

# Including Children with Autism: Overcoming the Challenge of Integration

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**Abstract.** In Malaysia, children with special needs have the opportunity for education in the special schools as well as in the integrated programme and inclusion programme conducted in the mainstream primary and secondary schools. Children who benefited from the integrated and inclusion programmes included those with autism alongside with many other categories of special needs. Children from the integrated programme who are high functioning have the privilege to be included in the mainstream classes. Many questions remain, however, about how to best implement inclusion programme in the Malaysian schools. As such, the challenge of integration remains! This paper seeks to discuss the smart initiatives since year 2005 till present by the Malaysian Government and the Non-Governmental Organisation in overcoming the challenge of integrating children with autism into the mainstream classes. A research visit was conducted as part and parcel of a major research entitled ‘Special Education for Energetic Development’ (SEED). The aim of the visit was to gather insight on the successful inclusion of children with autism into the mainstream classes in one of the primary schools located at the metropolitan of Kuala Lumpur, at Klang Valley. Few key features towards successful inclusion such as smart collaboration, co-teaching, peer learning, after-school coaching and experiential learning were identified. This smart initiative has spearheaded few more inclusion programmes throughout Malaysia.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Special education in Malaysia has been given the emphasis by the government way back before the country gained independence in 1957. The emphasis then was mainly focusing on the provision of special education to the visual and hearing impaired students. In the mid 1990s, more emphasis has been given to the development of special education for the learning disabilities which consists of the biggest group of special needs in Malaysia. The various groups of learning disabilities in Malaysia include children with autism, Down syndrome, hyperactivity, slow learner, dyslexia, cerebral palsy, remedial, mild mental retardation and the gifted. The special education in Malaysia thus, provides and fulfills the needs of these students.

## 2. SPECIAL EDUCATION IN MALAYSIA

### 2.1 Vision, Mission and Objectives

The Special Education Section (newly set up in 2008, previously it was named Special Education Department) in the Ministry of Education, Malaysia oversees the implementation of special education throughout the country. The newly drafted Vision reads as follows:

*“Quality Education for the Development of Excellent Students with Special Needs in Line with the National Educational System”.*

Its mission is to “Develop Excellent Human Capital in Special Needs based on:

- quality, holistic and relevant educational system;
- optimum development of self-potential;
- competitive and marketable ability;
- accountable citizens who uphold the moral values; and

- smart partnership with different authority.”

Few objectives have been outlined to ensure that the delivery in special education meets the needs of the students. The objectives are as follows:

- to provide opportunity and facilities in special education for children with special needs;
- to provide appropriate and relevant education for every student with special needs;
- to provide opportunity to develop the talent and potential of students with special needs;
- to prepare sufficient and up-to-date teaching and learning materials; and
- to ensure sufficient and trained teaching manpower in special education.

### 2.2 Programme

There are basically three types of special education programme offered in the Malaysian primary and secondary schools. Special schools offer programmes which are just catered for the visual impaired or the hearing impaired while some mainstream primary and secondary schools offer the second type of programme which is the integrated programme for the visual impaired, the hearing impaired and the learning disabilities. These students as mentioned are integrated with the mainstream students on the basis of social and functional integration, whereby students with special needs are integrated during recess time, or other co-curricular or sport activities. Integration then, demands building effective communities that provide a secure environment for the feeling of being together.

The third programme provided in the Malaysian context is the inclusive education. Students who are identified as high functioning in the integrated programme will be included in the mainstream classrooms. Most Malaysian schools adopt the partial inclusion whereby students with special needs are included based on their

functioning level on a particular subject(s). Not every subject matter is being involved and therefore this does not render the students with special needs into full inclusion. Subjects taken into consideration for partial inclusion include physical education, arts education, moral/religious education and functional academic subjects like language, science and mathematics. Full inclusion, on the other hand, allows the students to receive all educational services in the regular classroom (Bryant, Smith, & Bryant, 2008).

### 3. METHODOLOGY

A research visit was conducted as part and parcel of a major research entitled 'Special Education for Energetic Development' (SEED). The aim of the visit was to gather insight on the successful inclusion of children with autism from a non-governmental organization into the mainstream classes in one of the primary schools located at the metropolitan of Kuala Lumpur, at Klang Valley. A team of three researchers were involved in an unstructured interview for two hours between a focus group comprising eight (8) members, of which seven were special education teachers and a NASOM volunteer. Of these seven were special education teachers, one was the Chief Coordinator of the inclusive programmes for children with autism. Apart from the interview, permission was also obtained to observe the teaching and learning process and to video-tape children with autism in the inclusive classrooms. The feedback from interview and observation are documented below.

### 4. SMART INITIATIVES ON INCLUSIVE EDUCATION FOR CHILDREN WITH AUTISM

In the current era, inclusive education is no longer at the stage of debating the education value of it, but rather focusing on developing joint efforts with different bodies such as the schools and NGO's, and planning effectively to achieve maximal integration of all special needs students into mainstream classrooms (Raymond, 1995).

In 19 April 2005, the Special Education Department, under the governance of the Malaysian Ministry of Education together with the National Autism Society of Malaysia (NASOM), which is a national level non-governmental organization (NGO) initiated an inclusive programme in one of the primary schools in Kuala Lumpur, Klang Valley. This is the first joint inclusive programme between the government and the NGO for children with autism. This programme started with eight students with the help of four teachers from NASOM. These students have registered with NASOM and they have been included in a primary school identified by the Ministry of Education. After three years of implementation, the number of students has been increased to fourteen and they are currently helped by three teachers from NASOM. Obviously, the main parties involved in this programme are:

- Special Education Department, Ministry of Education, Malaysia

- Special Education Unit, Federal Territory Education Department
- National Autism Society of Malaysia (NASOM)
- The primary school where the joint inclusive programme is held

These four units work hand in hand to ensure that the inclusion process takes place smoothly.

#### 4.1 Process of Inclusion

The process of inclusion for students with autism begins with a formal registration with the Federal Territory Education Department which will then place the students concerned in the identified primary school. A diagnostic test will be conducted on the students after which students will have to go through the pre-inclusive class. From here, students will be selected and to be placed in the mainstream classes. Depending on the functioning level of the students, some may go for partial inclusion while some may go for full inclusion (Figure 1).

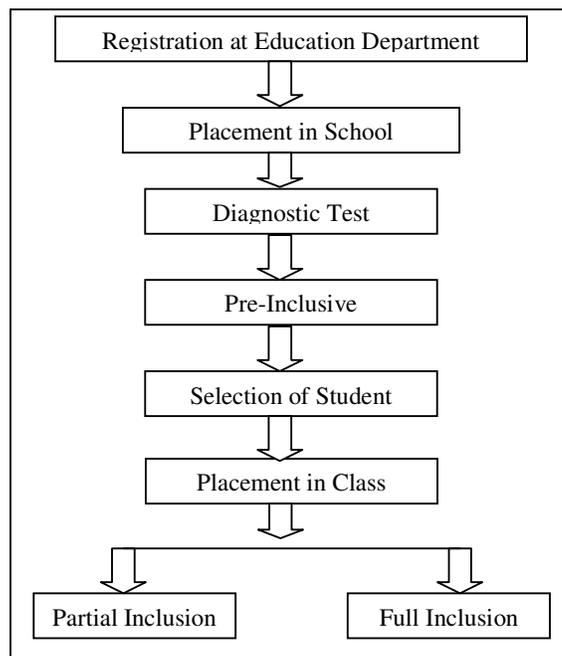


Figure 1: Implementation of the Inclusive Programme

One or more students who are placed in the mainstream classrooms will be assisted by their special education teachers who are always available in the mainstream classrooms. The regular teacher will implement the regular classroom instruction alongside with the presence of the special educator.

#### 4.2 Area of Focus in Inclusion

There are few main areas of focus in this inclusion programme. In terms of academic, the subjects involved are Malay language, English, Mathematics, Science, Religious Education, and Moral Education. Apart from academic subjects, the social and communication skills,

behaviour and emotional aspects, as well as attention skills are of major concern in the inclusion programme.

#### **4.2.1 Academic Skills**

Academic skills are being taught to students with autism. However, in the process of teaching and learning, teachers are encouraged to use variety of stimuli, such as the visual and hands-on materials whenever possible. The tasks too, need to be goal-directed and focus on a type of content for each activity. The teachers too, need to teach in a variety of settings for the purpose of generalization, for example: in teaching counting to students with autism, one needs to expose different settings to the students. The students concerned can be brought to different places such as hypermarket, bakery shop and toy shop to apply the counting skills that they have learned in the classroom.

#### **4.2.2 Social and Communication Skills**

Students with autism always exhibit long lasting social deficits. They need to be taught to understand the social norms and to improve their social interaction with people surrounding them. In teaching them, the end goal is always to teach them to be verbal, that is, able to articulate their needs, and able to relate with others more effectively.

In any instances where the student starts to initiate spontaneous communications in the social context, that is the first step to help them to develop positive relationships with others.

The use of Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) is meaningful way to help students acquiring communication skills by referring to pictures and symbols (Bondy & Frost, 1994).

#### **4.2.3 Behaviour and Emotional Support**

According to Smith, Polloway, Patton, and Dowdy (2008), students with behaviour and emotional disorders are frequently behaviourally disruptive, noncompliant, aggressive and verbally abusive.

Emotional disturbance often leads to inability to learn, inappropriate behaviour, unhappiness and depression, and physical symptoms or fears (Smith, Polloway, Patton, & Dowdy, 2008).

Positive behavioural support (PBS) that uses behavioural intervention by focusing on preventing problem behaviour by altering situations that could give rise to problem behaviour and by teaching and evaluating more appropriate behaviour (Carr, et al., 1999). PBS has proven to be useful to reduce aggressive and self-injurious behaviour (Marquis, et al., 2000). Hence, the regular teacher and the special teacher need to collaboratively implement PBS for students in the inclusive setting.

#### **4.2.4 Attention Skills**

Self-stimulatory behaviour and obsessive preoccupation with extraneous objects are not uncommon among

students with autism. Due to this, students with autism could get distracted easily and feel bored during classroom instruction.

To address these, students with autism should be redirected from external and unwanted stimuli, exercising proper prompting, and at times be given hands-on manipulation. The process of redirection can be done either through changing, removing, or modifying the environment of learning. For example, providing a 'break' after each activity to meet the sensory needs of the students, like allowing them to play with some toys, can often help improve the attention of these students.

At times, it is important to provide stimulating instruction to prevent boredom which can lead to distractibility (Autism Society of America, 2008).

### **4.3 Challenges of Integration**

In the effort of integrating students with autism, few challenges of integration have been observed. These challenges exist mainly due to the deficits and impediment in the development of pre-requisite skills necessary for learning among the students. At such, the challenge of integration remains!

#### **4.3.1 Lack of Self-Esteem among Students**

Students with autism in the inclusive classroom exhibit relatively low self-esteem compared to other regular students in the same class. This can be observed when the researcher visited the inclusive classroom. Loh (1997) found that students with mild learning disabilities show positive and significant moderate correlation between self-concept and learning achievement.

Some feedback given by the school shows that few students with autism who have been included are unable to participate in the group activities, some of them prefer to work individually, few of them are unable to respond to the questions, while few of them did not follow the lesson well. Myles and Simpson (1998) noted that many students with autism, especially students with Asperger Syndrome are aware enough to sense that they are different from others. Hence, they commonly have self-esteem and self-concept difficulties.

#### **4.3.2 Lack of Participation**

Though much effort has been invested to encourage students to speak up in the class, a few of the inclusive students have chosen to keep quiet within themselves. In situation where the students could not answer the questions, they end up with no response. Occasionally, some students were seen lack of focus and show no interest in their learning.

#### **4.3.3 Emotional Instability**

According to the teachers some students from the inclusive class show emotional instability from time to

time. This is especially true when the teachers reported that some students throw tantrums when they are given extra learning tasks; they cry when they are not satisfied with the grades obtained; and few even shout when their stationeries are taken away by their friends.

## **5. TOWARDS A SUCCESSFUL INCLUSION**

Successful inclusion involves communication and collaboration as well as many more positive elements which help makes a difference in students with special needs. Among the tips towards successful inclusion of NASOM-Government school joint inclusion programme are as follows:

### **5.1 Smart Collaboration**

For students with special needs to be included in the mainstream classrooms, it is important to establish collaborative partnerships among professionals and families to ensure appropriate educational service in the inclusive settings (West, & Idol, 1990; Bryant, Smith, & Bryant, 2008). The process of collaboration is to work together to accomplish a common goal (Cook & Friend, 1993; Halvorsen & Neary, 2001).

During the research visit, the researchers observed the joint effort of many parties in materializing the joint inclusive programme for students with autism. The collaboration include the provision of teacher aides, students with special needs, as well as the moral and facilities support from NASOM administrators; the provision of regular teachers and classroom, as well as the moral and infrastructure support from the Government school administrators; the parents too, were seen supporting their children morally and physically.

The inclusive teachers help the students by providing feedback on their daily progress to the special educators.

### **5.2 Co-Teaching**

For inclusion to be successfully run, the in-class support from the special educator is crucial. The presence of the special educator in the regular classroom, will serve benefit to many aspects, such that, the student will feel more comfortable, secured and relaxed, these added on to the emotional well being and confidence within the student. The special educator, too, plays important role in guiding and coaching the learning content to these students. Hence, co-teaching involves collaborative instructional planning, implementation and evaluation among team members (Bryant, Smith, & Bryant, 2008).

The feedback from the teachers show that majority of the students who had been included have good discipline, they were well-controlled, can follow teachers' instructions, and need excessive guidance to perform more difficult learning tasks.

### **5.3 Peer Learning**

In the school where the researchers conducted observation, it was found that students with autism were

paired with another peer without disabilities. This is also called 'buddy system'. Peer learning provides opportunity for students with autism to observe and model behaviours of their peers.

The researchers were informed that many of the inclusive students can play together with the regular students be it inside or outside the class.

### **5.4 After-School Coaching**

A unique approach adopted by NASOM in helping students with autism from the inclusive class is to have after-school coaching by the teachers from NASOM. Students who had finished their lessons in the morning session inclusive class are required to continue their learning at NASOM in the afternoon.

The purpose of after-school coaching serves the purpose of enhancing and enriching the learning among the students so that more concrete reinforcement is taking place. Besides that, social and communication skills are of main concerned apart from the formal learning (Lane, Gresham, & O'Shaughnessy, 2002).

The overall performances of inclusive students are encouraging as more assistance is provided to the students. It was reported that few of the students can answer the examination questions without any help from the teachers. Many of them show high potential in the core courses which they have enrolled in.

### **5.5 Experiential Learning**

Classroom instruction which helps to stimulate learning enhances the experiential learning among the students. The goal is to promote dynamic interactions between student and the environment.

In the inclusive classroom, the researchers observed that students were allowed to do simple experiment while learning Physics. This is especially important for students with special needs, as they need hands-on experience in order for learning to take place.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

The success of integrating students with autism in the regular setting requires continuous, consistent and persistent effort. Among the many positive implications observed through this project are: Firstly, students are given the opportunity to undergo the process of normalization in the environment of learning; secondly, the level of acceptance of the community towards students with special needs has been enhanced, and thirdly, this smart initiative has spearheaded few more inclusion programmes throughout Malaysia.

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