

Inclusive Education in Singapore Primary School Classrooms

Yeo Lay See, Maureen Neihart, Chong Wan Har, and Vivien Huan

THE STUDY AIMS to provide an insider perspective of inclusion in Singapore primary schools. Two hundred educators were interviewed about their perceptions and experiences of inclusion. Findings shed light on the definition and implementation of inclusion, teachers' personal experience, perceived barriers to and facilitators of to inclusion, and its advantages and disadvantages. Inclusion as currently practised in Singapore is an integration pull-out model. Teachers shared slightly more negative than positive experiences and provided valuable insights into the challenges and rewards of inclusion. Teacher attitude, a critical factor for successful inclusion, is related to perceived school support. More than training, teachers need to experience success. There are implications for school leadership, training, class allocation for special needs, and assessment.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the research was to examine the perceptions of primary school educators toward inclusive education in Singapore. The research study sought to provide an understanding of inclusion as it is practised in Singapore primary schools. In particular, it examined the features of inclusion and its implementation; the experiences of primary school teachers; perceived barriers to and facilitators of inclusion; and the benefits and disadvantages of inclusion. The findings of this study have implications for teacher training and development, and for instruction that impacts both typically developing children as well as children with special needs in mainstream schools.

KEY IMPLICATIONS

- School leadership is critical to the success of inclusion. A principal who embraces diversity can sustain teachers in creating an inclusive classroom.
- Assignment of children with special needs need to be carefully considered. Three possible guidelines can include having only one kind of disability in one class, reducing the class size when there are multiple disabilities, or asking teachers before assigning children with special needs.
- It is not only training but also successful classroom experiences that influence teachers' sense of efficacy and attitude toward inclusion. More approaches may be considered to improve these experiences.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Singapore is a newcomer to inclusion. In 2005, the Ministry of Education (MOE) embarked on training Allied Educators (AEDs) and Teachers Trained in Special Needs (TSNs) to enable teachers to educate children with mild special needs in the mainstream school system. In 2009, this research study was undertaken as a landmark project to investigate the practice of inclusion as it was applied to our local context. It sought to obtain data on prevailing perspectives toward inclusion and factors that facilitate or hinder efforts of inclusion in the primary school environment. The aim was to build a knowledge base to promote inclusive education.

In order to provide a rich description of the characteristics of inclusion, the study utilized a mixed method research design. It was predominantly qualitative and, to a smaller extent, quantitative in approach. Qualitative data was obtained from 200 primary school educators from 41 resourced primary schools via focus group interviews. The data were transcribed and coded using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (Giorgi, 1985) and NVivo software. Quantitative data were obtained from teachers' responses to a questionnaire on perceptions of barriers and supports to inclusion (Buisse, Wesley, & Keyes, 1998).

KEY FINDINGS

Inclusion

Inclusion, as it is practised in Singapore primary schools, is a pull-out integration model. It takes the form of withdrawal teaching in-class or out-of-class by the regular class teacher or the AED. Learning is individualized according to the needs of the pupil with special needs and supported mostly by the AED.

Teachers' Experiences

Our primary school educators reported more negative (60%) than positive (40%) personal experiences with inclusion. The most dominant negative feeling was the stress of coping with challenging pupil behaviours and teaching in ways that cater adequately both to pupils with special needs and typically developing pupils. The most dominant positive emotion was a sense of satisfaction related to the progress and success

of pupils with special needs and the rich on-the-job learning about what inclusion entails.

Supports of Inclusion

Three greatest supports are (a) availability of special needs personnel to provide the necessary services in primary school (16%); (b) availability of training to prepare mainstream teachers for inclusion (14%); and (c) staff members who show through their actions and practices that all children are valued regardless of differences (10%).

Barriers to Inclusion

The largest barrier (42%) is in relation to service quality issues, such as insufficient training to prepare teachers for inclusion, large class sizes, and too many children with special needs in a class. The second largest barrier (28%) is in service co-ordination and integration, insufficient teacher support in the form of an AED, and soliciting parental involvement.

Benefits of Inclusion

The benefits of inclusion extend to pupils with special needs, typically developing pupils, and their teachers. Pupils with special needs participate in the real world, learn to adapt, find social acceptance, and some attain success in learning. Typically developing pupils benefit as they develop awareness of diversity and, more importantly, heart strengths such as compassion. Teachers benefit as they find themselves positively stretched in catering pedagogically to a range of abilities in the classroom, develop collaborative relationships with AEDs and TSNs, and sharpen skills in differentiating instruction and in managing challenging pupil behaviours.

Disadvantages of Inclusion

Pupils with special needs struggle to keep pace with the requirements of mainstream school and may also experience the feelings of being labelled, loneliness and rejection. Typically developing pupils are disadvantaged by lesson disruptions, learning compromised by teachers having to cater to slower pupils, and sometimes aggressive behaviours of peers with special needs. Teachers experience stress and exhaustion from having to balance giving attention to pupils with special needs and to other pupils, as they grapple with large class sizes, completing the syllabus, and preparing children for high-stakes national examinations.

IMPLICATIONS

For Policy

School leadership

Teachers perceived the principal as the key to success for inclusion. A major finding suggests that it is the principal's beliefs and values more than their actions that make the difference. Implications for school leaders who want to develop a more inclusive school culture are to communicate their vision and values, and to provide a corporate environment that enables teachers to experience success in practising inclusion. One small way is to simply be present with AEDs and teachers at meetings with parents of the pupils who have special needs.

For Practice

Class size and distribution of pupils with special needs

There should be a policy on the allocation or distribution of pupils who have special needs in the mainstream classroom. One possible guideline is that a teacher should not have more than one kind of disability (and certainly not 3 to 5 disabilities) in one classroom. Another possible guideline is a reduction in class size when there is more than one pupil with special needs in that classroom. A third guideline is the option of asking teachers how they feel about having the child with special needs in their class because how they feel is relevant to their future success with those pupils.

Assessment

Assessment was an often raised issue that was very much on the teachers' mind, particularly the tension between covering the curriculum for all pupils and preparing all pupils equally well for PSLE. A question MOE needs to consider with respect to pupils with special needs is: What is the purpose of putting them through PSLE knowing that they (e.g., those with borderline intellectual impairment or low functioning

autism) are not going to pass? MOE may wish to recommend guidelines for determining when a child does not need to sit for PSLE. MOE may want to consider providing an alternative to PSLE for them. MOE may also consider giving parents the option of exempting their child with special needs from the Primary 6 PSLE and allowing these pupils to proceed directly to NorthLight School or a vocational school.

For Teacher Training

One of the major findings of this study is that training, by itself, does not strengthen teachers' self-efficacy in catering to diverse abilities and needs in an inclusive classroom. It is the experience of success that builds confidence and a positive attitude toward inclusion. It has implications for staff development and for the instrumental aspects of implementing inclusion (e.g., avoiding failure experiences for teachers).

For sustainability of inclusion, MOE can rethink the role of the AED and consider deploying the AED as a consulting teacher to share differentiation of content, (what pupils learn), processes (how pupils learn) and product (how pupils know what they have learned).

In addition, a coaching structure can be developed that provide opportunities for mainstream teachers to co-teach with a colleague trained in special needs. This will build resource capacity and ensure sustainability.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Lay See YEO, Maureen NEIHART, Wan Har CHONG and Vivien HUAN are with the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

Contact Lay See at laysee.yeo@nie.edu.sg for more information about the project.

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