HEADMASTERS UNDERSTANDING AND READINESS IN IMPLEMENTING THE ZERO REJECT POLICY

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Malaysia has consistently made continuous efforts towards promoting access to education, in alignment with the World Declaration on Education for All. Fast forward to 2015, The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization pledged to enhance the benchmarks of quality education, ensuring that all children can equally access a high standard of education. Building upon these international declarations and endeavours for improved education for future generations, Malaysia implemented a Zero Reject Policy (ZRP) in January 2019. This policy allows all children, irrespective of their disabilities, to enrol in government and government aided schools. This qualitative study involved six primary school headmasters from Selangor, who were selected through purposive sampling. Two qualitative data collection methods were employed including semi-structured interviews and systematic literature reviews. The collected data were analysed using ATLAS.ti (Version 9) software. The study discovered that the majority of headmasters comprehend the objectives of the Zero Reject Policy in facilitating access to education. Nonetheless, challenges such as inadequate infrastructure have posed significant obstacles for headmasters in effectively implementing the policy. The study concludes that the implementation of the ZRP has presented significant improvements among headmasters from two distinct perspectives: awareness and providing access to education.

Keywords: Special education, Special educational needs student, Zero Reject Policy, Education Policy

INTRODUCTION

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) has played a significant role in advocating for the rights of individuals with disabilities to receive an education. According to the UNCRPD, every individual has the right to education without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity (Kauffman & Hornby, 2020). This right extends to individuals with disabilities, who have the right to be educated in an inclusive environment that accommodates their diverse learning needs. Malaysia is a multicultural country with a unique citizen background, making it one of the most complex countries in the

Southeast Asia region. Special education has been a part of Malaysia's education system since before the colonial period (prior to 1990) (Fikri & Othman, 2020), gradually improving over time and continuing to evolve up to the present day (Chin, 2020).

Despite the various improvements implemented by the government, children with special educational needs (SEN) remain vulnerable due to their social circumstances, often facing discrimination and educational inequalities (Houtrow et al., 2020). Qualitative data presented by Chin (2020) indicates that stigma and discrimination towards SEN individuals at the community level are primarily associated with the children's disabilities, potentially rooted in specific cultural factors. On a global scale, Frey (2019) mentioned in her study that SEN students were denied access to public education provided by the ministry. ZRP was formerly announced by the former Minister of Education, Dr. Maszlee bin Malik in a parliamentary session at Dewan Rakyat and Dewan Negara during the Second Meeting, First Term 2018 (Government of Malaysia, 2018). The initial idea of the ZRP was to provide access to education for SEN and other undocumented children in all government schools and government-aided schools (Azmi, 2018). The ZRP promotes equity in education without denying the right to education for all school children across all levels of education from preschool to upper secondary.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Malaysia has multi-racial society with an estimated population of 32.7 million people (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2021). The influence of this multiculturalism and diverse beliefs in Malaysia has significantly impacted the education system, resulting in a robust implementation and execution of educational practices. Within Malaysia, the Special Education Division (BPKhas), Ministry of Education (MOE) is responsible for overseeing the implementation and execution of special education. The MOE offers three educational settings tailored to the specific disabilities and cognitive levels of SEN children. These settings include Special Education Schools (SES), the Special Education Integration Program (SEIP), and the Inclusive Education Program (IEP) (Special Education Division, 2015). In Malaysia, children with SEN are categorized into six groups: (1) visual impairment, (2) hearing impairment, (3) speech impairment, (4) physical impairment, (5) learning disabilities, and (6) multiple disabilities, which any combination of the aforementioned disabilities or difficulties as outlined in categories (1) to (5).

In general, all children aged 6+ or 7+ years old, who were born in Malaysia, must attend compulsory education provided by the MOE Malaysia (Attorney General Chambers of Malaysia, 2013). Since its inception in January 2019, there has been a notable rise in the enrolment of students with SEN at primary schools. The figures show an increase from 46,450 in 2018 to 49,665 in 2019, indicating a positive difference of 3,215 students. This accounts for a surge of 6.92% in the overall count of SEN students enrolled across all primary schools, with an even more significant increment of 3,124 students, reflecting an 8.49% increase within the SEIP program. Over the span of four years, the number of SEN students registered at primary schools has now escalated to 52,276, underscoring a constructive trend. SEN enrolment in government and government-aided schools from 2018 to 2022 as shown in Table 1:

Table 1
SEN Enrolment from 2018 to 2022

SEN Enrolment	Special Education School	Special Education Integration Program	Inclusive Education Program	Total
2018	2,530	65,120	15,948	83,598
2019	2,498	69,628	16,293	88,419
2020	2,649	74,447	16,855	93,951
2021	2,686	78,030	16,504	97,220
2022	2,710	85,362	17,713	105,785

This trend underscores the evident enthusiasm and satisfaction among Malaysian parents to have their SEN children embrace formal education within government schools, instead of confining them to home or other specialized rehabilitation centres. Research conducted by Othman and Matore (2020) underscores the positive impact of the ZRP implementation, which has translated into heightened opportunities for SEN students to participate in schooling and access quality education. Furthermore, the ZRP has facilitated interaction and familiarity between SEN students with their peers within the school environment.

Inclusive education asserted that children with SEN requiring support should participate in classes suitable for their age, irrespective of their abilities (Mitchell, 2015). Understandings of inclusive education vary across economic, cultural, and social contexts (Kamenopoulou, 2018), yet Khairuddin and Miles (2019) observe that the diverse interpretations and approaches to inclusion within Malaysia may have influenced the very conceptualization of inclusive education. To substantiate the insights of prior research, (Chin, 2020) indicated that broader policies and Malaysia's comprehension of inclusion might have a cascading impact on its policy development. This notion gains reinforcement from Sustainable Development Goal 4 outlined by UNESCO, which advocates for quality inclusive education and lifelong learning, setting a target for all participating nations to integrate inclusive practices (UNESCO, 2017, p. 7).

Children with disabilities are at a heightened risk of encountering limited engagement in the school system, which can result in enduring repercussions for their achievements, quality of life, and overall well-being (Maciver et al., 2019). In Malaysia, there exist various challenges that necessitate swift resolution in order to enhance the involvement of students with SEN within educational institutions. Among these challenges, the imperative task is the establishment of an appropriate educational environment tailored to accommodate SEN children, necessitating the amelioration of deficient infrastructure (Nasir & Efendi, 2016). In response to these concerns, the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework was introduced to amplify access to mainstream education for children, foster student engagement, and cater to their distinct learning requirements (Hazami & Ahmad, 2018). This framework is intended to be monitored throughout by school the leaders.

As a leader in special education schools or programs means being an active participant in policy-making (Nagro et al., 2018). This idea supported by Foreman (2017), underscoring the critical involvement of school administrators in decision-making and policy formation. Leaders in schools must possess a diverse set of leadership skills for their various

responsibilities (Bayar, 2016; Nguluma et al., 2017) and decisions made through legal and statutory frameworks should consider crucial aspects of special education (Rude & Miller, 2018; Thorius & Maxcy, 2015). The headmaster readiness to provide access to education for SEN children helps them to feel more confident and in control. It is essential for school leaders to ensure that they are all ready and have vast understanding of current special education programs and implementing related programs (DeMatthews et al., 2019; Kaul, 2018; Pradipta et al., 2018). Headmasters must also ensure that the school facilities create a comfortable and safe social environment that is conducive to the learning process of SEN children as it can significantly impact their learning.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Reviewing related studies, limited research has been found relating the implementation of the ZRP and the impact towards access to education for SEN children. This study aims to explore the readiness of headmasters in implementing the ZRP at primary schools in Selangor, Malaysia, with the goal of improving the access to education. The following research questions were sought to be address in this paper:

1. How ready were the headmasters of primary schools in Selangor to implement the ZRP?
2. To what extent do the headmasters of primary schools in Selangor willing to provide education for SEN after the implementation of the ZRP?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This qualitative study employed two methods of data collection which are semi-structured interviews and systematic literature reviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather detailed information based on respondents' experiences. These semi-structured interviews engaged participants in conversations centred around ongoing research. The systematic literature review focused on articles related to access to education for children with SEN, based on the right-based model of disability, aiming to provide insight into educational access for SEN children.

Sample and Sampling Method

Strategically, the respondents for this research are exclusively headmasters. Purposive sampling was adapted and six headmasters have been selected as the sample. They were chosen based on their appointments as headmasters dating back to at least 2018 or earlier. These headmasters were selected from a pool of candidates with experience providing access to education for SEN children in their schools, as well as monitoring the execution of ZRP since 2019. Demographic information about the respondents is presented in Table 2.

Table 2
Summary of the Respondents

Respondent	School Location (District)	Age	Gender	Working Experience as Headmaster (Years)	Working Experience as Headmaster in Current School (Years)
Headmaster 1	Hulu Langat	52	Female	6	4
Headmaster 2	Petaling Utama	50	Male	9	4
Headmaster 3	Petaling Utama	50	Female	4	4
Headmaster 4	Hulu Langat	59	Male	20	11
Headmaster 5	Klang	55	Female	6	4
Headmaster 6	Kuala Langat	59	Female	22	12

Instruments of the Study

The semi-structured in-depth interviews was set up for approximately 60 minutes of face-to-face interview sessions with 11 initial questions, which developed into more probing questions based on respondents' answers. Initial questions could be modified from time to time based on respondents' understanding and responses throughout the sessions. During the interviews, data was collected using an audio recording application with the verbal consent of the respondents. Besides asking questions and taking notes, the researcher observed the respondents' non-verbal cues and behaviours and jotted them down as they would make sense during the triangulation of data and synthesising the data collected. Overall, while conducting the interview, the researcher took notes on every change of emotions and facial expression that could not be captured by audio recording devices and related it to the data that the respondents provided.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the transcribed data commenced by meticulously reading through the transcripts line by line, thereby gaining a comprehensive understanding of the narrative woven within the interviews. After thoroughly reviewing the content of the transcripts, the dataset was organized into distinct codes and categories, subsequently breaking down the information into manageable components. These developed codes were subjected to scrutiny to ensure their accurate representation of specific concepts. Subsequently, the codes were assigned numerical identifiers before being grouped into cohesive themes. The subsequent stage involves the creation of themes that encapsulate the essence of the respondents' quotes. It proves essential to repeatedly peruse the transcripts, enhancing one's grasp of the data, before progressing to the task of defining and naming the codes. Throughout this process, prominent points, significant events, and emerging patterns or themes were meticulously highlighted. These emergent themes are then refined and finalized in alignment with the research questions, ultimately finding their place within the final report.

FINDINGS

All respondents agree that awareness towards the importance of education for SEN has been established in our education system. For those school with special education, the acceptance towards SEN among the school community is getting better. The awareness has led towards increasing access to education by providing more opportunity for SEN to be part in formal education even though the school physical and infrastructure has become less conducive due to over enrolments of SEN students in selected schools. The impact from the policy demanded the ministry to speed up the process of upgrading public school with sufficient PWD facilities that comply to the UDL framework. The goal is to enhance access to education and encouraging the engagement of students to meet their potential. Finally, the impact from the policy has promoted the model of holistic inclusive education where SEN students and mainstream students were coexisting in the school environment.

Rights to Education

In support of the international declaration on Education 2030, which seeks to establish clear routes to ensure education is available to everyone, alongside SDG 4: Quality Education (United Nations, 2019), the MOE Malaysia has introduced the ZRP. Through this policy, education accessibility for all students is being addressed. As part of this effort, all participants have expressed their perspectives on the educational rights of students with SEN:

> *"...Because these children with SEN also have the right to education..."* (Headmaster 1)

> *"...Education for SEN children is essential. We have to prepare a suitable setting for them..."* (Headmaster 2)

> *"...To me everyone deserves a quality education..."* (Headmaster 3)

> *"...Our approach here is different. We placed them in PPKI first and treat them as mainstream students to see their performance..."* (Headmaster 4)

> *"...They should have been given the opportunity to learn. They should have received an education..."* (Headmaster 5)

> *"...From what I understand, this policy encouraged all children including those with SEN to go to school. Yes, it is encouraging children to go to school..."* (Headmaster 6)

Education serves not just the needs of mainstream students, but also aims to enhance the abilities and potential of students with SEN. The respondents concur that education holds equal significance for SEN students in unlocking their future potential. Headmaster 1, Headmaster 2, Headmaster 4 and Headmaster 5 have shared their perspectives:

> *"...The educational process between PPKI and mainstream education is the same. Both need education..."* (Headmaster 1)

"...They do have a good cognitive level but it's just that they are a little slow compared to their friends in the mainstream. We should've helped them to improve their academic..." (Headmaster 2)

"...Education for SEN enables them to be independent and matched to their abilities. Education in PPKI should be diversified according to their cognitive level..." (Headmaster 4)

"...The basics of living skills are the most crucial and essential for SEN students at the primary level..." (Headmaster 5)

Headmaster 1 and Headmaster 2 also said that these students deserve the rights to education just like their peers. As a headmaster, they have to play a role in regulating the education services in their school to provide opportunities for students of diverse interests and abilities to develop their talents. Headmaster 1 and Headmaster 2 said that:

"...When it comes to equality, we must fight for the rights of those with disabilities to receive an education. We cannot simply abandon them. It is our responsibility to ensure that they are placed where they rightfully belong..." (Headmaster 1)

"...Children who show an inclination towards academics should be placed in academic settings to allow them to continue pursuing their interests. On the other hand, students who may be hyperactive or have autism, and those who are slow learners, should be taught basic living skills..." (Headmaster 2)

Headmasters' Knowledge on The Zero Reject Policy

ZRP aims to include more SEN students in formal education by enrolling them in nearby schools (Fikri & Othman, 2020). To ensure access to education for marginalized groups, policymakers envision adopting inclusive discipline practices, extending services to all educable children, and strengthening policy implementation for improved accessibility (Easop, 2022). Most headmasters noted that the policy's intent was to provide education for SEN students. Research revealed that respondents possessed a fundamental grasp of ZRP and its objectives. Moreover, they believed that to gain knowledge about special education and ZRP, acknowledging and embracing children's diversity was vital, along with promoting equal educational opportunities for all students. Headmaster 2, Headmaster 4, Headmaster 5, and Headmaster 6 shared their insights:

"...I believe this is a good policy, and I strongly believe that students with SEN should have equal opportunities to experience education..." (Headmaster 2)

"...Based on my understanding, children regardless of their differences are entitled to a formal education..." (Headmaster 4)

"...All schools are obligated to accept students who are undocumented and those who have special educational requirements. They are required to accept every student who comes to their doorstep..." (Headmaster 5)

> *"...I informed the school administrators and teachers through a series of meetings that SEN students not only attend PPKI but also join the inclusive program and participate in mainstream settings..."* (Headmaster 6)

According to the experiences of the participants in policy implementation, the school principals have confirmed that their understanding of ZRP has grown, leading to a better grasp of SEN students and special education overall. As a result of this improved understanding, these leaders should now be capable of creating suitable educational approaches for students with disabilities (Roberts & Guerra, 2017). As an example, Headmaster 1 shared the new knowledge she gained from ZRP:

> *"...This policy is beneficial as it aims to support children with learning difficulties, not just in terms of education but also in other aspects..."* (Headmaster 1)

Challenges in Special Education

Parents and teachers have distinct perspectives on their desires and expectations from one another. When introducing new policies, the primary challenges arise from the viewpoints of parents and teachers. These challenges encompass a shortage of adequately trained teachers, concerns regarding typical students, the inclusion of students with SEN, potential incidents of bullying, and the academic performance of SEN students in examination classes (Othman & Matore, 2020). Respondents revealed that the implementation of the ZRP has necessitated collaboration between parents and teachers to ensure suitable education for all SEN students based on their individual capabilities. The experiences of Headmaster 2, Headmaster 3, Headmaster 4, and Headmaster 6 are described as follows:

> *"...Parents are one of the biggest challenges. Perhaps this is due to their lack of knowledge about their child...."* (Headmaster 2)

> *"... To be honest, my relationship with parents at the time was quite strained. It was not easy for me to manage them..."* (Headmaster 3)

> *"...When parents see a positive impact on their child, they begin to develop trust in the school..."* (Headmaster 4)

> *"...Parents often have trust issues when it comes to letting others manage their child..."* (Headmaster 6)

Teachers, however, hold their own perspectives regarding each new policy. Headmasters operate within the framework of the public education system, and they are morally obligated to put education policies into action while adhering to external bureaucratic procedures (Billingsley et al., 2018). Hence, headmasters must ensure that special education teachers possess the essential instructional abilities for students with SEN. From interviews conducted, headmasters shared that special education teachers are among the most creative teachers in the education system. They have shown diverse teaching skills tailored to their respective students. Headmaster 1 and Headmaster 3 shared their experience with teachers as follows:

> *"... There are always pros and cons, and some will like it while others may feel the opposite. Perhaps those who understand this will find it acceptable ..."* (Headmaster 1)

> *"...Actually, teachers can also pose as a challenge. Changing them is not an easy task, and it never has been. Thus, we must approach this change slowly and carefully..."* (Headmaster 3)

In order to attain excellent student results, school leaders must actively involve the school community and parents. This involvement is vital for the effective implementation of special education (Pregot, 2020). Respondents noted the need to handle parents of children with SEN with special care, as these parents tend to be more protective of their children compared to others. The headmasters believed that it's essential for parents to trust the school in managing their SEN children and for a strong teacher-parent relationship to be established. Headmaster 2, Headmaster 4, and Headmaster 6 shared their insights gained from interacting with parents:

> *"...The parent was upset because his son lost his shoe and he blame on the teachers and PPM. He threatened to file a complaint with the ministry..."* (Headmaster 2)

> *"...When parents of SEN students finally see a positive outcome in their child's progress, the relationship between the parent and teacher tends to get closer..."* (Headmaster 4)

> *"...There is a mother who expressed her feeling that she wasn't confident in the school services..."* (Headmaster 6)

The abovementioned finding reveals that despite the diversity of SEN students in our education system, headmasters have equipped themselves with knowledge on special education and other related policies. Multiple perceptions towards special education and the services provided by the MOE should not be an issue to discuss if all stakeholders play their part and contribute towards the education of SEN students.

The Impact from the Implementation of the Policy

The policy's impact spans across various aspects, including enhanced insights into special education and heightened awareness. Leaders play a pivotal role in successfully enacting this policy. A study conducted by Pesonen et al. (2015) revealed that 68.1% of participants highlighted leaders' significant contribution in disseminating information about the new policy. Furthermore, the roles redefined (Sun & Xin, 2020) due to an increase in the enrolment of students with SEN in government schools following the ZRP implementation.

The ZRP implementation has yielded positive outcomes, affording headmasters and the school community an improved grasp of special education and better access to education for SEN students. Respondents overall concur that they have witnessed favourable effects from the policy. All respondents expressed these sentiments:

> *"...Actually, this has developed our self-confidence..."* (Headmaster 1)

> *"...I gained more exposure when this policy was implemented. I learned that there is more to PPKI than I previously thought..."* (Headmaster 2)

> *"...In the past, I did not realize just how important it is. However, since being assigned as the headmaster here, I have come to understand its significance..."* (Headmaster 3)

> *"...For me I gained my experience when I worked with these students. I studied their backgrounds and interests..."* (Headmaster 4)

> *"...I gained my knowledge on special education from my teachers. I joined their program and attended their events, from which I learned many things..."* (Headmaster 5)

> *"...This is a new lesson for me. All this time, I have only been focusing on mainstream education, until I lost sight of the importance of PPKI. Alhamdulillah, all activities will be conducted by a combination of PPKI and mainstream teachers..."* (Headmaster 6)

One of the actions taken by the ministry during the implementation of the policy was to open new SEIPs and relocate teachers and SEN students based on their locality to a new SEIP at a new school. Headmaster 1 and Headmaster 4 stated that the implementation of the policy has increased their readiness to provide a better environment for students to learn and develop their skills. Headmaster 1 and Headmaster 4 shared:

> *"...The number of SEN are lesser, making it easier to manage. Additionally, the new PPKI model is more conducive, and we are more prepared this time..."*
> (Headmaster 1)

> *"...Every year, we are ready with a new batch of students. We expect that the situation of over-enrolment will soon occur due to increased awareness among parents after the implementation of this policy..."* (Headmaster 4)

Accessibility for SEN Students

Schools should provide conducive facilities to accommodate SEN students, to provide them with quality education and create an inclusive environment (Mihat, 2019). During the implementation of ZRP, schools did not have much time to prepare, as the policy was formally announced by the ministry in November 2018 and implemented in January 2019. The only reasonable option was to utilize the existing school infrastructure to accommodate the newly registered SEN students. Headmaster 4, and Headmaster 3 shared their experience:

> *"...We are utilising all resources, but we are still facing overcrowding issues with our students. To address this, we have implemented other initiatives such as converting cabins into classrooms and relocating some students there..."* (Headmaster 4)

> *"...The sensory room has been converted into a cooking room to accommodate the requirements of PPKI, as therapy is currently not allowed..."* (Headmaster 3)

However, the action taken by the headmasters is considered temporary. Due to the awareness that already exists among parents, the demand for special education is increasing. Therefore, other actions should be taken to ensure the sustainability of ZRP and, at the same time, observe

other existing policies. One of the things that the headmasters did was to upgrade existing classrooms and special rooms to special education classes. Headmaster 1, Headmaster 4, Headmaster 5, and Headmaster 6 shared their experiences on infrastructure upgrades in their schools to provide better access for SEN students:

> *"...We took the lab and converted it into PPKI classes, and then added another class..."* (Headmaster 1)

> *"...We have renovated PPKI a few times, and recently, we took on two more classrooms on the second floor. Additionally, we purchased a cabin and an open hall for PPKI..."* (Headmaster 4)

> *"...Next year, we plan to open another class, but we are currently awaiting approval to do so..."* (Headmaster 5)

> *"...The current classrooms are not designated for PPKI classes, as they are regular classrooms for mainstream students. However, since PPD wanted to have PPKI classes here, we had to sacrifice some of the mainstream classrooms..."* (Headmaster 6)

Respondents also expressed their biggest concern regarding the existing facilities, which are not sufficient to accommodate students with SEN while fulfilling the policy's goal of providing education for all students. Headmasters reported that the enrolment of students with SEN has increased after the policy's implementation, leading to another negative impact, which is over-enrolment and insufficient classrooms. All respondents shared their experiences:

> *"...Currently, there are 45 SEN students and five classes, which means that each class has a ratio of 1:9 SEN students. This ratio should ideally be 1:7..."* (Headmaster 1)

> *"...The challenge we face is the limited capacity we have for students with SEN when implementing this policy..."* (Headmaster 2)

> *"...There are only two classes, but here we already have 18 SEN students..."* (Headmaster 3)

> *"...Now that we have 25 SEN, we need to figure out how to accommodate all of them in one classroom..."* (Headmaster 4)

> *"...Due to increased awareness among parents following the implementation of the policy, enrolment has increased. Therefore, our current issue is a lack of classrooms and teachers..."* (Headmaster 5)

> *"...We have added more classroom. The current classroom is not originally designed for PPKI but a mainstream classroom that has been converted to accommodate PPKI..."* (Headmaster 6)

DISCUSSION

Understanding special education and students with SEN is crucial for school leaders to effectively implement the ZRP. All respondents displayed a high level of readiness to implement the ZRP. They possess a strong foundational understanding of special education and have responded positively to the policy, actively working to ensure that SEN students have the opportunity to participate in formal education. Respondents shared that they gained knowledge on special education from working in schools with special education programs such as SEIP or IEP. Respondents shared that SEN children have unique talents and abilities. Henning and Schult (2021) mentioned that teachers in special education program have to deal with the diversity of SEN students as each is different from the other. Respondents also mentioned that SEN students vary in their achievements and have specific interests. To help them achieve their full potential, SEN students require the full attention of special education teachers and other school leaders in SES, SEIP, and IEP. Nonetheless, the respondents made an effort to understand each SEN student personally and build a good relationship with their parents.

The research carried out by Hayes and Bulat (2017) corroborated the findings that myths about SEN and PWDs having negative impacts on school performance and other issues related to the implementation of inclusive education are existed. As a result, ongoing endeavours are necessary to remove obstacles to SEN education, including unfavourable attitudes towards SEN and PWDs. Nevertheless, the findings revealed that willingness to provide education for SEN have proven to enhance trust among parents, fostering improved comprehension for all parties and raising awareness within the parent and community circles.

The results also revealed that the participants' understanding of special education and SEN students began with their conceptions about students whose circumstances or needs are different from the mainstream. Hence, their awareness of providing suitable education for SEN students has grown and is gradually extending to other teachers and the school community. Results have also shown that headmasters agree that working with and managing SEN students is entirely different from working with mainstream students alone. They have gained awareness of the importance of providing education for SEN students, and they have also become more confident in managing schools and dealing with SEN students and their parents. The responses uncovered that good leadership and communication skills have been shown to increase trust among parents, leading to a better understanding for both parties and spreading awareness among parents and the community.

Headmasters are actively creating public awareness to support the spirit of unity. The respondents shared that the awareness has helped to eliminate discriminatory practices against special education and SEN students. Promoting awareness in special education also aims to increase their societal acceptance and promote inclusivity among school members. Weekly programs such as assemblies and other blended programs conducted by schools have gradually increased the understanding and empathy towards SEN students and led to awareness among the school community. Headmasters also agree that once the awareness is established, everything becomes easier and smoother. Therefore, the idea of providing access to education and moving towards a right-based model of disability has become a reality.

Special education is a field that requires full, continuous, and implemented support at all levels of educational institutions. Thus, support from respected agencies has helped many children receive an appropriate education that is suitable for their abilities. This is where inclusive education and settings come into play, promoting access to education for SEN children. Many efforts have been made to create an inclusive environment in schools, such as implementing the "buddy system" that pairs SEN students with their mainstream peers and after-school activities that involve the community. The study revealed that the headmasters expressed readiness in implementing the ZRP. They aimed to provide better access to education for students with SEN and ensure equality in education for all school children. Research by Nordin et al. (2020) stated that the leadership skills of headmasters who lead schools with SEIP can affect their efficiency and consequently impact teacher productivity, which may lead to lower job satisfaction. The study found that headmasters with a vast amount of knowledge are more ready to implement any policy given by the ministry. The headmasters are capable of effectively managing available resources to ensure that children with SEN receive a comparable education to their peers. This finding is supported by previous literature from DeMatthews et al. (2019), Kaul (2018) and Pradipta et al. (2018) which suggests that knowledgeable leaders are better equipped to provide access to SEN children and run special education programs effectively.

Furthermore, the feedback collected during the study showed that the ZRP has had a positive impact on the school leaders, SEN students, and the school as a whole. The policy has granted SEN students the right to participate in formal education provided by the MOE Malaysia. Additionally, document analysis by (Special Education Division, 2022) revealed that more students were enrolled in SES, SEIP, and IEP indicating a positive impact resulting from the implementation of the ZRP. Parents and teachers have embraced the policy, making the school better prepared to accommodate students with SEN, regardless of their disabilities. Additionally, respondents indicated that the quality of education improved when combining both mainstream and SEIP activities within the school.

As the number of SEN students increases every year, headmasters express concern that current conditions following the implementation of the ZRP may result in the schools receiving multiple types of disabilities that could lead to inadequate manpower, especially special education teachers with specific expertise (e.g., teaching visually impaired or hearing-impaired students). Therefore, the headmasters suggested revisiting the policy and producing proper guidelines to assist the operational level in execution and provide a reference for future leaders.

CONCLUSION

Developing awareness necessitates a profound understanding of specific matters. However, during the implementation of the ZRP, school principals encountered difficulties stemming from insufficient knowledge. These challenges led to a restricted exposure to special education and a lack of collaboration between parents and teachers. These issues were rooted in discriminatory practices against SEN and the prevailing acceptance of their presence within our formal education system.

SEN students confront a lack of empathy from both regular educators and their peers due to a limited understanding of special education and the policy itself. School administrators encounter hurdles in fostering awareness within the school culture, including addressing parental trust concerns and a restricted grasp of SEN education. The absence of awareness

among parents creates a communication gap with teachers, impeding the progress of SEN students. This underscores the necessity for mutual comprehension between both parties.

Despite efforts by the ministry and schools to adopt a rights-based disability model, there remains significant room for improvement in enhancing understanding of special education within our education system. While various programs have been launched to raise awareness among the school community and parents, the education system still encounters challenges in ensuring that all Malaysian children can access age-appropriate education. Unfortunately, some children still do not attend formal education, hindering the development of human capital in our nation. Nonetheless, awareness is an ongoing process that requires periodic reminders. The continuation of the ZRP in Malaysia's education system relies on a solid foundation of understanding, which can lead to an improved education system for all children. Consequently, it can be inferred that the headmasters' grasp of implementing the ZRP has provided them with diverse experiences. Despite the limitations they've faced, these headmasters have improved their abilities to serve better, regardless of their positive or negative experiences.

The effort to put together a conducive facility that accommodates the disabilities of SEN students requires full cooperation from all stakeholders. Existing policies regarding public-private partnerships should be more accommodating to attract more private sectors to join the MOE in providing better facilities for our special children. Therefore, it is time for the MOE to revisit their existing policy and grant autonomy to school leaders so that school leaders can develop their school culture that cater to the needs of their community.

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