programme enrolment was recorded at around 51,157 students in 2013 which was almost thrice the number of 14,535 placements in 2002 (MoE, 2008b; EPRD, 2013). Whilst placing limited number of 'blind' and 'deaf' students into mainstream from special schools reflects integration (Bong, 2011), the wider 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. Parallel to this trend of reverse movement, the effort to increase the participation rates of indigenous and rurally situated students, as well as those from minority groups, has been ongoing since the inception of EFA and MDG (MoE, 2008a), thus the unprecedented growth in integrated special class placements is not unexpected with such influx of students with additional needs.

They are supposed to interact with the normal students but some administration in the school; they want to protect these children. They give them different recess times but by right if there are possibilities they could come together. Then the children will have that interaction. Also, some schools assign *[sic]* completely different timetables. (MP4)

The organisation of separate timetables and lunch hour on the basis of protection attests the perception of weakness towards the integrated students and defeats the purpose of integration to foster social cohesion among all children. The integration programme has additionally garnered some negative logistical and organisational feedback as the learning environment is a noticeable downgrade from the mainstream as basic amenities are deficient in unmodified old buildings, support materials are lacking and the recruited teachers are largely untrained (Mohd Yasin et al., 2013); a stark contrast to the generous provisions made to various 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 equipment, 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 which hinder the development of inclusive learning conditions (PEMANDU, 2010).

Figure 2: Enrolment category in special classes
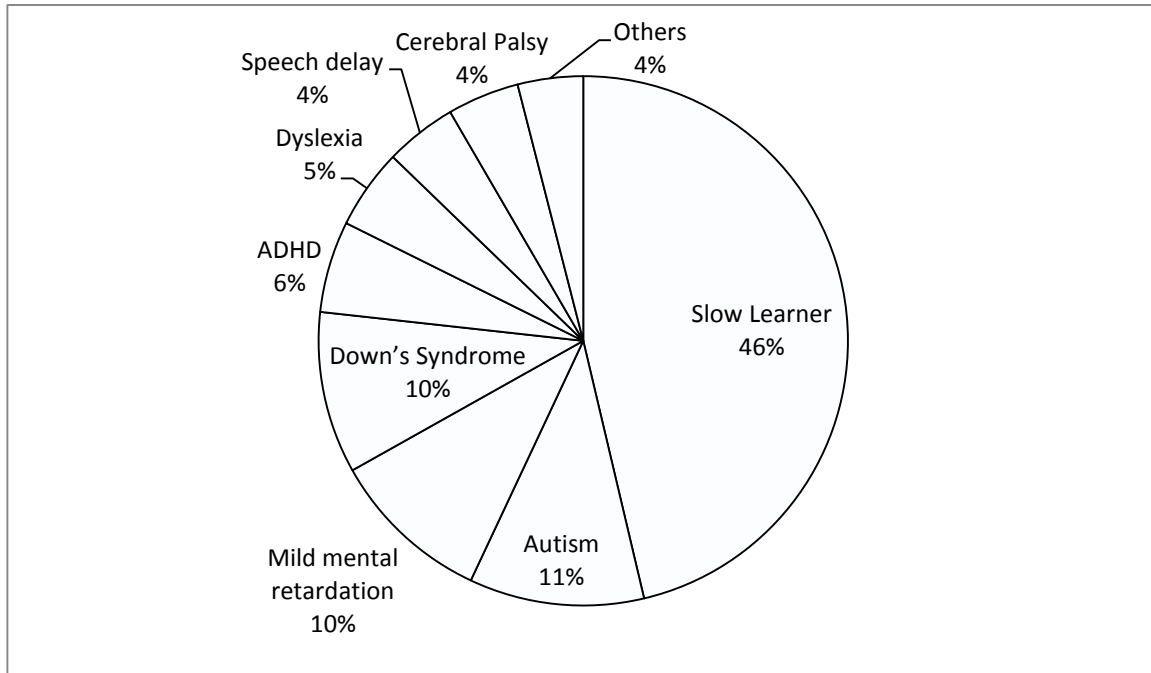
Sources: Combined PPKI databases of Selangor and Perak State Schools (n=100)

The data was compiled from the individual school online register of students in the Integration Programme. The category of slow learners is particularly contentious, striking at 46% of total enrolment and surpassing other medically constructed diagnostic categories. This pattern even more strongly calls into question the validity of the medical model, whereby medical professionals perform clinical tests or psychometrics to profile *slow learners* in an effort to attribute all learning inefficiency and non-compliance with individual deficit regardless of family, environmental or schooling influence.

> In the learning disability children, I can explain you about 20 or 30 subcategories, so like Down's Syndrome, autism, dyslexia, ADD, mild retardation syndrome, epilepsy and a lot [more]. But we put in one, easy for us to handle. (MP2)

Handling students with a range of learning disabilities as one cohort with similar needs in the special classes for administrative convenience is also pedagogically problematic. 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 been neglected in ordinary classroom or 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 a subjective 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 & Jahnukainen, 2011).

The ups and downs of the business of streaming

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 – mastering reading, arithmetic and writing [author's translation]. 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)

MP3 strongly supports early selective placements for students with learning difficulties as justified by their permanent 'handicapped' inability to learn and thus directing them to a suitable track, curriculum and environment better befits their inferior 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 meagre 0.23% of students with visual or hearing impairments were channelled into school integration programs in 2010 (BPPDP, 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 results' (MP1) which carry detrimental consequences to students who learn at a different pace, those unmotivated to study purely for examinations or culturally too different to follow test questions designed for the average population such as the aboriginal students. 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

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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 (Ong, 2010). 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. (MP4)

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. Students with special needs is primarily *streamlined* to vocational studies 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 to employment or further education.

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)

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 (MoE, 2008b). 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 ensures that 'we don't leave anybody behind, what we call *education for all*' by systematically sifting students in a way 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, structural organisation, teacher education and leadership have improved significantly since the 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 and schooling practices are closer to emulating the goal of inclusion. While Malaysia has steadily lifted the primary education enrolment and retention rates of minority, aboriginal and disabled students (MoE, 2008a), showing an unmistakable sign of progress towards the fulfilment of *Education for All*, the development of inclusive education is not as evident. EFA emphasises equality of access while inclusion disapproves the notion of ineducability to highlight how schools can be restructured and what teachers can do to make learning relevant to all (UNESCO, 1994); yet increased categorisation of learners and 'special' placements do not correspond with inclusive principles. 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.

> Shifting from seeing people with disability as people with potential and mainstreaming them into society, into education. Without shifting, you cannot change things. If you want to make a chair, you need to have a mental picture of the chair first. If we have a wrong type of mental picture of the chair we design something that is not right.

MP4 emphasised the importance of having a mental shift so that 'special' education progress can move away from the current deficit model which adversely highlights the inabilities of the disabled cohort and their incongruity to the 'normal' functioning of the society. He believes Malaysia still has a long way to go. Since the national endorsement of the Salamanca statement, inclusive rhetoric has been widely adopted; seemingly indicate that the discourse of inclusion has infiltrated the Malaysian education system. In practice, inclusion does not differ distinctly from integration which signifies special class placements

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in mainstream schools. Inclusive discourses are restricted to special education spheres without reference to general education policies which impedes sustainable organisational transformation. 'Inclusion' 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 of how does the government aim to move forward towards educational inclusion while holding firmly to the deficit model of disability where the 'less-than-normal' student has to blend into the 'normal', 'regular' school (Slee, 2011).

The growth of inclusion in Malaysia is also hampered by concurrent policy initiatives that draw on neoliberal theory such as the competitive centralised examinations, inflexible curricular standards and hefty incentives for high-ranked schools (PEMANDU, 2011); which inexorably put 'able-bodied' students with a privileged socio-economic status at an advantage. To secure educational quality and equity, Malaysia should adopt inclusive strategies conducive to meaningful learning through wider school-based assessments and stronger network of support 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 deficit policy discourse cancel out any positive initiatives that have been undertaken, thus bringing Malaysian special educational progress to a standstill.

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