

# The Designated Priority Level (DPL) System: Establishing Priority Levels for Students with Special Needs in Brunei Darussalam

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**Abstract**—Students with special needs can achieve their potential in schools that foster acceptance and when taught by teachers who are willing to adapt or modify the curriculum to meet their needs. It was this vision which catapulted special education within mainstream schools in Brunei Darussalam in 1994 and continues to be the thrust in the current Strategic Objective 2 (SO2) of the 2018-2022 MoE Strategic Plan namely, to provide equal and equitable access to quality education. Determining the allocation of appropriate support and resources is, however, a complex process. As such, the Designated Priority Levels (DPL) system was developed to prioritise the level of support and resources required by students with special needs. This paper will first discuss the identified barriers in the implementation of inclusive education in Brunei Darussalam followed by an overview of the DPL system to demonstrate how it can be used to establish the priority level of every student with special needs.

**Keywords**—priority levels for students with special needs; special education; inclusive education; Designated Priority Level System; students with special needs; inclusive schools; School-Based Team; Brunei Darussalam

## I. INTRODUCTION

Brunei Darussalam is steadfast in its strong commitment to uphold quality inclusive education. Its latest initiative, The Strategic Plan 2018-2022, focuses on equality and equity for all students by ensuring access to quality education. It sets out to achieve a main objective of Brunei Vision 2035 namely, for Brunei Darussalam to be recognised as a nation of well- educated, highly skilled and highly accomplished people. There are 3 objectives in the Strategic Plan 2018-2022:

### Strategic Objective 01

Transform our organisation human resource towards a performance-driven culture.

### Strategic Objective 02

Provide equal and equitable access to quality education.

### Strategic Objective 03

Enhance shared accountability with stakeholders in the development of teaching and learning [1]

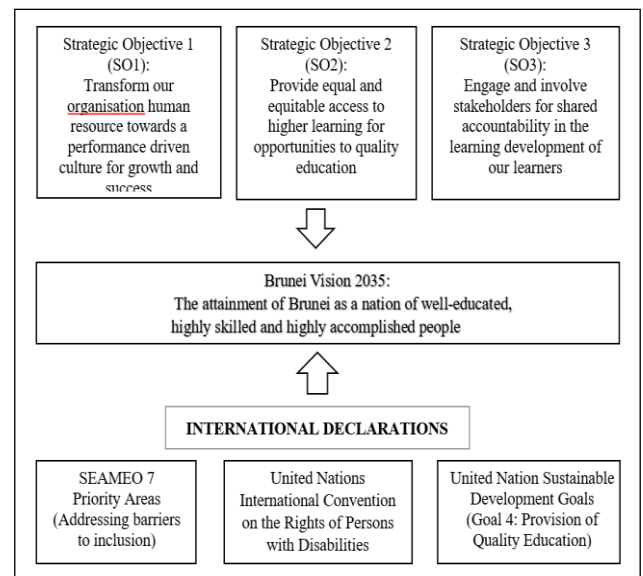


Fig. 1. Alignment of The Strategic Plan 2018-2022 to Brunei Vision 2035

### and International Declarations

As illustrated in Fig. 1, Brunei's steadfast commitment to inclusive education is also consistent with the following international declarations:

- SEAMEO 7 Priority Areas - Addressing barriers to inclusion [2].
- United Nations International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities - Provision of inclusive education at all levels and lifelong learning for all persons with disabilities [3].
- United Nations 'Sustainable Development Goals' -Goal 4 focuses on the provision of quality education that is both inclusive and equitable [4].

The following barriers to the implementation of inclusive education in Brunei Darussalam were identified using the Inclusive Education formula proposed by Mitchell [5]:

1. An insufficient number of Special Educational Needs Assistant (SENA) Teachers and Teacher Aides to provide the level of support required for the increasing number of students with special needs in Brunei Darussalam.

2. A shortage of specialists in providing support services for students with special needs, e.g. Educational Psychologists and Speech and Language Therapists.
3. A lack of accessibility and infrastructure in schools for students with special needs.
4. Inadequate specialised equipment (including assistive technology) and inadequate specialised resources.
5. A lack of differentiated teaching for students with special needs due to unwillingness or insufficient knowledge [6].

The identified barriers are largely due to the high number of students with special needs in Brunei Darussalam which has steadily increased over the years. When taking a snapshot of a 5-year period, as presented in Table 1, the overall percentage increase of students with special needs between 2012 and 2017 is almost 35%. The highest increase occurred between 2014 and 2015 when the total number of students with special needs increased from 3,212 to 4,161. By 2017, there was a total of 4,503 students with special needs in primary, secondary and tertiary levels who were provided the opportunity to access education alongside their peers within inclusive learning environments.

TABLE I. NUMBER OF STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN PRIMARY, SECONDARY AND TERTIARY LEVELS AND PERCENTAGES OVER THE LAST FIVE YEARS [7].

Years	Number of SN students	Percentage Increase
2011-2012	2,927	
2012-2013	2,989	2.1% increase from 2012 to 2013
2013-2014	3,212	6.9% increase from 2013 to 2014
2014-2015	4,161	22.8% increase from 2014 to 2015
2015-2016	4,303	3.3% increase from 2015 to 2016
2016-2017	4,503	4.4% increase from 2016 to 2017
<b>Overall Percentage Increase</b>		<b>34.9% increase from 2012 to 2017</b>

In 2018, a total of 101 SENA Teachers provided learning support and assistance for 2,932 students with special needs in 85 government primary schools. SENA Teachers are specially trained teachers with relevant specialist skills and knowledge in special education. They are primarily responsible for supporting students with special needs who require either an Individual Education Plan (IEP) or a Remedial Education Plan (REP). Students with high needs who have IEPs generally receive support from SENA Teachers on an individual basis or in a small group consisting of 3 students. Students who require learning support only are placed on REPs and provided with remedial learning sessions each lasting for 30 minutes and conducted three times weekly [6].

Table 2 shows a significant increase in the number of students with special needs from 2,403 in 2014 to 2,932 in 2018. However, the increase in students with special needs over the 5 years has not facilitated an increase in the number

of SENA Teachers. Instead, the number of SENA Teachers has steadily declined from 114 in 2014 to 101 in 2018. The decline has had an adverse impact on the ability of SENA Teachers to efficiently provide learning support and assistance as evidenced by the increasing SENA Teacher-Student ratio from 1:21 in 2014 to 1:29 in 2018.

TABLE II. NUMBER OF STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS ON IEP AND REP, NUMBER OF SENA TEACHERS AND SENA TEACHER-STUDENT RATION IN GOVERNMENT PRIMARY SCHOOL [7]

Year	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Number of students on IEP	571	737	792	839	921
Number of students on REP	1832	1965	1875	2124	2011
Total no of students	2403	2702	2667	2963	2932
No of SENA Teacher	114	113	109	110	101
<b>SENA Teacher-Student Ration</b>	<b>1:21</b>	<b>1:24</b>	<b>1:24</b>	<b>1:27</b>	<b>1:29</b>

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Inclusive education in practice is not easily achieved with a simple, one-step placement process. The placement of students with special needs in mainstream classes does not, on its own, serve as an indication of inclusive education in practice. It is in fact, a far more complex process that goes beyond just having students with special needs in mainstream classes.

### The Multi-Faceted Nature of Inclusive Education

Mitchell [5] described inclusive education as a multi-faceted concept that simultaneously engages vision, placement, curriculum, assessment, teaching, acceptance, access, support, resources and leadership. This multi-faceted concept is illustrated in Fig. 2 and encapsulated within his proposed Inclusive Education formula as follows:

$$\text{Inclusive Education (IE)} = V + P + 5A_s + S + R + L, \text{ where}$$

**V** = Vision

**P** = Placement

**A** = Adapted Curriculum

**A** = Adapted Assessment

**A** = Adapted Teaching

**A** = Acceptance

**A** = Access

**S** = Support

**R** = Resources

**L** = Leadership

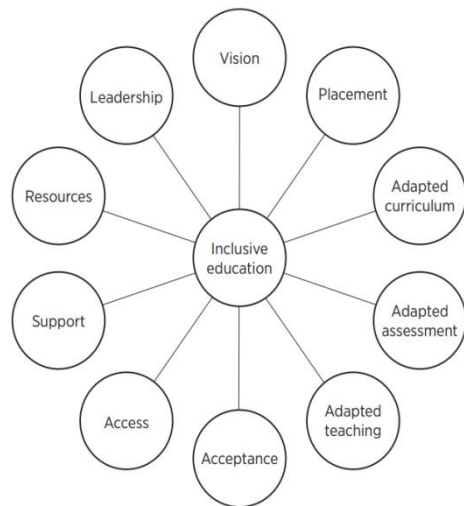


Fig. 2. Model of inclusive education [5]

In an ideal world, Mitchell's Inclusive Education formula could be successfully attained if all its facets were firmly in place. This is seemingly attainable as the intention to uphold inclusive education is apparent in legislation and policies. However, what is espoused on paper is often not evident in practice. Mitchell believes the discrepancy between policy and practice is due to numerous factors including large class sizes, lack of skilled human resources and lack of acceptance [5].

Gilmour [8] goes so far as to assert that while inclusion is more prevalent during this decade than ever before, there is little evidence that students with special needs are reaping benefits. Her research indicates that in 2016, more than 60% of all students with special needs in the United States spend at least 80% of their school days in mainstream classes. While this sounds ideal, Mitchell's cautionary notion springs to mind, that is, inclusive education is much more than a one-step process. It is in fact a far more complex process that goes beyond just having students with special needs in mainstream classes. There is value in considering the Inclusive Education formula in any context that claims inclusive education has been attained and set firmly in place (5).

Indeed, Gilmour [6] discussed various research sources which support Mitchell's notion that students with special needs do not benefit from merely being placed in mainstream classes. She found that teachers are not sufficiently equipped to meet the needs of students with special needs in their mainstream classes. She also found that there are teachers who will avoid teaching in classrooms if there are students with special needs in them and that these teachers were more likely to move to another school or leave teaching.

In addition, Gilmour [8] reported that having students with special needs in mainstream classes may even have an adverse impact on the academic performance of other students without special needs in the same classroom. Teachers may allocate more time in providing the individual support and guidance required by students with special needs at the expense of the other 'more capable' students in class.

On a more positive note however, she found that teachers tend to be more accepting of students with special needs if additional support would be provided in the classroom and if the students with special needs did not exhibit disruptive behaviours. This is consistent with Mitchell's assertions that students with special needs are more likely to succeed when they are provided with the required support and resources and when they are taught by teachers who are willing to make adaptations to the curriculum as well as to their teaching and assessment (5).

### III. DESIGNATED PRIORITY LEVEL (DPL) SYSTEM

Two Centres of Excellence (CoEs) were recently established for students with special needs as part of an initiative to uphold Strategic Objective 02 in Brunei Darussalam. These were set up in 2 inclusive schools within the Temburong district at the start of 2019. The primary objectives of establishing CoEs with centralised locations was to address the increasing number of students with special needs as well as to ensure that they are provided equal opportunities for access, engagement and active participation in conducive learning environments.

The CoEs were set up as training and reference hubs in specialised areas of special education where teachers possess the necessary knowledge, skills and competency in various fields of special education. In addition to skilled human resources, the CoEs were also set up with the appropriate infrastructure, specialised equipment and resources as well as assistive technology to meet the needs of their students [6].

It was during the process of determining students' needs, required support and resources as well as appropriate placement in CoEs that the importance of setting priority levels for all students with special needs was highlighted. More specifically, the process highlighted the importance of adopting an objective measure that goes beyond looking at diagnosis only and instead, moving towards a more comprehensive approach which considers the students' abilities, challenges and accessibility to a conducive learning environment.

There is, however, limited research on how to develop or use priority levels for students with special needs to ensure that their individual needs can be identified and adequately supported. Designating priority levels for students with special needs is also important as the range of disabilities impact differently on cognitive and adaptive functioning. Some students may have average cognitive ability and are able to follow the mainstream curriculum while others may have severe cognitive impairment and require intensive, specialised support and resources in order to access a specialised curriculum. Therefore, in order to ensure that students with special needs have equal and equitable access to quality education, it is necessary to first identify their individual needs so they can then be provided with appropriate skilled human resources and specialised resources.

The National Council for Special Education in Ireland [9] advised that the allocation of required support and resources is based on identified learning needs rather than disability. It also recommended that the assessment of students with special needs is conducted as an ongoing process rather than a one-off assessment based on diagnosis only. This is because the use of diagnosis only to determine the allocation of required support and resources detracts from the individual needs of students with special needs. Students with special needs who share the same diagnosis are likely to have different needs that reflect their individual abilities, difficulties and personalities.

As such, the Designated Priority Levels (DPL) system was developed as an objective means of identifying students' needs as an ongoing process that is not solely based on their diagnosis. It examines the required level of support and resources in the following domains: learning support, curriculum adaptation, physical adaptation, specialised resources, and access arrangements. Each domain has its own scoring criteria which determines the Priority Level for students with special needs. Once determined, the Priority Level is used to differentiate among students with special needs so as to accurately designate their placement according to whether their needs would be best met in a CoE or a non-CoE mainstream school.

The following are the 5 Priority Levels that indicate the severity of needs for individual students:

Priority Level 1 (PL1): *Diagnosis Only*

Students on PL1 have a previous or current diagnosis with adequate cognitive functioning. They are able to follow the mainstream curriculum alongside their classmates with minimal teacher support. They may qualify for access arrangements during examinations.

Priority Level 2 (PL2): *Mild*

Students on PL2 are able to follow the mainstream curriculum but may require some learning support typically available to the other students in a mainstream class, either during lessons or for pull-out remedial learning support. They may require physical adaptation, specialised resources and/or access arrangements.

Priority Level 3 (PL3): *Moderate*

Students on PL3 may require moderate to intensive learning support, curriculum adaptation or modification, specialised resources and/or access arrangements.

Priority Level 4 (PL4): *Severe*

Students on PL 4 may not be able to follow the curriculum or sit for examinations. They either require a specialised curriculum to develop functional skills and life skills or intensive, individual support to access a differentiated curriculum. They may require physical adaptation, specialised resources and/or access arrangements.

Priority Level 5 (PL5): *Profound*

Students on PL 5 are totally dependent on adult supervision to meet their basic needs. They require constant, individual support in all activities of daily living. They may require physical adaptation and specialised resources.

TABLE 3. NUMBER OF STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS ACCORDING TO PRIORITY LEVELS AND YEAR LEVELS IN THE TUTONG DISTRIC [9]

Priority Levels	Pra	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6	No of Students
1	0	6	5	8	1	2	2	24
2	4	6	4	4	3	3	6	30
3	14	12	13	15	8	15	17	94
4	3	6	5	4	10	9	6	43
5	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	2
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>193</b>

The DPL system is currently being used in the establishment of CoEs in the Tutong district. A total of 193 students with special needs in the Tutong district were each assigned a Priority Level using the DPL System. Table 3 indicates the Priority Levels for each of the 193 students: 24 were assigned Priority Level 1 (PL1) while 30 were assigned Priority Level 2 (PL2). 94 were assigned Priority Level 3 (PL3), 43 assigned Priority Level 4 (PL4) and 2 assigned Priority Level 5 (PL5).

Students on PL1 and PL2 will remain in their respective schools as they are able to follow the curriculum with minimal or regular support from their teachers. Students on PL3, PL4 and PL5 will be selected for placement in CoEs to ensure that their individual needs are adequately supported with appropriate skilled human resources, required physical adaptations and specialised resources.

IV. DISCUSSION

The premise underlying the development of the DPL system is that every student with special needs has the fundamental right to receive quality inclusive education which reflects their current level of functioning. The establishment of CoEs in every district sets out to address the identified barriers in upholding quality inclusive education in government primary schools. It is therefore important and relevant to determine the priority levels to ensure that students with special needs in Brunei Darussalam receive the required specialised support and resources to reach their potential whether they are placed in CoEs or remain in their non-CoE mainstream schools.

There are numerous implications in the use of the DPL system as a standardised tool to establish the priority level of every student with special needs in Brunei Darussalam. Firstly, the DPL system addresses the gap in knowledge with regards to prioritising the level of support required by students with special needs during the process of allocating them into CoEs. The use of priority levels helps to determine the appropriate placement for students with special needs so there is a clear distinction in the type and level of support required by them. For example, students on PL1 and PL2 remain in their schools because their learning needs can be met through the usual school processes without requiring additional support or resources. On the other hand, students identified on PL3, PL4 and PL5 would be best placed in CoEs that are specially set up to provide skilled human resources and the required level of specialised support and resources.

The use of the DPL system can also be used to determine the required number of skilled human resources as well as required level of specialised support services through its scoring rubric for each Priority Level. The scoring rubric requires further trials to evaluate its validity for this purpose but it is envisioned that the required number of SENA Teachers and Teacher Aides can be determined as well as the required level of specialised support services such as Educational Psychology Services, Occupational Therapy Services, Speech Language Therapy Services and Special Needs Support Services from the Special Education Unit, Ministry of Education. In addition, the scoring rubric could be used to assess, review and monitor the progress of students with special needs on all 5 Priority Levels. This is particularly important if there are changes in their health, personal circumstances, living arrangements or in the type and level of support they have been receiving.

The DPL System can be revised to provide more detailed and comprehensive information for each of the 5 domains. This could serve as a Handbook that provides detailed guidelines for intervention and suggested support strategies which can be used for students on all 5 Priority Levels by SENA Teachers, Teacher Aides and subject teachers. Lastly, the use of the DPL System provides a forum for dialogue to occur among parents, SENA Teachers, Teacher Aides, subject teachers, other school personnel and professionals in relation to what is currently in place for the students, what works well, and the level of support required to maximise students' potential in schools. Designating priority levels for students with special needs is a collaborative activity which can be incorporated into an IEP meeting. It is designed to elicit discussion in reviewing progress, celebrating successes and taking a solution-focused stance when addressing current difficulties and challenges to ensure that students with special needs are empowered to reach their potential.

#### V. CONCLUSION

All the aforementioned implications of using the DPL system will help address the barriers in the implementation of inclusive education in Brunei Darussalam, as identified using Mitchell's Inclusive Education formula. The DPL

system can be used to ensure that students with special needs receive the required level of support that goes beyond merely being placed in mainstream classes. This means teachers will be more accepting of students with special needs when they are provided with additional support and resources which in turn, means students with special needs are more likely to reach their potential when they are taught by teachers who are willing to make adaptations to their teaching, assessment and curriculum [5], [8].

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