WHO DOES WHAT? AN INITIAL NEEDS ANALYSIS STUDY ON ENHANCING TRANSITION GUIDELINE FOR MAINSTREAM AND SPECIAL NEEDS EDUCATORS

Joanna Mah Tjun Lyn
Loh Sau Cheong, PhD
Noor Aishah Binti Rosli, PhD
University of Malaya
Malaysia

This study presents an initial stage of a larger research to enhance the existing inclusive Guideline for Inclusive Education for Students with Special Needs, specifically on the roles and responsibilities of educators in supporting inclusive transitions into Malaysian primary schools. The following study represents the needs analysis phase of the research to examine the scenario of educators' knowledge on their roles and responsibilities in supporting inclusive transitions, through the lens of a multi-stage and multi-role transition process. The study seeks to challenge the understandings of inclusive education and reconceptualise the inclusive process as a process of transition, rather than a singular "event". The authors identify three important stages in inclusive transitions, namely Pre-Transition Stage, During Transition Stage, and Post-Transition Stage. The study was conducted on both mainstream and special needs educators in primary schools (n = 608) across Malaysia. A Likert scale questionnaire was constructed. Findings were analysed and grouped in percentages according to low, moderate and high levels of knowledge. Findings demonstrated that there is a general lack of knowledge of educators, and this indicates that both groups of educators are clearly not proficient and skilled enough to support transitions into mainstream classrooms. The analysis demonstrated that the special needs educators were marginally more knowledgeable in their roles and responsibilities in supporting students with special needs than the mainstream educators in all three levels of transition. The findings draw links between low knowledge levels, increasing resistance and attitude levels in inclusive education, as well as possible explanations of how the traditional job roles of mainstream and special needs educators interfere with positive attitudes and willingness to embrace the paradigm shifts in the educators' inclusive job roles.

Keywords: Inclusion, transitional support, roles, responsibilities, mainstream educators, special needs educators

INTRODUCTION

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2014) defines the term "inclusion" as an ideology that expresses full commitment toward educating every child with equal opportunity and support to reach their fullest potential. One of the ways to provide equal access to education is to enable students with special needs to learn alongside their typical peers without being segregated based on their disabilities or abilities in a mainstream classroom (UNICEF, 2014). However, this practice has been subjected to great special educational debates in Malaysia due to the inconsistencies in implementing inclusive practices – which range from discourses in the conceptualisation of the term "inclusive education", to more practical issues such as educators' competency of professional skills, access to training, resources, logistics, and placements (e.g., Lee & Low, 2014; Mohd Kamel Idris, 2011; Mohd Zuri Ghani, Aznan Che Ahmad & Suzana Ibrahim, 2014; Sukumaran, Loveridge & Green, 2014); and while the debates range broadly from the philosophies of inclusive education down to its technicality, researchers have come to realise that the effectiveness of inclusive education implementation critically depend on the conceptualisations of inclusive education. The philosophical understandings of inclusive education are interrelated and ultimately guide the workings of an educator in inclusive education.

For educators, inclusion means that they are required to increase their knowledge. They must be more well equipped with a variety of skills to understand the diversified needs of special education as well as be professionally capable to support a multiple range of disabilities which can range from visual impairments, hearing impairments, speech impairments, physical impairments, to learning disabilities in Malaysia (MoE, 2015). Despite a drastic increase in enrolment over the years, reports are showing a significant need for more specially trained educators in inclusive education, specifically in mainstream classrooms to address the growing needs of these students (Sukumaran et al., 2014). These are clear indicators of low knowledge levels on inclusive education among the educators. Reports show that there is little standardised guidance to inform educators on identifying students with special needs, individualising instructions, and basic behavioural management skills (Khairul Farhah Khairuddin, Dally, & Foggett, 2016).

Educators' knowledge of inclusive support is an important feature of how successful transition practices in inclusion can be implemented. Their attitudes about transitions and inclusion, according to researchers, can be important indicators and give measure to how proficient and knowledgeable the educators are on their inclusive roles (Zalizan Mohd. Jelas & Manisah Mohd. Ali et al., 2014). Recent local studies have unearthed both positive and negative attitudes. Previous studies demonstrated that despite the apparent benefits of inclusive practices, a review of literature has shown that Malaysian educators are filled

with feelings of doubt, vulnerability, uncertainty and apprehension regarding their instructional skills in special education (Zalizan Mohd. Jelas & Manisah Mohd. Ali, 2014). Less conclusive in the years that followed are studies that started to demonstrate mediocre and less positive attitudes in studies by Mohd. Zuri Ghani et al. (2014). If the findings of these studies reflect reality, then the mixed attitudes of the educators demonstrated through previous studies indicate a mixed, varied, and messy array of knowledge levels among them.

However, despite the advent of the Guideline for Inclusive Education for Students with Special Needs 2018 to improve the lack of knowledge and guidance in the workings of the inclusive educator, the guideline does little to provide sufficient explanations on the roles and responsibilities of educators in supporting inclusion and the transition process. The guideline gives brief understandings and conceptualisation of the true meaning of inclusive education, as well as its procedures, knowledge, and roles of important stakeholders in its implementation (Aliza Alias, 2014).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Various studies have given critical attention to the re-conceptualisation of inclusive education and how re-envisioning the understandings of inclusive education can affect teacher preparation and implementation. Understanding clear roles and responsibilities within a clear philosophical or conceptualised lens is vital in supporting better transitions and educational outcomes; and that a full understanding of expected roles and responsibilities within that inclusive conceptualisation will produce more effective implementation of inclusion.

As effective implementation of inclusion involves preparing both mainstream and special needs educators to understand their roles and responsibilities in supporting transitions, the author has captured the principal concepts of inclusive education through the lens that inclusive education is a multi-stage and multi-role process. The author has constructed these concepts into a conceptual framework. The roles of the mainstream and special needs educators in supporting the transition process are centrally placed in this framework.

Figure 1 provides a frame of reference for how the concept of inclusion as a transition process, and shows how educators' roles and responsibilities are interrelated.
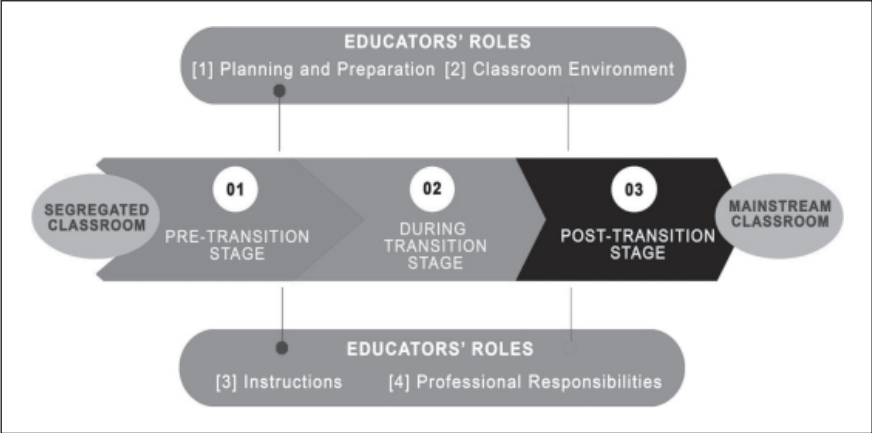
Figure 1. Conceptual framework (concepts of the roles and responsibilities in supporting transitions in inclusive education).

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

The Ministry of Education (MoE, 2018) defines "inclusive education" as an educational programme for students with special needs that emphasises equal opportunity and access to education alongside their typical peers in a similar mainstream classroom. However, inclusive education is a transformative work that is synonymous with a process of assimilation, adaptation, and adjustment – ultimately, a process of transition (Danielson, 2011). Despite the usage of the term "transition" several times in the present inclusive guideline, the guideline does little in conceptualising the true meaning of inclusive education. Based on the ministry's definition, the guideline proves that inclusive education is tantamount to an ultimate "destination" rather than a "process". It proves to provide little comprehension of inclusive education as a transformative work in transitioning students with special needs into mainstream classrooms.

While one objective of the present guideline was to clarify the roles of important stakeholders in implementing inclusive education, the roles and responsibilities of the educators are illustrated categorically and in "bullet-point". The fact that the roles and responsibilities of the educators were illustrated as such proves that the Ministry of Education still conceptualises and again views inclusive education as a "singular event" and an ultimate "destination", rather than a transition process. If Malaysia were to challenge the re-conceptualisation of inclusive education as a process of adaptation and adjustment, consequently, the roles and responsibilities of the educators should alternatively be illustrated in a continuum process whereby the differing responsibilities are based on where the student is along the transition continuum.

The present guideline offers little to equip, train, guide, and inform educators both pre-service and in-service to address the skills, knowledge, roles and responsibilities needed to support inclusive transitions before the student enters the inclusive transition process, during the transition process, up until the educator is able to fade transitional support for a student to learn independently in a mainstream classroom (Sukumaran et al., 2014).

Consequently, the debates on the philosophical conceptualisation of inclusive education have ultimately generated cracks in the workings of the educators toward supporting inclusive education. Putting inclusion into effective implementation has proven to be difficult in Malaysian primary schools because of the vast discrepancies in the work of mainstream and special needs educators in inclusive education. At the grassroots level, the main stakeholders of inclusive education implementation have demonstrated gaps in their understandings, a lack of clarity, a lack of role alignments, and a general misunderstanding of inclusion, and guiding a student gradually through different stages of transition into a mainstream classroom (Muhamad Khairul Anuar & Abdul Rahim, 2016; Zalizan Mohd. Jelas & Manisah Mohd. Ali, 2014).

Despite numerous evidence indicating that supported transitions have important effects on student well-being, motivation and learning capacity (Bayley & Featherston, 2004; Bailey, Nomanbhoy, & Tubpun, 2014; Lee & Low, 2014; Khairul Farhah Khairuddin et al., 2016; Sukumaran et al., 2014), local studies have shown that both mainstream and special needs educators feature some form of reluctance when implementing inclusion and setting up transitional support plans due to insufficient understandings of their roles and fear of the unknown (Khairul Farhah Khairuddin et al., 2016). In Malaysia, literature has shown that major shifts in the role of the educators have made inclusive transitions complex and demanding, surrounded by multifaceted roles and responsibilities (Bailey et al., 2014; Khairul Farhah Khairuddin et al., 2016; Sukumaran et al., 2014). Educators are expected to perform roles and responsibilities that are beyond their competencies and capability.

The drastic shifts in their roles as educators and a lack of proper job understanding may have potentially given rise to detrimental work hazards. Studies have also shown that hints of role conflicts are present between mainstream and special needs educators due to their lack of clarity on their individual roles and responsibilities in supporting transitions (Khairul Farhah Khairuddin et al., 2016; Sukumaran et al., 2014). Findings have also demonstrated that educators who display a lack of job understanding find themselves in scenarios that exude alarming burnout symptoms of role conflicts (Chua, Saili, & Sabil, 2018). Findings have also shown that such conflict in job descriptions can potentially give rise to detrimental work hazards such as job stress as well as emotional burnouts, and evidenced that these occurrences are currently taking place (Nurmazlina Mohd. Isa, Hardev Kaur, & Rozalli Hashim, 2018). The stress caused by conflicting understandings of roles and misalignment of roles

are leading to a significant increase in emotional burnouts and higher attrition rates among educators in Malaysia (Mohd Zuri Ghani et al., 2014).

Hence, this study holds that first and foremost, a re-conceptualisation of inclusive education as a process of transition rather than a singular "event" or an ultimate "destination" is critical for redefining clearly the roles and responsibilities of mainstream and special needs educators. We suggest that inclusive education is synonymous with a process of adaptation, assimilation, and adjustment. By redefining inclusive education, only then can a true guide be provided to support the educators every essential step of the way from beginning to the end of the inclusive transition process. In the words of Takala, Pirttimaa, and Törmänen (2009), "when guidelines are clearer…, future educators will be able to focus on the learning process, on co-operation with educational staff within the schools and on helping students achieve their individual learning goals even better. In other words, these teachers would be able to focus on the essential aspects of education" (p.170).

PURPOSE

This study presents an initial stage study of a larger research to enhance the existing inclusive guideline, specifically the roles and responsibilities of educators in supporting inclusive transitions into Malaysian primary schools. The following study represents Phase 1 out of 3 phases in which this study exhibits the Needs Analysis Phase of the research. The objective of this current needs analysis study is to examine the scenario of educators' knowledge on their roles and responsibilities in supporting inclusive transitions, through the lens of a multi-stage and multi-role transition process.

This study aims at exploring and examining the level of knowledge of Malaysian primary school educators and comparing the knowledge level between mainstream and special needs educators in supporting transitions of students with special needs into mainstream classrooms.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Data from this needs analysis study were collected to answer two research questions:

1. What are the levels of knowledge of mainstream educators in their roles and responsibilities toward supporting the pre-transition, during transition, and post-transition process in Malaysian primary inclusive classrooms?

2. What are the levels of knowledge of special needs educators in their roles and responsibilities toward supporting the pre-transition, during transition, and post-transition process in Malaysian primary inclusive classrooms?

METHODOLOGY

Data for this phase were collected through the quantitative survey research design. Respondents were selected using the multistage cluster sampling method. The samples were first divided according to locality zones (Northern, Central, Southern, Eastern Zones, East Malaysia), and within each zone, one state was selected through simple random sampling to represent the targeted population of each locality zone. All mainstream and special needs educators within schools with inclusive programmes were invited to participate in this study.

A total of 608 educators participated in the survey questionnaire whereby the educators consisted of mainstream educators (n = 282) and special needs educators (n = 326). The majority of the respondents were female (512 out of 608), between the ages of 20 to 40 years old (512 out of 304) and had between one to five years of experience dealing with inclusion (390 out of 608). Some 30.26% of the educators were from Johor, 7.57% from Pahang, 20.39% from Penang, 3.95% from Sarawak and 37.83% of them were from Kuala Lumpur.

During the data collection process, structured Likert-scale questionnaires were self-constructed and utilised to gather findings on the level of knowledge of mainstream and special needs educators' roles and responsibilities in supporting inclusive transitions. With reference to an existing instrument from Danielson (2013), a three-part questionnaire was constructed. The questionnaire elicited the demographic profile of the respondents, the educators' background in supporting inclusive transitions, and their level of knowledge of their roles and responsibilities in transition support.

To ensure the appropriateness, validity, and reliability of the items constructed, the questionnaire underwent a content validity process involving a panel of experts in inclusion, special education, and disability education, as well as a pilot test using an exploratory factor analysis (EFA), Cronbach's Alpha reliability analysis and construct validity. Four experts with expertise in inclusive education including an associate professor from a public university, senior lecturers from teacher's training colleges, and a special education senior assistant agreed that the instrument comprehensively addresses aspects of inclusive transitions and provided comments on enhancing the overall presentation of the instrument. Meanwhile, a pilot test was conducted on 33 mainstream and special needs educators. Loadings that were less than .40 were omitted in order to improve its clarity. A Cronbach's Alpha reliability analysis was also performed on all stages of inclusions and their sub-domains with strong reports of reliability and indications of high levels of Alpha values between .88 to .95; this is strong evidence that the instrument is consistent and suitable for this study.

Table 1
Summary of Cronbach's Alpha Results according to Domains (N = 33)

Domains	Pre-transition	During transition	Post-transition
Planning and Preparation	.93	.89	.91
Classroom Environment	.93	.91	.92
Instructions	.95	.88	.88
Professional Duties	.91	.89	.90

Utilising descriptive statistics, responses from the questionnaire were aggregated, scored and grouped in percentages according to low, moderate and high levels of knowledge. Levels of low, medium and high knowledge were based on Thavanah, Harun-or-Rashid, Kasuya, and Sakamoto (2013) in which "Low" levels of knowledge from the respondents were scored as $\leq 50\%$, while "medium" levels of knowledge were those that scored between 51% to 74%, and "high" levels of knowledge were those scored as $\geq 75\%$.

Before the research data were collected, all participants were presented with an informed consent form detailing their rights and risks of the research, and voluntary agreement as participants of the study.

RESULTS

Through the Likert scale questionnaire, responses on 73 items were gathered, resulting in "low", "moderate" and "high" levels of knowledge on the Pre-transition Stage, During Transition Stage, and Post-transition Stage, as shown in Table 2.

Level of Knowledge on the Roles and Responsibilities toward Transition

Overall, more educators rated themselves as having low levels of knowledge (n = 226; 37.17%) in the Pre-transition Stage and During Transition Stage (n = 298; 49.01%) while a majority of educators rated moderate levels of knowledge on their roles and responsibilities in the Post-Transition Stage (n = 370; 60.86%). In detail, a great percentage of mainstream educators reported low levels of knowledge in supporting the Pre-transition Stage (n = 156; 55.32%), During Transition Stage (n = 198; 70.21%), and Post-Transition Stage (n = 142; 50.35%). Comparatively, the special needs educators demonstrated greater levels of knowledge characterised by moderate knowledge levels in the Pre-transition Stage (n = 156; 47.85%), During Transition Stage (n = 184; 56.44%), and Post-Transition Stage (n = 242; 74.23%).

Table 2

Mainstream and Special Needs Educator's Level of Knowledge in Pre-Transition, During Transition, and Post-Transition Stages (N = 608)

	Low Levels of Knowledge N (%)	Moderate Levels of Knowledge N (%)	High Levels of Knowledge N (%)
Pre-transition Stage	226 (37.17)	212 (34.87)	170 (27.96)
Mainstream Educators	156 (55.32)	56 (19.86)	70 (24.82)
Special Needs Educators	70 (21.47)	156 (47.85)	100 (30.67)
During Transition Stage	298 (49.01)	254 (41.78)	56 (9.21)
Mainstream Educators	198 (70.21)	70 (24.82)	14 (4.96)
Special Needs Educators	100 (30.67)	184 (56.44)	42 (12.88)
Post-Transition Stage	212 (34.87)	370 (60.86)	26 (4.28)
Mainstream Educators	142 (50.35)	128 (45.39)	12 (4.26)
Special Needs Educators	70 (21.47)	242 (74.23)	14 (4.29)

DISCUSSION

Based on the findings on mainstream and special needs educators' level of knowledge in pre-transition, during transition, and post-transition stages, the following discussion was made.

Proficiency of Educator's Skills

While moderate levels of knowledge were reported by some educators, the findings unquestionably indicate that both groups of educators are evidently not proficient, skilled or experienced enough to support students with special needs where high skill is required. With the absence of high levels of knowledge within the current study, these findings demonstrate that the educators are nowhere near experts in inclusion. The lack of expert knowledge provide necessary evidence needed to support previous claims by professionals for the lack, need and availability of more trained professionals to assist with the transition period (Loh & Sharifah Zainiyah Syed Yahya, 2013; Muhamad Nadhir Abdul Nasir & Alfa Nur Aini Erman Efendi, 2016). These gaps in expert knowledge also furnish necessary evidence to support the gap noted in

previous literature by researchers who drew correlations between poor performance outcomes and a lack of appropriate educator training (Toran, Westover, Sazlina Kamaralzaman, Suziyani Mohamed, & Mohd Hanafi Mohd Yasin, 2016).

The lack of proficient knowledge in educators who are supposedly "experts" in education evidentially portray significant information gaps between the educators' expected teaching role and their proficiency level in performing such roles in inclusion. According to Zalizan Mohd. Jelas et al. (2014), Malaysian educators lacked, for many years, skills to address the diversity within students with special needs and lack an integrated knowledge between what they are expected to perform. As evidenced in the findings of this study, educators are still not equipped to address such challenges with inclusive transitions.

Attitudes to Inclusive Transitions

Studies such as Bailey et al. (2014) also conclude that the lack of training, lack of proficiency coupled with low sense of proficient knowledge may possibly correlate with the educator attitudes. Managing students with special needs demands a lot of motivation and passion in challenging conditions and many educators struggle between accommodating to their skills, teaching demands of special needs and maintaining the continuous motivation for these students. Acquiring dedicated and committed educators is challenging and training educators to be such takes a lot of time, effort, resources, as well as expenses (Toran et al., 2016). Educators' attitudes can pose a major limitation to successful transitions in inclusion. Educators may not see themselves as acquiring the necessary skills to support students of varying needs and given the lack of desire to do so, places them with feelings of vulnerability and naturally, a reluctance to do so. Hence, the practical implementation of transitions is increasingly viewed in an unfavourable light with increasing resistance (Toran et al., 2016).

Knowledge Gaps Between Mainstream and Special Needs Educators

Findings of this study also demonstrated that special needs educators were marginally more knowledgeable in their roles and responsibilities in supporting students with special needs in inclusive classrooms as compared to their counterpart mainstream educators in all three levels of transition. According to the Ministry of Education (2013), special needs educators are trained experts that have acquired specialised training in providing individualised and specialised instructions to meet the educational needs of students with special needs. This is vastly contrasting to the role of a mainstream educator whose main tasks are to provide instruction in an inclusive classroom and are expected to plan and coordinate curriculum for all students (MoE, 2013).

Educators, like other professionals, also operate best within their given job roles and responsibilities. As the role of supporting students with special needs traditionally lie with special needs educators, it can be expected that mainstream educators report lower understandings on supporting students with special needs that may be beyond their expert specialisation (Tengku Sarina Aini Tengku Kasim, 2014). Conventionally, mainstream educators were never involved in special education in Malaysia until recently. The classic model of special education has largely confined the special needs educator's role to providing individualised instructions for students with special needs in their segregated classrooms; supporting and providing aid to their difficulties; providing instructions for special needs, working together collaboratively with other professionals, managing behaviours, coordinating support services and advocating for the needs of students with special needs (Lee & Low, 2014). Meanwhile, with inclusive education now pushing the boundaries of teaching and learning, it now challenges mainstream educators to depart from the traditional ways of teaching toward a more diverse, rigorous, personalised, collaborative and flexible role (Amin, 2016).

While the mainstream educator needs to pay attention to the student undergoing transition, they must also be careful to balance the high demands of other students in their classroom. Adding to that, an average classroom size in Malaysian inclusive schools is large and can number up to 35 students per classroom. Mainstream educators are getting more than they bargain for as managing a class of 35 'typical' students can already pose a great challenge for them (MoE, 2013). Having students with special needs in their classrooms, educators find classroom management and teaching a relatively daunting and unnerving idea particularly when they are untrained and unprepared for the task. Hence, it is not surprising that mainstream educators reported lower levels of knowledge in this study toward supporting the role of inclusive transitions which may be overwhelming to their current roles.

CONCLUSION

The study represents the needs analysis phase of the research to examine the scenario of educators' knowledge on their roles and responsibilities in supporting inclusive transitions, through the lens of a multi-stage and multi-role transition process. Some limitations should also be noted pertaining to the reliance on self-reported data. First is the veracity of respondents' reported knowledge of themselves. While self-reports are reliable and efficient in assessing phenomena that includes human tendencies, they can sometimes be limited to providing the full spectrum and scope of one's social and behavioural tendencies (Friedman & Schustack, 2012). Second, the questionnaire reports are limited to the cooperation and honest reports by the respondents.

Through a re-conceptualisation of inclusive education as a multi-stage transition process, it can be concluded that there is a general lack of knowledge in mainstream educators and special needs educators on all stages of the transition process, and this indicates that both groups of educators are clearly not proficient, skilled or experienced enough to support transitions into mainstream classrooms throughout the entire process. The findings of this study demonstrate that mainstream educators show lower levels of knowledge in general as compared to special needs educators and provides possible explanations of how the traditional job roles of mainstream and special needs educators interfere with positive attitudes and willingness to embrace the paradigm shifts in the educators' inclusive job roles. Findings of this study also challenge educators to undertake the re-conceptualisation of inclusive education as a process of adaptation, adjustment, and transition, rather than a "destination".

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