Inclusion Of Children With Disabilities In General ECCE Centres

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Abstract—**The high demand from working parents has led to the rapid growing number of early childhood care and education centres (ECCE) in Malaysia. Despite of the policies enacted regarding persons with special needs and awareness given about the rights of all children to receive care and support, working parents who have children with disabilities still facing difficulties and in dilemma on where to place their children. This is due to limited number of childcare centres specialized on special needs as well as inclusion of children with disabilities in general childcare centres are not widely accepted in Malaysia. The purpose of this research is to exploring factors that influenced the childcare administrators' willingness to accept children with disabilities in their centres. A total of twenty principals of childcare centres in two districts in Selangor, Malaysia have participated in this qualitative research. From the result, it can be concluded that most of them did not accept children with disabilities in their centres. Factors that influence their decision are curriculum, centre's facilities, centres' environment, as well as teachers' and principals' knowledge and skills in handling disabilities. Whereas empathy, humanitarian, and recommendation from doctors are the factors that initiate those who are willing to accept children with disabilities in their centres as well as administrators were not informed by the parents about their children's conditions during registration.**

Keywords—**Childcare centres; Inclusion of children with disabilities; Acceptance factors**

I. INTRODUCTION

Inclusion of children with disabilities in general settings has been increasing worldwide since the declaration on "Education for All" in Jomtien; Thailand in 1990 and conference on Special Needs Education in Salamanca; Spain in 1994. Malaysia as one of the 164 signatory countries that ratified "Education for All" has included inclusion in The National Education Blueprint 2013-2025 as part of the effort to achieve caring Malaysia slogan in Vision 2020 [1; 2]. To ensure that no children with disabilities are left out from receiving good education; Ministry of Education Malaysia has currently implemented Zero Reject Policy which requires schools to accept children with disabilities [3; 4]. Under the policy; children with disabilities would be able to receive education suitable with their abilities.

UNICEF has done a research on "Childhood Disability in Malaysia: A Study of Knowledge; Attitudes; and Practices" in 2016. Findings from the research revealed that practices of inclusion are not widely accepted in Malaysia [5; 6] even though inclusion has been implemented in Malaysia since 1990's [2; 7; 8]. This is due to teachers' limited knowledge and skills in handling and teaching children with disabilities. This has led to the question which is how the situation is in general ECCE centres in Malaysia.

Much attention has been given to the teachers as they have been regarded as the key to the successfulness of inclusion [9; 10; 11]. However; as the persons who responsible for hiring; supervising; and scheduling trainings for teachers; less attention were given to the childcare centre administrator. Therefore; this research is attempted to explore the inclusion of children with disabilities in general ECCE especially in childcare centres from the administrator's perspectives.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. ECCE and Inclusion in Malaysia

In Malaysia; Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is divided into two main groups which is childcare centre known as TASKA and preschool known as TADIKA. TASKA accepted children under the age of four years old and regulated by the Department of Social Welfare under the Ministry of Women; Family; and Community Development [12]. TADIKA accepted children from four to six years old and regulated by the Education Department under the Ministry of Education [13].

According to statistics obtained from Department of Statistics Malaysia; there were 2;630;400 numbers of children below six years old in Malaysia in 2016 [14]. From this figure; statistics from Department of Social Welfare showed that 11;621 children below six years old have registered as children with disabilities in 2016 [15]. These numbers indicates that there is a need to address the problem of placement for children with disabilities in ECCE institutions.

In Malaysia; there are seven categories of disabilities that is recognized by the Department of Social Welfare [16] which are 1) hearing disabled; 2) visually disabled; 3) speech disability; 4) physical disability; 5) learning difficulties; 6) mental disability; and 7) multiple disabilities (have more than one type of disability and those that are not appropriate to be classified in category (1) to (6). Meanwhile; Education

(Special Education) Regulation 2013 defines special needs students as those who is certified by a medical practitioner; an optometrist; an audiologist or a psychologist to have hearing-impaired; sight-impaired; speech-impaired; physically-impaired; learning difficulties; and multiple disabilities [17].

The placement for children with disabilities in ECCE in Malaysia is limited and depending on their categories and level of disabilities. There are six childcare centres set up by Department of Social Welfare for six categories of children with disabilities which are Down syndrome; Autism; vision; hearing; physical; and learning disabilities [16; 18]. Meanwhile; children with severe disabilities will be given rehabilitation and early learning programmes at Community-based Rehabilitation Centres [16]. With the limited numbers of childcare centres specialized on special needs; parents have to depend on private general childcare centres to place in their children. However; there is no specific legislation in Malaysia that stated ECCE institutions must accept children with disabilities [6; 19; 20]. Therefore; the acceptance of children with disabilities is subjected to the childcare centre administrator's own discretion. It has caused many parents in dilemma on where to find childcare centres that are willing to accept children with disabilities.

B. Factors that Influence Administrator's Acceptance of Children with Disabilities

Childcare centre administrator may involve the operator; the manager; and the supervisor. For the purpose of this research; the childcare centre administrator is referred as the principal. A principal is a person who responsible for handling childcare centre operation and oversee the staff. They are required to attend and pass the Basic Childcare Course KAAK or KAP [16]. In Malaysia; it is common that the childcare centre operators are also the principals of the centres.

Principal is the key to the success of inclusion implementation in general settings [21; 22; 23; 24]. The principal's vision and mission as well as their beliefs and experiences will affect their decisions making and the centres' environment [23; 25]. According to [26]; principals are the change agent that introduce and provide adaption for school reformation. Principal's awareness; support; and action plans in finding ways to better address the specific needs of the children and teachers will improve the inclusion environment [27].

Researchers have identified several variables that would influence the acceptance of children with disabilities [28; 29; 30]. The variables can be divided into four categories which is the physical environment category; educational environment category; the personnel category; and the child category.

Physical environment is referring to the infrastructure facilities of the childcare centres. According to [20]; the building must be design to be accessible and disabled-friendly. Lack of elevators; ramps; automatic doors; Braille signage; and telecommunication devices are considered as physical environmental barriers [31]. In their research [32] stated that accessibility to the toilets in school is important for children with disabilities. Appropriate classroom adjustment such as lighting and noise levels; seating plans; labeling and

positioning of resources; and utilizing verbal instructions with illustration is important in eliminating the barriers for the children with disabilities [28].

Educational environment involve financial support; teaching aids materials; assistive equipment; and curriculum; in addition to human support such as teachers; therapists; and shadow aids. Inclusion of children with disabilities is expensive to conduct [20; 33]. Space modification; appropriate teaching aids materials; and assistive equipment involves high expenditures. Most of the general childcare centres in Malaysia are private childcares which belong to either individuals or NGOs. The curriculum needs to be defined; modified and implemented based on the needs of children with disabilities [29; 34]. However; there is no support available to assist teachers [30] except for shadow aids assistance which are currently being introduced in the state of Selangor.

Personnel category is referring to the principals' and teachers' experience; education background; and training. The number of years of experiences influence principals and teachers acceptance of children with disabilities [23; 24]. Research done by [24] and [35] found out that principals with positive attitude towards children with disabilities have either personal experience with persons with disabilities or they themselves are experiencing some form of disabilities. Therefore; the acceptance for the children with disabilities is based on humanity [30]. Education background of teachers and principals provides them with relevant knowledge on children milestones and teaching and learning strategies [30; 36]. Principals must be knowledgeable in disabilities and inclusion and have the appropriate skills to lead and guide the teachers [21]. Appropriate trainings enable principals and teachers to provide instruction that meets the needs of all children. It also supports the education background by requisition of new skills on latest educational reform [37].

Several research have found that type and severity levels of disabilities are among the child category that influence the admission decision making [23; 31; 38; 39]. Research done by [31] and [40] indicated that children with physical and sensory disabilities are more favorable to be accepted in general settings rather than children with learning and emotional-behaviour disabilities. This is due to the less behavioural challenges and less attention demanding that faced by the teachers. However; research done by [41] showed that children with mild to moderate learning disabilities are more likely being accepted by teachers compared with children with behavioural and sensory disabilities. Research conducted by [39] found out that administrators prefer to support children with mild to moderate disabilities with severe disabilities received less support for inclusion in a general setting.

III. METHODOLOGY

Acceptance of children with disabilities in childcare centres is very important for the survival and education of these children. The earlier the intervention is given to them; the brighter their future will be. The purpose of this research is to have better understanding on 1) factors that influenced the childcare administrators' willingness to accept children with

disabilities in their centres; and 2) the category of disabilities that have been accepted.

A. Setting and Sampling

This research was conducted in childcare centres located in Petaling District and Kuala Langat District in Selangor; Malaysia. These two districts were selected to ensure diversity among the demographics is obtained. Petaling District is an urban centres with major cities such as Petaling Jaya; Shah Alam; and Subang Jaya are located within. Whereas; Kuala Langat District is a rural area consist of small towns such as Banting and Morib.

A total number of twenty participants who are principals of childcare centres involved in the interview. All of them are female and have been operating the childcare centres for at least five years. Participants in this research were convenient samplings. They have participated in a research conducted by Department of Social Welfare and UNITAR International University regarding childcare centres quality. For confidentiality; a pseudonym was given to all the participants to protect their identity. Principal 1 to 10 is from Petaling District and Principal 11 to 20 is from Kuala Langat District.

B. Data Collection

Data collection method for this qualitative research was individual interview using semi-structured interview protocol. The interviews were done at the participants' childcare centres. All the information gathered in the interviews were audio-recorded using tape recorder with permission to ensure accuracy of data heard during interviews and provide permanent record for data analysis as well as handwritten notes in case of the tape recorder malfunctions [42]. The recordings were transcribed into word processing documents. Since the interviews were conducted in Bahasa Malaysia; the transcript data were translated into English for data analysis. Thematic analysis was used for identifying; analyzing; and reporting patterns in the data. The transcribed data was later coded into themes and categories for data analysis.

The trustworthiness of this research is established through triangulation of data; frequent peer debriefing sessions; and member checking. Frequent debriefing sessions are done with expert in the field who shared his views and experiences. Two principals were selected to do member checking. The process of triangulation is consistent with suggestion by [43].

IV. RESULTS

The participants in this research can be divided into three categories 1) those who are willing to accept children with disabilities; 2) those who previously have accepted children with disabilities; and 3) those who have rejected children with disabilities. Table 1: Childcare Centres Demographic summarized the participants demographic and category of disabilities that have been accepted in the childcare centres.

TABLE I.   CHILDCARE CENTRE DEMOGRAPHIC

Participant	Accept CWD	CWD Category	Child's Age
Principal 1	Yes	Down Syndrom	8 months
Principal 2	Yes	Speech and Physical Disability	3 years old and 5 months
Principal 3	Previously accepted	Autism	2 years old
Principal 4	Previously accepted	Physical Disability	3 months
Principal 5	Previously accepted	Learning Difficulties	4 years old
Principal 6	Previously accepted	Autism	3 years old
Principal 7	No	-	-
Principal 8	No	-	-
Principal 9	No	-	-
Principal 10	No	-	-
Principal 11	Yes	Learning Difficulties and Speech Disability	4 and 3 years old
Principal 12	Yes	ADHD	4 years old
Principal 13	Yes	Autism and ADD	3 and 2 years old
Principal 14	Previously accepted	Speech Disability and Down Syndrom	4 years old and 4 months
Principal 15	Previously accepted	Hearing Impairment	3 years old
Principal 16	No	-	-
Principal 17	No	-	-
Principal 18	No	-	-
Principal 19	No	-	-
Principal 20	No	-	-

A. Willing To Accept Children With Disabilities

Five out of twenty principals stated that they are currently having children with disabilities in their centres. Their decision to accept children with disabilities is based on their own personal experience; belief; and humanity as express below.

"I believe they also have the right to be love just like other children." (Principal 1)

"During visit at the centre; I saw they behave and able to listen to instruction. That means my teachers should be able handle them." (Principal 2)

"I pity the child. She looks at me. She reminds me of my own daughter. My daughter; she's quite active too." (Principal 12)

Some of the children have been diagnosed by doctors prior to enrolment to the childcare centres. Their parents are aware that their children show development features that are different from other children. Principal 13 explained it as:

"His parents show me recommendation letters from doctor. The letter says putting him with normal children will help him to socialize and behave better."

Most of this childcare centres have either principals or teachers who is certified or have been trained to handle children with disabilities.

"I have employed one teacher with degree in special needs. She helps in training other teachers."
(Principal 11)

"I went for a short course childcare for children with disabilities at MAKPEM in Sentul after we accept Wani (not her real name)." (Principal 12)

B. Previously Have Accepted Children With Disabilities

Six out of twenty principals mentioned that they have included children with disabilities in their childcare previously. The principals were initially agreed to accept children with disabilities but later have to release the children due to lack of skills to handle the children.

"He looks normal when his mom brought him along during inquiry even though I notice he does not response to any of my questions. After we accepted him; my teachers keep complaining he likes to throw things on the floor; will run away if ask to put back.
We ask his mom to send him for checkup. He was diagnosed with autism. So we cannot take him as we are not trained to handle autistic child." (Principal 3)

"This child has lip cleft. All my teachers decline to take care of him. They don't know how to feed him using the milk bottle." (Principal 4)

"She's always wondering around and making noise. She ignore when her teacher call her and throw tantrum if the teacher hold her. The teacher doesn't know what to do so she gives up. No other teacher willing to care for her. So we had to tell her parents to take her somewhere else." (Principal 6)

"I accept the child because I pity her mom. But my teachers' voice out that they don't know how to handle her. I myself also have no idea how to handle her. So after two weeks I tell her mom we cannot take her."
(Principle 14)

"I wasn't informed by his parent he has hearing problem. No wonder he doesn't response to his teacher's calling. We later find out about it when I confronted his parent. I told them we don't have expertise to handle such condition." (Principal 15)

However; not all the principals shared the same sentiments. Principal 5 stated that they are no longer having children with disabilities in their centres because the child has left for kindergarten and currently no parents who have children with disabilities request to send their children there.

She also confessed that she accept the child because she believes that all children should be given equal chance to grow happily.

"Currently we don't have any children with disabilities register in our centre… Previously we had one boy with dyslexia. Now that he is five years old; his parent sent him to kindergarten near his mom office…He looks normal to me. As long as he can take care of himself; I am ok with it. Children should enjoy their childhood; right. "

C. Rejected Children With Disabilities

Nine out of twenty principals claimed that they do not have any children with disabilities in their childcare centres. Two of them stated that they have not received any request from parents who have children with disabilities to enroll in their childcare centre. As explained by Principal 7 and Principal 10:

"We had inquiry from parents before. But so far we don't have any children with disabilities register in our centre." (Principal 7)

"So far we don't have any inquiry for children with disabilities. Maybe it is because there's one centre for them nearby." (Principal 10)

Several of the principals admitted the reason why they do not accept children with disabilities is because they themselves and their teachers do not know how to handle children with disabilities. Principle 9 and Principle 20 shared the same reasons.

"We don't accept children with disabilities here. To handle such children; teachers must have training in special needs. None of my teachers have training in special needs." (Principle 9)

"My teachers are not trained to handle children with disabilities. Neither am I. By the way our management has set rules no children with disabilities."
(Principle 20)

Some of the principals justified childcare centres infrastructure as the factor that restricted them from accepting children with disabilities in their centre. On top of complying with the building regulations set by local authority and fire department before getting approval by Department of Social Welfare; the principals still need to modify the space inside to accommodate the needs of children with disabilities.

"This centre has been designed with fix furniture. As you can see we have big play stations all over the place. If we were to accept children with disabilities; all this must be rearranged." (Principal 8)

"This house is not ours. We only rent it. The owner does not allow us to modify the building."
(Principal 17)

"This is just a small childcare. Our fees are not that high so I can't afford to spend money modifying the space." (Principal 19)

Another reason given by the principals for not accepting children with disabilities is the curriculum. They claimed that their curriculum is not suitable for children with disabilities.

"Our curriculum is not suitable for children with disabilities. Our activities require children to do a lot of physical exercise." (Principal 8)

"The curriculum we use is not for children with disabilities. Children need to do the activities independently." (Principal 16)

Principals' decision making for rejecting children with disabilities is depending on their own belief. As express below by Principal 18:

"Children with disabilities need different type of care and instruction from normal children. So they must be sent to TASKA that specialize on special needs. Over there they have all that."

V. CONCLUSION

Principals' decision making influence theirs centre's environment as they are the one who responsible for handling childcare centre operation and oversee the teachers. Understanding principals' perceptions regarding children with disabilities may enlighten the reasons why practices of inclusion are not widely accepted in childcare centres.

Four categories of variables which are physical environment category; educational environment category; the personnel category; and the child category emerged from the findings of this research regarding acceptance of children with disabilities. These findings resonate with findings from other research that reported lack of knowledge and skills in special education and handling children with disabilities; lack of appropriate curriculum for teaching and learning activities for diverse children abilities; physical environmental of the centres; lack of human and financial support; and principals' personal belief regarding disabilities as barriers in accepting children with disabilities. The findings also revealed that some of the childcare centres management reluctant to embrace inclusion by having regulation against inclusion of children with disabilities in their centres. Furthermore; principals and teachers are seen to favour in accepting children that are easy to handle and able to manage themselves regardless of their disabilities.

However; not all principals rejected inclusion of children with disabilities. Humanity; principals 'personal experiences; and recommendation from specialist are identified as the reasons in in accepting children with disabilities; in addition to lack of information provided by parents regarding their children disabilities. This is because principals take inclusion as rational decision and personal. Therefore; the acceptance for the children with disabilities is mainly due to love for children and concerning on their well-being.

From the findings of this research; it can be concluded that despite policies on disabilities have been enacted and awareness on benefits of inclusion on children with and without disabilities have been disclosed to public; the implementation in general ECCE are still poor. There is a lot to be done to improve for children with disabilities to be included in general childcare centres including social stigma and support from various shareholders.

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