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# Students' Psychological Preparedness for Inclusive Education: An Insight from Special and Inclusive Education Teachers

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of inclusive education is to ensure that every child has equal rights to learning opportunities in mainstream classrooms regardless of ability or disability, physically or psychologically. The physical aspects of disability have been given much importance. However, special educational needs (SEN) students' inclusion depends not only on physical and institutional readiness but also on psychological preparedness. This study investigated the psychological preparedness of SEN students for inclusion in Malaysian national primary schools. The composition of this study represents the urban context, as it was carried out in schools around Klang Valley. By using a quantitative method, the research examined cognitive, social-cognitive, information-processing, and emotional aspects of students' preparedness. These aspects are derived from the theoretical assumptions of Piaget, Vygotsky, Goleman, and the Information

Processing model. Data were collected across Klang Valley from 34 teachers attached to primary schools with inclusive and special education programs. Results revealed moderate preparedness in cognitive and social-cognitive domains but lower preparedness in emotional and information-processing aspects. The need to emphasize and strengthen the psychological foundations of SEN students prior to inclusion through effective interventions was highlighted in this research highlight. This paper also highlights the need for a rethinking of the educational practices, teacher collaboration, and the assessment framework to enhance psychological preparedness and advancement as essential aspects of inclusive education.

**Keywords:** inclusive education, psychological preparedness, special educational needs (SEN), cognitive, social-cognitive, information processing, emotional

## INTRODUCTION

To ensure equitable access to quality learning, inclusive education has become a global priority for all children. Through the UNESCO Salamanca Statement (1994) an important decision has been made in global education policies. Through the adoption of the Framework for Action on Special Needs Education, 92 countries and 25 organisations agreed that children with disabilities should be given the right to learn alongside their peers in regular schools. Through the Persons with Disabilities Act (2008), Malaysia ratified this statement. Its commitment was shown in the Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013–2025). Implementing inclusion at all levels of education reflected it as a national effort. (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013)

There are three types of structured programs in the Malaysian context. Special Education Schools, Special Education Integration Programs, and Inclusive Education Programs (IEP). The number of students with special needs - SEN (known locally as *Murid Berkeperluan Khas*, MBK) has been increasing in Malaysian education fraternity. Their inclusion into mainstream school has risen by 8.81% between 2021 and 2022 (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2022). Since emphasis is given only on their academic progress, the students' psychological preparedness remains a question before they're sent for inclusion. A student's life doesn't just revolve around learning but involves his or her psychological aspects as well.

Teacher preparedness and institutional support are critical to inclusion as mentioned in previous studies by Hargrove (2010), Mhlongo (2015) and Nedellec (2015). But how psychologically are students prepared for this

transition has been given limited attention. Students' success for inclusive education doesn't just depend on academic skills. Cognitive, social, emotional, and information-processing abilities also determine how successful are they in adapting to a new learning environment (Ormrod, 2006).

Therefore, this study focused on addressing the gap on students' psychological preparedness to be given equal emphasis in determining the success of inclusive education. It examined how cognitively, socially, and emotionally prepared are SEN students in Klang Valley's national primary schools before being integrated into mainstream classes. The findings from this study are also able to be used in educational policies and practices within Malaysia and beyond.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Inclusive Education and Policy Context

Inclusive education is meant to give equal education to all child irrespective of physical, cognitive, or emotional differences. Its principle is grounded on equity. Therefore, through inclusive education every child is able and deserve to learn within the same educational environment (Ainscow & Miles, 2009). With the philosophy of inclusive education, students with disabilities aren't segregated in educational settings. It challenges and alters segregation practiced previously and emphasizes full participation of SEN students in mainstream education (Haegele et al., 2020).

Through the Education Act (1996), Ministry of Education Malaysia established inclusive education to ensure students with learning disabilities could participate in mainstream education system. The Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013–2025) targeted 75% participation in inclusive education by 2025 and this target has already been achieved in recent years. However, this achievement is only based on quantitative data. Learning outcomes and classroom adaptation are affected (Salmah Jopri et al., 2020) when students without adequate psychological preparedness enter inclusive programs. How well the students perform qualitatively is an issue that need to be researched.

### Learning Disabilities and Inclusion Challenges

Students with dyslexia, ADHD, autism spectrum disorder, and dyspraxia are considered to have learning disabilities (LD). They struggle with cognitive processing, communication, and social interaction (Kohli et al., 2018). Adapting into a mainstream classroom will be difficult for these students with learning disabilities since the instruction is typically designed for neurotypical learners (Mngo, 2017). Without targeted psychological and emotional support, research has shown that inclusive education could heighten anxiety and social isolation among SEN students (Cefai & Cavioni, 2015; Humphrey & Wigelsworth, 2016).

### Theoretical Perspectives

Assumptions from four psychological theories have been used as the framework to understand and identify students' psychological preparedness.

1. The active process of constructing knowledge through interaction in learning.
  - **Cognitive Development Theory (Piaget, 1952)**
2. The emphasise of social interaction and scaffolding in learning.
  - **Social-Cognitive Theory (Vygotsky, 1978)**
3. The focus on receiving, storing, and retrieving information in learning (Wang, Liu, & Wang, 2003)
  - **Information Processing Theory**
4. The importance of emotional regulation, empathy, and self-awareness in learning.

## • Emotional Intelligence Theory (Goleman, 1995)

The assumptions from these four theories underpin the statement that successful inclusion requires not only academic proficiency but also psychological preparedness through cognitive, social, informational, and emotional domains.

### Psychological Preparedness

SEN students' ability in adapting cognitively, emotionally, and socially to a mainstream educational environment is what psychological preparedness refers to (Skuratovskaya et al., 2019). Psychological traits such as self-esteem, emotional stability, and motivation are key to success in inclusive settings as shown by prior studies on higher education (Crocker et al., 2003; Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2003). However, researches particularly at the primary level in Southeast Asia remains limited.

This study examined and extended the knowledge on psychological dimensions of students' preparedness for inclusive education in Malaysian primary schools. It also revealed the adequacy of the current assessment instrument using 'Senarai Semak Kesediaan Inklusif Murid Berkeperluan Khas' (SSKI MBK) in measuring the students' psychological factors.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This research used a quantitative method in providing data to understand in depth the psychological preparedness of the SEN students. The instrument used to collect the data measured teachers' perceptions of students' cognitive, social-cognitive, information-processing, and emotional preparedness.

### Population and Sampling

The study used mainstream and special education teachers that were involved with teaching SEN students. A total of 34 teachers responded being sufficient for a 95% confidence level and <5% margin of error (Bryman, 2016).

### Research Instrument

The researcher developed a structured questionnaire with 20 items grouped under four psychological dimensions namely Cognitive (5 items), Social-cognitive (5 items), Information processing (5 items) and Emotional development (5 items). Each item adopted a simplified 3-point Likert scale.

The instrument was validated by five experts with more than 5 years of experience in inclusive education (Berliner, 2004). The **Cronbach's alpha** coefficient of **0.815** indicated high internal reliability (Cohen et al., 2018).

### Data Collection and Analysis

The quantitative data were examined using simple statistical method to identify the percentages of psychological preparedness levels of SEN students across four domains through AGREE, DISAGREE and UNCERTAIN answers.

## RESULTS

### Quantitative Findings

The data from this study showed that **62%** of teachers agreed that their inclusive students showed adequate psychological preparedness across the domains, while **22%** disagreed and **16%** were uncertain. From the 62% of teachers who agreed across domain, the following data were acquired:

DOMAIN	%	LEVEL
Cognitive Preparedness	70.4%	moderate
Social-Cognitive Preparedness	63.6%	moderate
Information-Processing Preparedness	64.2%	moderate
Emotional Preparedness	51.8%	low

Specifically, the emotional domain recorded the lowest mean score. It indicated that emotional preparedness is lacking in many students (51.8%). Constantly, teachers reported uncertainty (38.8%) on the emotional domain. This suggests a knowledge gap in assessing or supporting SEN students' emotional preparedness.

In conclusion, these findings display moderate cognitive and social readiness but affirms that emotional preparedness remains the most significant barrier for SEN students to be successfully included in inclusive education.

## DISCUSSION

The results highlight the importance of psychological preparedness with its multidimensional nature in determining the success of inclusive education. With the quantitative findings demonstrating moderate preparedness across cognitive, social-cognitive, and information-processing domains, the emotional aspect appears to be the weakest link. This pattern is in tandem with prior studies that emphasized emotional regulation and socio-emotional adaptation as being the most challenging areas in entering inclusive settings for students with learning disabilities (Cefai & Cavioni, 2015; Humphrey & Wigelsworth, 2016).

### Cognitive and Social-Cognitive Preparedness

The findings on cognitive and social-cognitive preparedness assert Piaget's (1952) and Vygotsky's (1978) theories of learning, which highlighted that cognitive development is based on knowledge construction and social interaction. As reported by many teachers, scaffolding and peer support when provided, could engage inclusive students with mainstream content. This is in support that structured inclusion enhances adaptation and learning as researched earlier by Mogharreban and Bruns (2009).

However, the cognitive preparedness that remains "moderate" as observed in this study, suggested that even though SEN students are able to engage in mainstream settings, their progress excessively depended on teacher facilitation and individualized instructional strategies (Berry, 2021). Teachers who understood students' cognitive development and employed differentiated instruction were more successful in helping students' transition effectively (Odongo & Davidson, 2016).

### Emotional Preparedness: The Critical Gap

The emotional dimension of preparedness through self-awareness, self-regulation, and resilience were found to be notably low by the respondents. This asserts that emotional regulation is foundational to learning and social participation as corroborated by Goleman's (1995) Emotional Intelligence Theory. In inclusive classrooms, emotional unpreparedness manifests into behaviours such as anxiety, frustration, and withdrawal. These behaviours can disrupt not only the student's learning process but also the classroom dynamics (Soares et al., 2022; McGuire & Meadan, 2022).

In addition, the study also found that the existing *Senarai Semak Kesediaan Inklusif Murid Berkeperluan Khas* (SSKI MBK) did not emphasize psychological and emotional indicators but favouring cognitive and motor skills. Consequently, SEN students may be admitted to inclusive classes without sufficient emotional preparedness. This could be a flaw that compromises the teacher's ability and experience in providing necessary support for

SEN students. This is supported by the findings and concerns highlighted by Skuratovskaya et al. (2019) regarding the underemphasis of socio-psychological factors in readiness assessments.

### Implications for Teacher Collaboration and Practice

The current research reaffirms that teacher collaboration to be essential in addressing the psychological needs of SEN students. This supports previous studies that successful inclusion depends on cooperation between mainstream and special education teachers (Jones et al., 2008; Razalli et al., 2020). This shows that classroom outcomes improve when both parties share insights on students' cognitive and emotional development.

However, many teachers still lack training in psychological assessment and differentiation as observed in prior literature (Mukhopadhyay, 2013; Rojo-Ramos et al., 2021). Therefore, the result of this study supported the initiative for professional development programs that integrate psychological theory, behaviour management, and emotional intelligence being a part of inclusive pedagogical training.

### Policy and Systemic Implications

From the perspectives of Malaysia's inclusive educational framework, these findings suggest that it requires further refinement in assessing and developing students' psychological preparedness apart from being progressive in accessibility. This can be done by considering to revise the SSKI MBK checklist to could give greater emphasis to emotional and social-cognitive indicators. In addition, a pre-inclusion psychological profiling could be implemented in schools. This will assess students' adaptability and emotional resilience before being integrated into the mainstream settings.

On a wider level, the study also contributed to international debates on inclusion. This in particular with emerging education systems where infrastructure improvements are outpacing psychosocial preparedness (Banks et al., 2019; Woodcock, 2021). A reminder too for developing nations striving for inclusive education to balance educational expansion with carefully paying attention to students' psychological foundations.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study highlights that inclusive education cannot succeed on accessibility alone. Psychological preparedness which is the missing dimension will determine and lead inclusive education towards a meaningful learning. The findings demonstrate that SEN students' emotional preparedness in Klang Valley national primary schools remain low, even though they exhibit moderate cognitive and social preparedness. This poses a significant barrier to SEN students to be successfully integrated into inclusive education.

Based on these results, several recommendations are proposed:

1. **Revise inclusion assessment tools** such as the SSKI MBK to also emphasise psychological domains.
2. **Enhance and integrate** psychological literacy, emotional intelligence, and behaviour management strategies into both pre and post teacher training programs.
3. **Develop collaborative support systems** between special education and mainstream teachers to consistently ensure and monitor students' psychological adaptation.
4. **Introduce orientation programs** to build emotional preparedness among SEN students before full integration into inclusive education.
5. **Encourage further research** across different cultural contexts to explore the relationship between psychological preparedness and various learning disabilities.

By making psychological preparedness integral to inclusion, inclusive education can better nurture every SEN student's potential in both academic and psychological domains.

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