

Acceptance and Readiness of Mainstream Teachers Towards Special Education Students in Inclusive Education Programmes

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ABSTRACT

This study assessed mainstream teachers' acceptance of special education students participating in Inclusive Education Programmes and evaluated teachers' readiness to teach them. A quantitative survey was conducted among 86 mainstream teachers from 17 primary and secondary schools in Kota Belud, Kota Marudu and Kudat, Sabah. Data were collected using a five-point Likert-scale questionnaire and analysed using descriptive statistics. Teachers recorded a moderate level of acceptance ($M = 3.69$). They strongly believed that inclusive education could improve student achievement and reported that the presence of special education students did not disrupt mainstream students. Their weakest area was knowledge of effective implementation methods ($M = 2.98$). Teachers' readiness was also positive, with an overall mean of 3.80 based on the item means. High scores were recorded for adapting pedagogy, working with parents, spending additional time with students and recognising every student's right to education. Lower scores concerned the adequacy of classroom facilities and the need for further training. The findings indicate that mainstream teachers are receptive to inclusion but require clearer implementation guidance, professional development, teaching resources and cooperation with special education teachers. These forms of support can translate positive attitudes into effective inclusive classroom practice.

Keywords: mainstream teachers; special education students; inclusive education; teacher acceptance; teacher readiness; Sabah

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education provides students with special educational needs opportunities to learn alongside their peers in mainstream classrooms. In Malaysia, the Inclusive Education Programme operates in primary, secondary, technical and vocational schools (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2008). Its success depends greatly on mainstream teachers, since they plan lessons, manage the classroom and respond to differences in students' learning and behaviour.

Teacher acceptance affects whether students with special educational needs are treated as full members of the class. Teachers with positive attitudes are more willing to adapt instruction and provide support, whereas teachers who lack confidence or reject inclusion may struggle to conduct inclusive lessons effectively (Agbenyega & Klibthong, 2015; Varcoe & Boyle, 2014). Acceptance alone is insufficient. Teachers must be ready to modify pedagogy, collaborate with special education teachers and parents, provide teaching aids and manage diverse behaviour.

Studies in Malaysia and other countries report mixed teacher responses to inclusion. Concerns often involve limited training, large classes, insufficient resources and uncertainty about teaching students with different learning needs (Ghani & Ahmad, 2012; Mohd Najib & Sanisah, 2006; Supiah Saad, 2010). Research focused on Sabah is limited, particularly in rural and semi-rural districts. Evidence on acceptance and readiness can guide professional development and school support for inclusive education.

Problem Statement

Teachers are central to the continuity of inclusive education (United Nations, 2006). Positive attitudes can encourage instructional adaptation and participation, yet insufficient knowledge and resources may weaken teachers' confidence. Some mainstream teachers have reported limited cooperation in teaching special education students, and others regard inclusive classes as difficult when class sizes and workloads are already high (Mohd Najib & Sanisah, 2006; Supiah Saad, 2010).

The key concern is whether mainstream teachers accept special education students and are ready to meet their needs in ordinary classrooms. Without evidence on these two areas, schools may provide training or resources that do not address teachers' actual needs. This study therefore focused specifically on teacher acceptance and readiness in 17 schools across Kota Belud, Kota Marudu and Kudat.

Research Objectives

To assess the extent of acceptance among mainstream teachers towards special education students participating in Inclusive Education Programmes.

To evaluate the level of readiness among mainstream teachers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Teacher Acceptance

Acceptance refers to teachers' willingness to include special education students, confidence in their potential and support for their participation in mainstream classes. Avramidis and Norwich (2002) found that teacher attitudes are shaped by experience, perceived competence and the nature of students' needs. Teachers may accept inclusion in principle but remain uncertain about implementation. Malaysian studies have reported both positive perceptions and reluctance, particularly when teachers have limited exposure to special education or regard students' needs as difficult to manage (Ghani & Ahmad, 2012; Haniz Ibrahim, 1998).

Teacher Readiness

Readiness concerns the practical willingness and capacity to conduct inclusive teaching. It includes adapting pedagogy, collaborating with parents and specialists, allocating additional time, using teaching aids and arranging the classroom. Training and experience can improve knowledge and confidence (Dapudong, 2014). School-level support remains necessary, since individual willingness may not result in effective practice when facilities, teaching materials or professional guidance are insufficient (Sukbunpant et al., 2013).

Conceptual Focus

The study treated acceptance and readiness as related but distinct domains. Acceptance represented teachers' beliefs and attitudes towards including special education students. Readiness represented their willingness and practical capacity to adjust teaching and classroom arrangements. This two-domain focus guided the questionnaire analysis and the interpretation of the findings.

METHODOLOGY

The study used a quantitative cross-sectional survey. The population comprised 110 mainstream teachers from eight secondary schools and nine primary schools offering Inclusive Education Programmes in Kota Belud, Kota Marudu and Kudat. Based on the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sample-size approach, 86 teachers participated. Group sampling was used across the three districts.

Data were collected through a five-point Likert-scale questionnaire. Section A recorded demographic information. Section B contained 15 items measuring acceptance, and Section C contained 13 items measuring

readiness. A pilot study was conducted before the main survey to assess the instrument's reliability. Descriptive statistics were used to calculate item means and standard deviations. Mean scores below 3.00 were interpreted as low, scores from 3.00 to 3.99 as moderate, and scores from 4.00 to 5.00 as high.

The sample consisted of 47 female teachers (54.7%) and 39 male teachers (45.3%). Most respondents were aged 30-39 years, held a bachelor's degree and had 11-20 years of teaching experience. Demographic differences were not analysed in this shortened article, as they were outside the two research objectives.

FINDINGS

Domain	Items	Overall mean	Interpretation
Teacher acceptance	15	3.69	Moderate
Teacher readiness	13	3.80	Moderate

Table 1. Overall levels of teacher acceptance and readiness.

Acceptance of Special Education Students

The overall acceptance mean was 3.69, indicating a moderate level of acceptance. Five items recorded high means. Teachers most strongly agreed that special education students did not disrupt mainstream students ($M = 4.28$) and that inclusive education could improve student achievement ($M = 4.15$). They also reported understanding the meaning of inclusive education ($M = 4.03$) and confidence in teaching students with learning disabilities ($M = 4.01$).

The lowest score concerned knowledge of effective implementation methods ($M = 2.98$). Other areas, including excitement about teaching special education students ($M = 3.33$), confidence in their abilities ($M = 3.16$) and full support for the programme ($M = 3.63$), were moderate. The results show broad acceptance, coupled with uncertainty about how inclusion should be implemented in practice.

Readiness of Mainstream Teachers

The item means produced an overall readiness mean of 3.80, which represents a moderate but positive level. Teachers expressed high readiness to spend additional time with special education students ($M = 4.19$), recognised that every student is entitled to education ($M = 4.19$), were willing to work with parents ($M = 4.07$) and were ready to diversify their teaching approaches ($M = 4.05$).

The lowest readiness score concerned the adequacy of facilities and learning resources in inclusive classrooms ($M = 3.22$). Teachers also reported a need for courses to improve their inclusive teaching skills ($M = 3.58$). Collaboration with special education teachers ($M = 3.93$), willingness to make physical changes to classrooms ($M = 3.94$) and provision of teaching aids ($M = 3.68$) remained at moderate levels.

Domain	Key item	Mean	Level	Meaning
Acceptance	Students do not disrupt mainstream students	4.28	High	Strong inclusion belief
Acceptance	Inclusion can improve achievement	4.15	High	Confidence in programme value

Acceptance	Knowledge of effective implementation	2.98	Low	Clear training gap
Readiness	Spend more time with students	4.19	High	Strong personal commitment
Readiness	Diversify teaching pedagogy	4.05	High	Willingness to adapt instruction
Readiness	Facilities and learning resources are sufficient	3.22	Moderate	School support needs improvement

Table 2. Selected high and low item means.

DISCUSSION

The moderate acceptance score indicates that mainstream teachers were open to including special education students, though their support was not complete. Strong agreement that students did not disturb mainstream classes challenges the assumption that inclusion creates unavoidable disruption. Teachers also believed inclusion could improve achievement and confidence. These findings are consistent with studies showing that teachers can hold positive views of inclusion when they recognise its educational and social value (Dapudong, 2014; Ghani & Ahmad, 2012).

The low score for knowledge of effective implementation methods is the clearest weakness. Teachers may support the principle of inclusion but lack guidance on differentiated instruction, behaviour support, assessment and collaboration. Similar gaps have been linked to limited exposure and professional preparation (Sukbunpant et al., 2013). Acceptance should therefore be supported by practical training rather than treated as a sufficient condition for successful inclusion.

Readiness was positive, particularly in teachers' willingness to adapt pedagogy, work with parents and devote additional time to students. These responses show personal commitment. Yet the lower score for facilities and learning resources indicates that readiness is shaped by school conditions. Teachers need accessible materials, suitable classroom arrangements, manageable class sizes and regular support from special education teachers. Responsibility for inclusion cannot rest on mainstream teachers alone.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Schools and education authorities should provide short, practice-based courses on differentiated instruction, classroom management, individual learning needs and inclusive assessment. Training should use examples from mainstream classrooms and give teachers opportunities to practise strategies. Regular collaboration between mainstream and special education teachers should be included in school timetables rather than arranged informally.

Schools should review the adequacy of teaching aids, physical access and learning spaces. Parent-teacher communication should be strengthened, since teachers expressed willingness to work with families. Future studies could compare acceptance and readiness across Malaysian states and examine which forms of training or school support produce measurable changes in classroom practice.

CONCLUSION

Mainstream teachers in the three Sabah districts demonstrated moderate acceptance of special education students and moderate but positive readiness to teach them. Their strongest responses reflected belief in the value of inclusion, willingness to adapt pedagogy and commitment to spending time with students. Their main

weaknesses concerned knowledge of effective implementation and the adequacy of facilities and learning resources.

The findings suggest that teachers are receptive to inclusive education but require practical guidance and school-level support. Focused professional development, collaboration with special education teachers, suitable teaching resources and stronger family engagement can help convert acceptance and readiness into effective inclusive practice.

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