

Exploring teachers' readiness, knowledge and attitudes towards inclusive education in the district of Sibul, Sarawak, Malaysia

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Abstract

Teachers' readiness, knowledge and attitudes level towards inclusive education in mainstream schools were explored as they were tasked to carry out this responsibility. They must ensure the success of inclusive education which actually depended heavily on their readiness in inclusive classes, teachers' knowledge level and attitude towards teaching inclusion classes. This research study aimed to explore teachers' readiness level in inclusive classes, teachers' knowledge level and attitude towards teaching inclusive classes in primary and secondary schools in the district of Sibul, Sarawak. The sample size for this study consisted of 154 respondents. This study explored specifically into the teachers' readiness, knowledge and attitude level towards inclusion in the classrooms. The method used for this research was descriptive survey approach. Identified teachers involved directly in teaching and supervising students with special educational needs in the inclusive classrooms were provided with a survey questionnaire. Fully completed questionnaires were collected from respective schools through self-collection, post or e-mail. The data collected were analysed for descriptive and inferential statistics, percentages, *t*-test and ANOVA using SPSS (version 22). The outcome of the findings was discussed according to the objectives and research questions of the study. This outcome of this study showed high readiness level among teachers, high knowledge level among teachers and positive attitudes of teachers toward inclusive education. At the same time, the study also found out that there is a strong positive correlation between teachers' readiness, knowledge and attitude level.

Keywords: Inclusive education, readiness, knowledge, inclusion, special educational needs (SEN) students.

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1. Introduction

Schools and classrooms had experienced tremendous change from traditional setting to the present pupil diversity setting (Conway & Sloane, 2005) which transformed education to concentrate on the students (Katie, 2001). The current trend is expected to continue in parallel to changes and transformation as demanded by the society according to expectation and needs. One of the main contributing factors for this change was due to the increased number of students with special education needs enrolling into mainstream schools (Stevens & O'Moore, 2009). This trend affected Malaysia too, which made Malaysia introduce inclusive education as part of the national educational system in 1995. 'Inclusive Education Programme' is an educational programme for pupils with special educational needs (SEN). This programme requires students with SEN to attend actual teaching and learning lessons with normal students in government or government-aided schools [(Federal Government Gazette, 2013), Education Act 1996, Education [Special Education] Regulations, 2013]. However, in Malaysia, Bakar (1993) revealed that inclusive education policy focused more on academic achievements in efforts to form a strong, caring culture and society. Following this development, parents and guardians of special education needs students were excited as their child was given the opportunity to study in mainstream schools, which was impossible earlier. Their expectations were high towards teachers to fully educate their child as other ordinary students. On top of this, the school puts pressure on teachers to go the extra mile in handling this group of students. All these excitements mount pressure especially on teachers in teaching and supervising this group of students in the class apart from their routine task in educating normal students. Since one of the teacher's tasks is to carry out teaching and learning, including supervising students in the classrooms, the focus is on teachers to perform a good job. Though Malaysian teachers were trained professionally, their professional training did not include handling or supervising students with SEN. With this development, these teachers were required to teach and supervise students with a special educational need which puts pressure on these teachers. Therefore, a need arises to find out the level of teachers' readiness, knowledge and attitudes towards students with SEN for studying in normal classes, known as inclusive education.

1.1. Background of the study

Malaysia put serious effort to include students with SEN into mainstream school by sharing the same common concern as United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation for the need to educate every child irrespective of their learning difficulties or disabilities. Inclusive education was introduced since 1986 with an emphasis on achieving a strong, caring culture and society (Bakar, 1993). With vigorous efforts and innovations undertaken over the years till 2015, the number of students had grown to over 16,899 with 4,869 schools involved (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2016), creating change to Malaysia's vision towards Vision 2020 (Aziz, 1993), which impacted the nation positively year after year. The seriousness of Malaysia towards Inclusive Education was proven with the inclusion of Inclusive Education into Malaysia National Education Blueprint with guidebooks to spearhead implementation of inclusive education. In the Malaysian context, it is to create schools for every child to study regardless of his or her characteristic, disadvantages or difficulties as it is Malaysia Education for All (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2016).

1.2. Research problem

SEN students can obtain their academic education in mainstream school alongside normal students known as inclusive education in normal classes. Mainstream school teachers were directed and tasked to teach and supervise every student in the class including students with SEN in inclusive classes. These teachers were professionally trained to handle normal students but are tasked to teach SEN students as well. As teaching and supervising students are the main core focus, it is very important to look into the readiness, knowledge and attitude level of teachers in achieving successful

implementation of the given tasks. As such, this research was to explore readiness, knowledge and attitude level of teachers' involved directly in teaching and supervising students with SEN in mainstream schools in the district of Sibul, Sarawak.

1.3. Objective of the study

The purpose of this study was to explore the teachers' readiness, knowledge and attitude level towards inclusive education in mainstream schools in the district of Sibul, Sarawak.

1.4. Significance of the study

The study was aimed to explore teachers' readiness, knowledge and attitude level towards inclusive education in mainstream schools in the district of Sibul, Sarawak. The outcome of the study can be used to improve quality of teachers' readiness, knowledge and attitude level so that students with SEN could be taught more readily with better knowledge and better attitudes from the teachers. In addition, the outcome could also be used to prepare and formulate preparatory courses for trainee teachers with better readiness, knowledge and attitude level towards inclusive education. Last but not least, the study could provide a better understanding to stakeholders on teachers' readiness, knowledge and attitude in mainstream schools, thus allowing improvement to weaker areas in efforts to enhance contribution to the development of teachers' readiness, knowledge and attitude.

2. Literature review

2.1. Inclusive education and disability

Blecker and Boakes (2010) defined inclusive education as educating students with disabilities and without special needs together at the same time in general education programmes. Alur and Bach (2010) defined inclusive education as the placement of every child in mainstream classrooms irrespective of their conditions. Booth and Ainscow (2011) summarise inclusive in education as putting inclusive values into action and reducing exclusion, discrimination, barriers to learning to diversity in ways that value everyone equally. For this study, inclusive education is the provision of educational opportunities to every school-going child with a place to study together with other students in the class for the benefit of every student in education. Shulman (1987) revealed that knowledge possess by teachers as domain content, pedagogy, student development, educational contexts, purposes and values possessed by educators. A knowledgeable teacher is considered to possess an appropriate level of assistance to students with learning disability (Mercer & Mercer, 2005). Borko and Putnam (1995) insisted that knowledge possessed by teachers detects the decisions they make in academic practice. Therefore, this study perceives knowledge as the way teachers conceptualise inclusive education and the way they define inclusive education in their own classroom. Hay, Smit and Paulsen (2001) insisted that readiness can be ascertained by looking into the level of knowledge, skills and attitudes of teachers towards inclusive education. Das, Kuyini and Desai (2013) indicated that readiness can be seen from the perceived skill level of competencies needed to implement inclusion. For this study, readiness is perceived as the preparedness of the teacher in the classroom towards students with special needs. Attitudes, in social psychology, can be regarded as an individual view that may influence the way we see and react to a particular situation (Gall, Borg & Gall, 1996). According to Loreman, Earle, Sharma and Forlin (2007), most teachers are positive towards inclusive education. Cook (2001) stressed that the main influencing factor for teachers to continuously work with students with special needs is the positive attitude of teachers. Robertson, Chamberlain and Kasari (2003) claimed that the positive attitudes of teachers are important indicators of successful education of children with special needs. For this study, attitude is seen from the cognitive component with knowledge, views and thoughts of an individual concerning a particular issue.

2.2. Research questions

To find the answers for the following research questions, the means and standard deviations for 14 items, each measuring readiness and knowledge level of teachers and teachers' attitude, were generated:

Research Question 1: What is the readiness level of teachers teaching students with special education needs in inclusive class in mainstream schools?

Research Question 2: What is the teachers' knowledge level towards inclusive education in mainstream school?

Research Question 3: What is the teachers' attitude towards students with SEN?

The mean scores and standard deviation are as shown in Tables 1–3.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Study design

The study used a quantitative method of descriptive approach using the survey design (Creswell, 2012).

3.2. Participants characteristics

The participants were teachers from schools identified to be directly involved and supervised students with SEN in the classrooms. The sample of this study comes from 10 government primary schools and five government secondary schools in the district of Sibul, Sarawak. The identified teachers' population in 15 schools was 180 teachers, and from the table by Krejcie and Morgan (1970), the sample size for the study was calculated as 123 participants. However, the total number of respondents for this study was 154.

3.3. Instruments

To find the answers for the research questions, the researcher adopted, adapted and modified existing quantitative survey instruments to measure teachers' readiness and knowledge level towards students with SEN in inclusive classes. The survey instrument contained questions in a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = *lowest response* to 5 = *highest response*. For this study, the instrument contains four sections—A, B, C and D. Section A of the instrument contains five demographic questions designed to ascertain the similarities between the participants who participated in the study. Section B consisted of questions on *readiness* aspect, Section C consisted of questions on *knowledge* aspect and Section D consisted of questions on *attitude* aspect. In this study, Survey instruments were carried out in identified schools in the district of Sibul, Sarawak. The survey instruments were distributed to teachers identified with prior permission from Malaysia Ministry of Education, State Education Department, District Education Office and respective school heads.

3.4. Data collection

Data were not only collected on the day of visit by the researcher but were also collected from teachers through postal mail as some identified teachers were not available during the actual day of the study due to other commitments. The same questionnaires were also distributed to teachers through the school head for identified teachers not available during the time of survey as they would be in class attending to students. These questionnaires were collected personally by the researcher or sent via a self-addressed envelope.

3.5. Data analysis

Descriptive analysis was used to analyse collected data for frequency, mean, scores and standard deviations through SPSS version 22. Based on the mean scores, the level of teachers' readiness, knowledge and attitudes were explained. Pearson Correlation analysis was conducted to determine the relationship between readiness and knowledge level of teachers, readiness and attitudes level of teachers and knowledge and attitudes level of teachers. The generated *r* and *p* values, respectively, showed the strength of the relationship and significance of the relationship between readiness and knowledge, readiness and attitudes, and knowledge and attitudes.

4. Results

Table 1 shows the mean score for Readiness Domain. For average mean score for Readiness Level ($M = 3.79$, $SD = 0.45$), the score suggests the readiness level for teachers towards inclusive education in mainstream school be high. All the items for readiness domain secured a mean score of 3.42 and above with the highest mean score at 3.95 which indicated high score suggesting the teachers' readiness towards inclusive education in mainstream school in the district of Sibul to be high.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for readiness aspect

SI No.	Teachers' Readiness	M	SD
1	I am ready to teach in the inclusive classes all the time in the school	3.42	0.612
2	My readiness level in teaching the inclusive class is attracting attention of students in the inclusive class	3.69	0.670
3	My readiness level to teach students with SEN encourages students to be more active in the inclusive classes	3.80	0.670
4	I know that teachers teaching inclusive classes are ready to teach in the inclusive classes in this school	3.63	0.732
5	My readiness towards inclusive education makes me feel comfortable when teaching students with SEN	3.78	0.769
6	I know I can take proper prepared precautions that are necessary to keep activities running efficiently in the inclusive classroom	3.82	0.810
7	My readiness to teach th inclusive class causes the students to learn more effectively in the inclusive class	3.90	0.777
8	My readiness as an inclusive teacher is contributing effectively to inclusive education/programme	3.95	0.739
9	I know my colleagues are ready to teach in the inclusive class	3.75	0.701
10	My readiness encourages other teachers' readiness to teach in inclusive class	3.84	0.681
11	My readiness brings a positive impact to the students' result	3.85	0.721
12	My readiness can enhance students' readiness to study	3.89	0.691
13	My readiness encourages students to be ready in the classroom for my lesson	3.82	0.671
14	My readiness encourages students to look forward to their lesson	3.86	0.677
R	Readiness	3.79	0.451

Table 2 indicates mean score for Knowledge Domain. For average mean score for Knowledge Level ($M = 3.88$, $SD = 0.55$), the score suggests that readiness level for teachers towards inclusive education in mainstream school be high too. All the items for knowledge domain secured a mean score of 3.27 and above with the highest mean score at 4.06 which indicated high score suggesting that teachers' knowledge towards inclusive education in mainstream school in the district of Sibul be high.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for knowledge aspect

SI No.	Teachers' Knowledge	M	SD
1	I was trained to teach students with SEN in inclusive class	3.27	0.717
2	I am able to impart my knowledge effectively to students with SEN	3.64	0.764
3	I have inclusive knowledge of teaching in the inclusive class in this school	3.69	0.836
4	I am effective in the inclusive classes in term of applying inclusive knowledge in inclusive classes in school	3.72	0.852
5	I am willing to be equipped in order to be knowledgeable in inclusive education	4.01	0.758
6	My knowledge towards inclusion helps me to teach students with special education needs effectively	3.88	0.827
7	I know that every teacher involved with inclusive education can teach effectively in the inclusive classes	3.92	0.821
8	In my inclusive class, I use all my knowledge to prepare my lesson to make my lesson effective	4.01	0.780
9	I have knowledge in motivational theories to prepare my lesson to make my lesson	4.06	0.789
10	I know my knowledge contributes effectively to the inclusive programme	4.03	0.796
11	I am selective on instructional strategies in my preparation for SEN students	3.97	0.855
12	I know other teachers are equipped knowledgeably for inclusion	4.05	0.739
13	My knowledge brings positive impact on my students' academic result	4.01	0.824
14	My knowledge helps other teachers to teach more effectively during teaching and learning	4.06	0.798
R	Knowledge	3.88	0.556

Table 3 describes the mean score for Readiness Domain. For average mean score for Readiness Level ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 0.47$), the score suggests that attitudes of teachers towards inclusive education in mainstream school be positive. All the items for attitude domain secured a mean score of 3.48 and above with the highest mean score at 4.05 which indicated high score suggesting that teachers' attitude towards inclusive education in mainstream school in the district of Sibu be positive.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for attitude aspect

SI No.	Teachers' Attitude	M	SD
1	I am willing to use individualised instruction for students with special needs in the inclusive class	3.48	0.669
2	I have the positive attitude to teach students with special needs in the inclusive classes in this school all the time	3.72	0.652
3	I encourage students with SEN to participate in activities in the class	3.87	0.674
4	I am willing to teach in the inclusive classes even though I am not trained in inclusive teaching	4.00	0.750
5	Every time, I will be excited about my teaching in the inclusive class	3.75	0.803
6	I am the proper role model for students with SEN in my class all the time	3.90	0.785
7	I know that students with SEN can be guided to success in inclusive class	3.96	0.757
8	I believe students with SEN can be taught in inclusive class	4.05	0.730
9	I am able to help SEN students in their study	3.84	0.733
10	My attitude encourages other teachers to have positive attitudes towards special needs' students	3.88	0.753
11	My attitude towards students with SEN is positive	3.82	0.844
12	My attitude contributes to the effectiveness of inclusive education	3.84	0.771
13	I show respect toward students with SEN	3.89	0.728
14	I readily use suitable language technique in my communication with SEN students	3.99	0.796
R	Attitude	3.86	0.465

A Pearson's r data analysis revealed a strong correlation occurred between readiness domain ($M = 3.79$, $SD = 0.45$), knowledge domain ($M = 3.88$, $SD = 0.55$) and attitude domain ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 0.47$). A Pearson's r data analysis for readiness and knowledge revealed a strong positive relationship and significantly correlated, $r(154) = 0.665$, $p = 0.000$. The strong positive relationship between readiness and knowledge level indicated that when the readiness level is high, the knowledge level will be high too. Similarly, when the readiness level is low, knowledge level will also be low. This showed the close relationship between readiness and knowledge level of teachers where they are interdependent on each other.

At the same time, Pearson's r data analysis for readiness and attitude also revealed a strong positive relationship and significantly correlated, $r(154) = 0.611$, $p = 0.000$. This strong positive relationship between readiness and attitude level indicated that when the readiness level is high, the attitude level will be high too. Similarly, when the attitude level indicates low, readiness level will also be low. This showed the close relationship between readiness and knowledge level of teachers where they are interdependent on each other.

Last but not least, Pearson's r data analysis for knowledge and attitude also revealed a strong positive relationship and significantly correlated, $r(154) = 0.690$, $p = 0.000$. The strong positive relationship between knowledge and attitude level also indicated that when the knowledge level is high, the attitude level will be positive. Similarly, when the knowledge level is low, the attitude level will also be negative. This showed the close relationship between knowledge and attitude level of teachers where they are interdependent on each other.

5. Discussions

This study explored teachers' readiness, teachers' knowledge and teachers' attitude towards inclusive education in mainstream schools in the district of Sibul, Sarawak because there is concern about teachers' readiness, teachers' knowledge and attitude level towards students of SEN in inclusive education. This led to the interest to find out the level of readiness, knowledge and attitude level of teachers towards students with SEN. At the same time, it also ignited interest to look into intervention methods and ways to improve teachers' readiness, teachers' knowledge and attitude towards inclusive education in hopes of bringing greater positive impact to improve effectiveness for teachers to impart knowledge to students with SEN as teachers and supervisor in the classrooms. The result of this study corresponded with the result of another study carried out by Astha, Sushma and Smriti (2011) which claimed that it is important that teachers possessed increased knowledge and proficiency towards inclusion to achieve effectiveness in the classrooms.

Similarly, another study reported that teachers' who are prepared for inclusive classes are more willing and effective in carrying out inclusive teaching in the classrooms (Sharma, Simi, Janin & Forlin, 2015). Dulcic and Bakota (2008) explained that a teacher's attitude is a decisive element in determining the successful inclusion of students with special needs. Schmidt and Vrhovnik (2015) stated that attitudes of teachers towards inclusion were positive. Harding and Darling (2003) revealed that attitudes of teachers were positive towards inclusive education. Alkhateeb and Abdullah (2014) in their study reported that teachers' knowledge related to inclusive practices enabled the teachers to be adaptable in inclusive classrooms. Furthermore, this study clearly stated that a knowledgeable teacher contributed to the success of inclusive education.

Hence, findings from this study suggested that teachers' readiness and knowledge level are high with a positive attitude towards students with SEN in mainstream schools in the district of Sibul, Sarawak.

5.1. Summary of the study

Education for all including to students with SEN was adopted by the Ministry of Education, Malaysia since 1994. With this adoption, parents began sending their children with SEN to normal schools. This development led to the various challenges faced by schools and teachers. Among the challenges are teachers' readiness, knowledge and attitude level towards inclusive education when teaching students with SEN in mainstream schools. This study explored teachers' readiness and knowledge level including teachers' attitude towards inclusive education through descriptive study through a questionnaire to identified participants to answer. Data were analysed using SPSS for determining mean score of teachers' readiness, knowledge and attitude level towards inclusive education. The results of the study showed the high mean score for teachers' readiness and knowledge level and high teachers' positive attitude towards inclusive education. Pearson analysis showed a strong positive relationship between readiness, knowledge and attitude level which are significantly correlated to each other. Therefore, this study showed an indication that teachers' readiness and knowledge level towards inclusive education as high. It also showed that teachers' attitude towards inclusive education to be positive.

5.2. Contributions of the study

The study revealed teachers' readiness and knowledge level to be high which suggested teachers' readiness and knowledge level towards inclusive education to be high in mainstream schools. This revelation suggests that teachers in mainstream schools possess high readiness and knowledge level in teaching students with SEN though teachers were not specifically trained to handle this group of students. The result may possibly be due to teachers being ready and flexible in adapting themselves well to new situations and environments according to needs thus contributing to high level of teachers' readiness and knowledge apart from being faithful and strict rules-abiding individuals. Furthermore, this revelation should be viewed as complimenting to relevant authorities for having a pool of teachers who are ready to be adaptive to environment alien to them initially. The outcome of this study could be used by relevant authorities as possible benchmark and level to design better modules and friendlier teaching materials to train trainees related to inclusive education programme. It can also be a reference to potential schools interested to open new inclusive classes where sharing experiences from these teachers could further boost the morale of other teachers engaged directly or indirectly in inclusive education. The outcome from of this study could also be a starting point for other teachers in the district of Sibul to be spurred in conducting other related studies to help this particular group of students.

6. Conclusion

Inclusive education was introduced as an alternative to students with SEN to mainstream schools apart from specially designed schools that only accept students with SEN. The result from this study shows high readiness and knowledge level of teachers' in their commitment to teach students with SEN. Apart from this, the attitudes of teachers were found to be of highly positive toward students with SEN in inclusive education in mainstream schools. The result of this study was similar to Movkebayeva, Oralkanova, Mazhinova, Beisenova and Belenko's (2016) study which stressed that readiness of teachers as among the most important element in the successful implementation of inclusion. Webster-Stratton, Reid and Stoolmillar (2008) revealed that knowledge of teachers brings about better and effective inclusive education. Todorovic, Stojiljkovic, Ristanic and Djigic (2011) claimed that school teachers have high positive attitudes towards inclusive education in mainstream schools. With high readiness and knowledge level of teachers teaching and supervising this group of students, the students were in safe hands. Furthermore, with the highly positive attitude shown in this study, the parents and guardians can rest assured that their child would be cared for by the teachers.

Therefore, this study showed that teachers' readiness, knowledge were high and the attitude was positive toward students with SEN in inclusive education.

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