

PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES IN IMPLEMENTING  
INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

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*To my beloved husband and children,  
who supported me each step of the way*

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the lived experiences of primary school teachers in implementing inclusive education, in order to further understand the challenges faced by the teachers, strategies they employ, and forms of support they need. The data was obtained through one-on-one semi structured interviews. Six mainstream primary school teachers who have experienced teaching students with special educational needs (SEN) participated in this qualitative study. Data from the interviews was organized and coded using QDA Miner Lite software and Hycner (1985) data analysis process was applied as a guide in the analysis of data. Findings of the study show that teachers' attitude towards inclusive education was generally positive. However, the teachers were unsure of how to implement inclusive education due to inadequate training, exposure, and knowledge in regards to the concept and practice of inclusive education. The participants suggested that positive, supportive and accepting attitude of teachers towards students with SEN is very important for a successful inclusion program. The teachers requested additional training, effective collaboration with special education experts, more effective teacher-parent relationship and early intervention of students with SEN as support structures needed to boost confidence to teach in an inclusive classroom. Several implications are drawn from the findings and some recommendations for professional practice and further research on inclusive education are provided in the final chapter of this study.

## ABSTRAK

Kajian ini meneroka pengalaman guru-guru sekolah rendah dalam melaksanakan pendidikan inklusif untuk lebih memahami cabaran yang dihadapi oleh guru-guru, strategi yang mereka gunakan, dan bentuk sokongan yang mereka perlukan. Enam orang guru sekolah rendah arus perdana yang berpengalaman mengajar pelajar berkeperluan khas telah ditemubual dalam kajian kualitatif ini. Temubual separa berstruktur telah digunakan dalam kajian ini. Data daripada temu bual dikod menggunakan perisian QDA Miner Lite dan proses analisis data Hycner (1985) digunakan sebagai panduan dalam analisis data. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa sikap guru terhadap pendidikan inklusif pada umumnya adalah positif. Walau bagaimanapun, guru-guru tersebut tidak pasti bagaimana untuk melaksanakan pendidikan inklusif dengan berkesan kerana tidak menerima latihan, pendedahan, dan pengetahuan yang mencukupi berkaitan konsep dan amalan pendidikan inklusif. Menurut guru-guru dalam kajian ini, sikap dan penerimaan positif guru terhadap pelajar berkeperluan khas adalah amat penting dalam memastikan kejayaan pendidikan inklusif. Guru-guru dalam kajian ini juga menyuarakan perlunya lebih banyak kursus berkaitan pendidikan inklusif, kerjasama yang berkesan dengan mereka yang mahir dalam bidang pendidikan khas, hubungan baik antara guru dengan ibu bapa, dan intervensi awal pelajar berkeperluan khas sebelum menerima pendidikan di arus perdana. Beberapa implikasi diambil daripada penemuan dan beberapa cadangan untuk penyelidikan lanjut mengenai pendidikan inklusif dibincangkan dalam bab akhir kajian ini.

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**LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

EPU	Economic Planning Unit
IEP	Individualized Education Program
ISEP	Integrated Special Education Program
LD	Learning Difficulties
MOE	Ministry of Education
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
SEN	Student with Special Educational Needs
UNESCO	United Nations Education, Social and Cultural Organization

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Introduction

The term inclusion is often used to describe various efforts to teach students with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream classrooms. It may involve educating these students through consultation, team teaching, or integrated instructional activities (Summey and Strahan, 1997). According to Idol (2006) inclusion means students with SEN are attending the general school program, enrolled in age appropriate classes for their entire school day.

The United Nations Education, Social and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2003) defines inclusive education as:

*“ a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all children, youth and adults through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing and eliminating exclusion within and from education. It involves changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures and strategies, with a common vision that covers all children of the appropriate age range and a conviction that it is the responsibility of the regular system to educate all children.”*

*(UNESCO, 2003:p.7)*

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Mentally Retarded Persons in 1971 was a landmark document in recognizing the right of people with disabilities to education (Peters, 2007). However, in this declaration the concept of integration and inclusion was not specifically emphasized. The Sundberg Declaration in 1981 which states that ‘every disabled person must be able to exercise his fundamental right to have full access to education’ (art.3, p.2) underlines the importance of rehabilitation and integration as far as possible of disabled persons. The declaration leads to the introduction of the World Programme of Action Concerning Disabled People in 1982 which represents the first worldwide long-term policy regarding people with disabilities.

World Declaration on Education for All (EFA) developed in 1990 in Jomtein, Thailand emphasized more on universal access and equity, stating that ‘steps need to be taken to provide equal access to education to every category of disabled persons as an integral part of the education system’ (art. 3, p.9). This document moves closer to a social model of disability with inclusive concepts (Peters, 2007). The concept of inclusive education later is clearly defined and seriously emphasized in the World Congress on Special Needs Education, Salamanca in 1994 (UNESCO, 1994). These documents stress the principle of inclusion, by recognizing the need to work towards ‘schools for all’, referring to institutions which include everybody, celebrate differences, support learning, and respond to individual needs. The education of children and youth with disabilities is the central focus of this document.

The principles underpinning the United Nations’ move towards inclusive education firmly support individual’s right to education alongside their peers (Flewitt et al., 2009). These principles lead to major explosion of inclusive practice internationally. In recent years, the movement towards inclusion has become a global phenomenon. Internationally, the practice of inclusion is gradually replacing the practice of segregation and integration as an educational priority. In fact in some countries it has become an ideological issue and is accepted as educational policy.

Italy, Denmark, Sweden, USA and the United Kingdom are among the countries that have practiced some form of inclusion for a number of decades (Prater, 2010).

In the USA, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) of 2004 required that individual aged 3 to 21 years who have special educational needs should be educated in ‘the least restrictive environment’ with their non-disabled peers, to the greatest extent appropriate (Eisenman et al., 2011). Removing children with disabilities from the general classrooms was to occur only when the severity of the disability was so great that supplementary aids and services in general classrooms were insufficient. According to Soodak et al. (2002), parent advocacy has also been a driving force in the move toward inclusive educational practice in many schools throughout the country.

In a similar way, the Australian Commonwealth Disability Discrimination Act (1992), and the Disability Standards for Education (Commonwealth of Australia, 2004) which applies to both government and non-government schools, mandated that disability neither hinders enrolment nor results in a conditional enrolment in regular schools (Byrnes et al., 2002). According to the act it is unlawful to refuse access to any part of the curriculum or to expel a student just because the student has a disability.

Malaysia also supports the principle of equality in education. Article 23 of the Persons with Disabilities Act 2008 clearly states that ‘persons with disabilities shall not be excluded from the general education system on the basis of disabilities’ (p.24) and reasonable accommodation should be provided suitable with the requirements of persons and children with disabilities in terms of, infrastructure, equipment and teaching materials, teaching methods, curricula and other forms of support that meet the diverse needs of persons or children with disabilities.



The concept of inclusion in Malaysian context is more to placing students with SEN into the mainstream classes, either with or without additional support. This concept of inclusion, though is not in line with the ideal concept, is considered practicable due to some limitations and constraints (Ministry of Education, 2004). To show that Malaysia is really committed to moving more students with SEN towards inclusive education, the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 places great emphasize on raising the overall quality of provision. Appropriate measures shall be taken to overcome the problems and obstacles in the implementation of inclusion.

The merit of educating children with disabilities in inclusive and non-inclusive settings continues to be widely debated. The proponents of inclusive education, using the legal or civil rights' perspectives argue that segregating students is antithetical to basic human rights. All individuals, including those with disabilities, have the right to receive the same educational opportunities. They view the shift from segregated to inclusive education as in accordance with the fundamental moral principle that every human being should be treated with unconditional respect.

On the other hand, opponents of inclusive education are generally concerned about the impact that inclusion has on teachers, students, and/or schooling in general. Many are concerned that including students with disabilities in the general classrooms increases general educators' teaching loads and stress levels (Prater, 2010). For some people segregated education means the only setting in which a child with particular difficulties may feel included and learn effectively (Cigman, 2007), as clearly stated in the Salamanca Statement that in exceptional cases, children should be educated in special schools or special classes within ordinary schools (UNESCO, 1994).

Regardless of the different opinions and findings, there is widespread acknowledgement that teachers play a crucial role in providing quality education. The positive outcomes of inclusion depend on changing the perceptions of educators and instigating commitment as well as the provision of resources (Burstein et al., 2004) to serving the needs of both general and special education students. Teachers must be

convinced that a particular change is worthwhile and understand the reasons for it. When mainstream teachers become both willing and capable of including students with SEN into their classrooms, then students with SEN will be more likely to enjoy the same outcomes as their non-disabled peers in the mainstream education setting.

Numerous studies regarding the beliefs and attitudes of the individuals who are responsible for implementing inclusive policies found that teachers' attitude was one of the key elements in the successful implementation of inclusive education (e.g. Avramidis et al., 2000; Agbenyega, 2007; Konza, 2008). Vaughn et al. (1994) claimed that majority of teachers had strong negative attitudes about inclusion.

Past research suggested that the negative attitude was due to lack of training and expertise related to inclusive education, and inadequate of resources and supports. Findings by Bailey and du Plessis (1997) highlighted that prominently in the teachers' concerns are resources, human and physical, teacher and teacher aide training, and the provision of specialist support to assist with inclusion. Shippen et al. (2005), investigate the perceptions of pre-service teachers regarding serving students with disabilities in general education settings. Their results demonstrated that the increased level of knowledge about students with SEN made these teachers less anxious about including students with SEN in their classrooms. Forlin et al. (2008) examine the concerns of 228 regular class teachers in Western Australia, regarding inclusion. Their findings showed that the support of the whole school community is essential for teachers in order to reduce the feeling of isolation, and increase the opportunities for collaboration that are particularly important for successful inclusion programmes.

Winy (2004) examined Malaysian teachers' and principals' conceptions of inclusive education. Her data showed that many teachers and principals favoured the philosophy of inclusive education. Nevertheless, in terms of the implementation some teachers were concerned about workload and class size barrier. A survey carried out by Manisah et al. (2006) shows that in theory the majority of respondents agreed that

inclusive education is appropriate for students with SEN. However, in practice they were concerned about availability of support and resources, as well as expertise in handling students with SEN. Numerous studies showed that teachers agree that inclusive education is important, but many find it difficult to implement (e.g. Winny, 2004; Manisah et al, 2006; Aziz, 2007).

The Malaysian government is aiming to achieve 30% enrolment of students with SEN in the mainstream classes by 2015. At the moment only 6% of students with SEN are in the inclusive classes. It seems the goal requires great effort and full commitment of the mainstream teachers because they are dealing directly with students with SEN. In realizing the goal, issues such as teachers' acceptance and preparation, teachers' needs and concerns, availability of resources and support, their problems and challenges in inclusive classes should also be taken into account. In light of highlighting teachers' needs and concerns, their experiences regarding inclusive education need to be explored. The best way to explore the issues is to go to schools and communicate directly with the teachers because they are the key players in the implementation of inclusive education at the classroom level.

Thus, this qualitative study is designed to explore the experiences of six mainstream primary school teachers in teaching students with SEN at a primary school in Johor Bahru. The focus of this study is on the challenges the primary school teachers face, the strategies they employ and the supports and resources that they need. Exploring the teachers' experiences brings to the forefront the supports and resources that teachers believe help with the process of moving toward greater levels of inclusive schooling.

## 1.2 Background of research

There is extensive discussion of the term ‘special educational needs’ in the literature on special education and many definitions have been proposed internationally. In the United States, only children with identified disabilities are considered to have special educational needs (Florian et al. 2006). On the other hand, in England children who need more services than are provided to other children of similar age are considered to have ‘special educational needs’ (Florian et al. 2006, p.39). In Malaysia we use the terminology ‘children with special educational needs’ for students with hearing impaired, visual impaired and learning difficulties (Ministry of Education, 2009). According to Aziz (2007) in the language of educational legislation the terms ‘special educational needs’ is widely used. In this context, the term ‘special’ suggests ‘different’ and ‘separate’ rather than ‘out of the ordinary’ in the positive sense (p.40).

A child is commonly recognised as having special educational needs if he or she is not able to benefit from the school education made generally available for children of the same age without additional support or adaptations in the content of studies (OECD, 2002). Therefore, SEN can cover a range of needs including physical or mental disabilities, and cognition or educational impairments.

In Malaysia, the Memorandum on Legislation for Education of Individuals with Special Needs defines ‘individuals with special needs’ as:

*“Individuals with special needs assessed and identified by medical standards and having a physical, mental or other impairment which has a substantial and/or long term adverse effect on their ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities and/ or impedes his ability to pursue his studies in the mainstream of education in regular classes.”*  
(Bar Council of Malaysia, 2005: para.1)

The Education Act (1961) emphasized that the Ministry of Education is responsible for providing guidelines for the defining of the categories of pupils

requiring special educational treatment, and the appropriate method to educate them (Manisah et al., 2006). Special education was also emphasized in the Ninth Malaysia Plan (EPU, 2006) stating that, educational opportunities for children with special needs will be expanded by opening special classes in regular schools to enable these children to adapt to the normal school environment. To improve the quality of teaching and learning, more teachers will be trained and the curriculum for special education will be further improved.

Special education in Malaysia is implemented through special schools for children with visual and hearing problems, Integrated Special Education Programs (ISEP) for students with learning difficulties (LD), students with hearing problems, and students with visual impairment. The programs are placed in the mainstream primary and secondary schools as well as technical / vocational schools. These programs provide opportunities for students with SEN to communicate and socialize with their non-disabled peers in a 'least restrictive environment'. Apart from that, the integrated programs also give room for students with SEN to be included into the mainstream classrooms if they are considered able to follow the mainstream teaching and learning.

Opportunity to be accepted to pre-school and primary school program in special education depends on several conditions; aged 6 to 14 years, certified by a medical practitioner, and can manage themselves without the help of others. To join the special education programs in secondary school, the similar conditions applied; aged 13 to 19 years, certified by a medical practitioner, and can manage themselves without the help of others.

All the primary special education schools use the mainstream education curriculum. Meanwhile students in the Special Education Integrated Program comply with the national curriculum or alternative curriculum. The alternative curriculum is focused towards a holistic development, skills acquisition in order to secure quality life which would contribute in the future. Standard Curriculum for Primary Schools

(KSSR) for Special Education includes curriculum for students with hearing problems, visual impairment and with learning difficulties. Students with hearing impairment and visual impairment generally use mainstream curriculum. Nevertheless, there were some modifications made to the number of elective subjects concerned (particularly in terms of teaching and learning) in accordance with special learning needs. These students are also required to study additional subjects of Sign Language Communication (BIK) and Basic Skills for the Visually Impaired Individuals (KAIMaL).

Curriculum for Special Education (Learning Difficulties) is constructed based on the abilities and needs. The curriculum for these students focused more on the mastery of skills to meet the needs of individuals, and not putting too much emphasis on academics. This is consistent with the Regulations of Education (Special Education), which states that ‘teachers may modify methods or techniques in teaching or learning, the timing of activities and the arrangement of activities, subjects and teaching aids in achieving the aims and objectives of Special Education’ (1997, p.1).

In the first phase, students in Special Education (Learning Difficulties) are provided with 3M basic education integrated in Living Skills, Creative Arts, Islamic Education, Moral Education and Physical Education. Meanwhile, in Phase II, students learn Malay Language, English, Mathematics, Islamic Education, Moral Education, Health and Physical Education, Science, Social and Environment, Visual Arts, Music Education, Basic Life Skills, Information Technology and Communications, as well as Living Skills.

The first secondary program for students with Learning Difficulties (LD) was introduced in 1995. Therefore secondary education for students with LD is considered a new venture in Malaysia. Students with LD in secondary schools continue what they had learned in primary school, but in secondary school more emphasis is given on prevocational training skills acquisition. The Prevocational Curriculum has been approved by the Ministry of Education Malaysia in September 2005. It consists of

30% academic skills and 70% vocational skills. The courses available are cooking, sewing, agriculture/gardening, maintenance, service and handcraft.

In recognition for students with LD to have equal opportunity in employment, the Ministry of Education sets up its first Secondary Special Education Vocational School in 2003 (Norsham, 2005). The Indahpura Secondary Special Education Vocational School provides training for all three categories of special needs namely student with visual impairment, hearing impairment and learning difficulties. In addition to that, the Secondary Special Education School, Penang offers vocational elective subjects (MPV) and Secondary Special Education Vocational School, Shah Alam offers Malaysian Skills Certificate.

Since the introduction of the 'least restrictive environment' policy in 1981, many special education classes in the mainstream schools have been improved to ensure better learning for the special needs students in the integrated programs. Classes were upgraded with better facilities and adequate supplies of skilful teachers were provided to ensure students with SEN are learning in a more conducive classroom. Still, students with SEN are confined to their own special class and segregated from their non-disabled peers.

During the last decades the government of Malaysia has encouraged and supported the education of children considered as having special needs within the mainstream educational system. The concept of inclusive education has been emphasized in the Persons with Disabilities Act 2008, which clearly states that 'persons with disabilities shall not be excluded from the general education system on the basis of disabilities, and children with disabilities shall not be excluded from pre-school, primary, secondary and higher education, on equal basis with persons or children without disabilities, including vocational training and lifelong learning' (p.24).

Inclusive education was introduced into Malaysian school system as a pilot scheme in 1994 (Winny, 2004). The educational approach being practiced for children with SEN in integrated programme are full inclusion and partial inclusion. In full inclusion, students with SEN are taught in a regular classroom alongside their non-disabled peers for all subjects. This approach is rarely practiced in Malaysia due to some limitations and constraints (MOE, 2004). The commonly practiced is partial inclusion approach, where students with SEN learn in a regular classroom for certain subjects, normally the non-academic subjects.

Since its implementation, there are no set rules imposed by the Malaysian Ministry of Education concerning the inclusion of students with SEN. The decision to include them rest entirely on the school's administration, based on the advice by the school's special educators. Nevertheless, there are generally two accepted criteria for the inclusion of students with SEN into the mainstream school setting, in which they are able to manage themselves without help and they do not have behavioural-conditions that can lead to disruption of the mainstream learning.

Theoretically, the integrated programs give room toward inclusive education where able special education student may be placed and study in regular education classes. Lee (2010), wrote that 'in practice, however, no real placement options exists, and students are placed in programs correlating to disabilities without much systematic progression towards mainstream education' (para.10). This statement is supported by the information given in Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 that only about 6% of students with special needs are currently in inclusive programs (Ministry of Education, 2012). Most attend integrated programmes (about 89%), and the rest attend special education schools (around 5%). Shortage of qualified teachers, curriculum adjustment, lack of facilities and assistive devices, and unwillingness of most mainstream teachers to accept students with SEN into their classes are among the constraints in implementing inclusive education.



An inclusive school must offer possibilities and opportunities for a range of working methods and individual treatment to ensure that no child is excluded from companionship and participation in the school. This implies the development of rights-based, child-friendly schools. A rights-based education helps children realize their rights. It is not only academically effective but also inclusive, healthy and protective of all children, gender-responsive, and encourages the participation of the learners themselves, their families and their communities. In ensuring the success of inclusive education policies, support from the teachers, head teachers and the communities close to the school is essential. All must be able and willing to ensure inclusion in the classroom and in learning for all children regardless of their differences. Ultimately, the goal of inclusive education is to break down the barriers that separate general and special education and make the included students feel liked, safe and actually become an active member of general education classrooms.

In light of understanding teacher's needs and challenges regarding inclusive education the researcher decided to go to school and explore the primary school teachers' experiences in implementing inclusive education. Understanding teachers' perceptions of inclusion is important in order to develop methods that will foster positive attitudes toward inclusion and consequently to the success of inclusion because studies found that teachers' attitude was one of the key elements in the successful implementation of inclusive education. Less-than-optimistic attitudes among general education teachers appear to cause difficulty in introducing and successfully implementing inclusive reforms (Cook et al, 1999). Aziz (2007) revealed that some mainstream teachers perceive students with SEN are unable to interact with mainstream learning due to their impairments and best being educated in the special education classes, because only special educators are qualified to teach them. He further added that in ensuring the success of inclusive educational practice such perceptions should be changed. Instead, general educators should be convinced of their competencies to teach students with SEN.

The focus of this qualitative study is on challenges teachers face, the strategies they employ, and the supports and resources that they need. The school chosen for this study was a primary school located in Skudai, Johor. Throughout this study the school will be referred as school A. School A was chosen because it is involved with the Integrated Special Education Program, and implements full inclusion of six students with Learning Difficulties. The number of student with SEN placed in the mainstream classrooms in the school is considered high in comparison to other schools contacted by the researcher, which on average have only one inclusive student. School A has 942 students including 32 students with SEN and 68 teachers including 8 Special Education teachers. Inclusive program has been implemented in the school since 2003.

### **1.3 Statement of problem**

In realizing the target of 30% participation of students with SEN in inclusive education by 2015, undivided support is required of the teachers. Nevertheless teachers' needs and concerns need to be considered as many studies have indicated that teachers face particular challenges in implementing inclusive education, that led to negative feelings about inclusion (Vaughn et al, 1996). A considerable amount of literature has been published on mainstream teachers' challenges in implementing inclusive education (e.g. McLeskey et al., 2001; Shippen et al, 2005; Forlin et al., 2008; Shevlin et al, 2009; Brackenreed, 2011). It seems that past research has generally indicated that teachers have strong reservations regarding inclusive programs. The teachers were concern about their lack of knowledge of the inclusion, increased in workload, inadequate of resources and support.

Studies also revealed that though teachers agree with the concept of inclusive education, they feel that its implementation is difficult (Manisah et al., 2006). Moreover, teachers have tremendous tasks involving reports relating to lesson plans,

extra-curricular activities, students' assessments, exams assessments, and other extra activities (e.g. meetings, courses, seminars) organized by the school.

The researcher believes that teachers' experiences in inclusive education need to be explored and their voices need to be heard so that their problems, challenges, and needs concerning the practice of inclusion can be better understood. Besides, by identifying their needs and challenges appropriate measures could be taken to address the barriers to ensure that students with SEN are accepted and provided with a quality education in an inclusive educational setting because attitudes and concerns of teachers affect their acceptance and commitment to implementing inclusion (Agbenyega, 2007). In considering how to help educational systems become more inclusive, the nature of teachers' beliefs and how beliefs relate to their consequent actions need to be understood (Gibbs, 2007).

#### **1.4 Objectives of the study**

This study aims to:

- i. Explore primary school teachers' challenges in implementing inclusive education.
- ii. Investigate the strategies primary school teachers use to address the challenges in implementing inclusive education.
- iii. Examine the supports and resources primary school teachers need in ensuring the effectiveness of inclusive educational practice.

## 1.5 Research Questions

This study seeks to answer the following questions:

- i. How do primary school teachers experience challenges in teaching students with special educational needs in inclusive classroom?
- ii. What are the strategies primary school teachers employ to address the challenges they face in implementing inclusive education?
- iii. What are the supports and resources primary school teachers need in ensuring the effectiveness of inclusive educational practice?

## 1.6 Conceptual Framework

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model served as a broad framework to guide this research. Bronfenbrenner described five systems that influence an individual, which are the microsystems, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem (Santrock, 2011). This study concentrated on the microsystem and mesosystem levels, with the understanding that all of the systems are mutually interdependent. The study focused on three categories of issues at the microsystem level that can contribute to what teachers perceive as challenges in educating students with special needs, which are student-related issues, teacher-related issues, and environmental-related issues. These are the issues that can influence teacher-student relationship and consequently the socioemotional and educational development of the student.

Student-related issues refer to the individual attributes of the students, which in this study referring to the types of disabilities the student has. According to Aziz

(2007), teachers' concerns regarding students with SEN can be differentiated on the basis of three dimensions: physical and sensory, cognitive and behaviour-emotional. Forlin (1995) claimed that the degree of disability influenced the perceived suitability for inclusions. In this study the researcher will explore the teachers' challenges regarding the nature and degree of disabilities the students have.

Teacher-related factors involve the issues related to teachers' knowledge, experiences, training, and self-efficacy. This study focuses on teachers' knowledge on inclusion and students with SEN, their experiences in teaching students with SEN, and their pre- or in - service training regarding inclusive education. These are considered as important factors in developing teachers' positive attitudes towards the implementation of inclusion. Environmental-related factors concern the provision of support structures and resources. This study explores teachers' experiences regarding the supports they receive from their colleagues, parents and administrators in regards of inclusive educational practices. The availability of physical support such as adequate facilities, materials and equipment, as well as human support such as support from the headmaster, inter-personal and task-related support from special educators and colleagues are instrumental in helping teachers manage the challenges they face in teaching students with SEN.

## **1.7 Significance of study**

Many studies regarding teachers have been conducted by various parties in Malaysia (Supiah, 2005). So far, however, there has been little research on inclusive education (Winny, 2004; Supiah, 2005; Aziz, 2007)). This study explores primary school teachers' experiences in implementing inclusive education, aiming at highlighting the challenges they face, how they manage the challenges and what are the support and resources that they need. The researcher believes that the findings of the study could provide school administrators and teachers insights into the strengths

and weaknesses of the inclusive education practices in the school, so that changes could be made to improve the practice.

### **1.7.1 Regular classroom teacher**

This study hopes to highlight the strategies used by teachers in addressing the problems and challenges they face, so that the strategies can be applied by other teachers in the school or in other schools with similar context. The Ninth Malaysian Plan (9MP) maintains the country's commitment to continuously address socio-economic inequalities by ensuring that by 2015 all citizens receive fair and equal educational opportunities regardless of location, race, ability, or ethnic background (Malaysian Education For All Report, 2008). In response to this, the government will open up more integrated classes in the mainstream school which will consequently increase the inclusion of students with SEN into the mainstream classes. Therefore, mainstream classroom teachers generally have to get adequate knowledge and information regarding inclusive education.

### **1.7.2 Special Education Teacher**

To make inclusive placements successful for all learners, collaboration between general and special education teachers is essential. Both special and regular education teachers have expertise and experience in their respective areas, they had different perspectives and beliefs about teaching, learning, and teaching methods. If they could collaborate, they might be able to integrate their different yet complementary instructional styles. This study is hoped to provide special education teachers insight into the problems faced by the mainstream teachers in the inclusive classrooms and do their part to initiate collaboration with the mainstream teachers.

### **1.7.3 School Administrator**

This study would provide school administrators insight into the teachers' problems and challenges in inclusive classrooms. Furthermore, this study provides school administrators first-hand knowledge on the supports and services needed by the inclusive classroom teachers, so that the school administrators may find it necessary to review the present supports and services and implements necessary changes. Other than that the study would help the school administrators identify the strength and weakness of the school in promoting inclusion.

### **1.7.4 Parent of student with special educational needs**

This study is hoped to help parents who have children with SEN understand the concept of inclusive education and the challenges teachers face in educating the children. Parents are acknowledged as key actors in the process of inclusion, yet research on their involvement is limited primarily to their perceptions of the benefits and drawbacks of inclusion (Soodak et al, 2002). Parents' understanding of inclusive education is very important to enable them provide appropriate support to the teachers involved. They can help out in the classroom, provide material on their children's disabilities to teachers and educate people about inclusion.

### **1.7.5 Department of Special Education Personnel**

The researcher believes that the findings of the present study could help the Department of Special Education personnel to understand and identify the problems and challenges faced by the inclusive classroom teachers. Accordingly, they could take appropriate measures to help these teachers overcome challenges and problems

in educating students with special needs, while providing the resources and support so that the teachers are more positive and optimistic about the implementation of inclusive education practices.

### **1.8 Limitations of the study**

The focus of this qualitative research is to explore primary school teachers' experiences in inclusive education, specifically on the challenges they face, how they manage the challenges and the supports and resources they need. The participating teachers were a special education teacher who have formal training and qualification in Special Education and five regular education teachers who have had some experiences in inclusive classroom.

The data was collected from only one primary school and a small number of participants were interviewed. The experiences of educators in other primary school might well be different. However, the data is never intended to be generalised. A deeper understanding of the participants' experiences is the primary aim, not generalizability of the data.

The data was gathered from interviews with the participating teachers. No classroom observation was made as the researcher wishes to explore the phenomenon through the teachers' experiences. Data-collection interviews continued until the topic was exhausted or saturated, that was when interviewees introduced no new perspectives on the topic.



## **1.9 Definition of terms**

For the purposes of this study, the following terms will briefly be explained to give the reader a sense of context and understanding when reading this research.

### **1.9.1 Experience**

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines experience as practical knowledge, skill, or practice derived from direct observation of or participation in events or in a particular activity. For this study, the definition is referring to primary school teachers' practical contact with and observation of facts or events related to the implementation of inclusive education in terms of the challenges they face, the strategies they use to manage the challenge and the support and resources they need. In this study, a gain is in understanding of the teachers' realities and their everyday experiences with students with SEN in inclusive classrooms.

### **1.9.2 Student with special educational need (SEN)**

According to Aziz (2007) the term 'special educational need' was introduced by Warnock in 1978. The term was later used widely in English-speaking countries. The term 'special educational need' refers to children who have significantly greater difficulty in learning compared to the majority of children of their age and whose disability prevents or hinders them from making full use of the educational facilities of the kind generally provided in schools. In this study, the term 'student with special educational need' refers to students with learning difficulties (LD).

### **1.9.3 Inclusive education**

Inclusive education can be defined as educating students in general education classes in their neighbourhood schools and providing supports to students and teachers so that all can be successful (Bassett et al., 1996). This definition implies that inclusion does not mean simply placing students with SEN into mainstream settings without learning and social supports. According to Manisah et al. (2006) inclusive education is a concept that allows students with special needs to be placed and received instruction in the mainstream classes and being taught by mainstream teachers.

In Malaysia students who are able to sustained mainstream classes education are normally included either fully or for certain subjects only. The degree of inclusion for each student depends on his or her ability to cope with mainstream learning. In this study the term inclusive education refers to full and partial inclusion where the student with SEN is either included in the mainstream classroom for the entire school day or for certain subjects only.

## **1.10 Chapter Summary**

The dissertation is divided into the following five chapters:

Chapter one introduces the topic of primary school teachers' experiences in inclusive education, the purpose of the study and the research questions. It also discusses the background of the study, research framework, and significance as well as the limitations of the study. The chapter ends with the definition of terms used throughout this study.

Chapter two explains the concept of inclusive education and briefly describes special education and inclusive education in Malaysia. The chapter also reviews past research on teacher's experiences in teaching students with SEN, and highlights the challenges, strategies and supports in regards of inclusive education practices.

Chapter three provides an overview of the methodology for the study. This includes description of the methodological orientation, data collection methods and techniques that were employed in the study. The chapter further explains the procedures during field work and in the analysis of data. The chapter ends with the discussion of ethical considerations and guidelines in the gathering of data.

Chapter four reports on the major themes raised by the participants during interviews. The themes have been organized based on the research questions which cover challenges facing the participants, strategies employed by the participants, and the forms of support the participants require. Description of the findings is divided into the background information of the participants and the identified themes.

Chapter five presents the discussion and implications of the findings. The chapter also consist of several recommendations for the effective practice of inclusion, suggestion for future research, and the conclusion of the study.

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