Inclusive education in Brunei Darussalam

Teng Leong Koay

Brunei Darussalam is an independent Islamic Sultanate located in the northern part of Borneo in Southeast Asia. It is an oil rich country with a land area of 5,765 square kilometers that shares its borders with the Malaysian state of Sarawak. The capital, Bandar Seri Begawan, is located in a district known as Brunei-Muara, one of the four districts that make up Brunei Darussalam (the other districts are Tutong, Belait and Temburong). The population of Brunei Darussalam is estimated at 357,800, comprising 66.3 per cent Malays, 11.2 per cent Chinese and 22.5 per cent other races (Department of Statistics, 2005).

Overview of Brunei Darussalam’s education system

The education system of Brunei Darussalam has its roots in the British school system and has adopted a 7-3-2-2 pattern, which represents primary, lower secondary, upper secondary and pre-tertiary levels, respectively. Students are required to sit for four public examinations throughout the length of their schooling years, one at the end of the primary cycle and three more at the end of lower and upper secondary and pre-tertiary levels, respectively. The medium of instruction from pre-school to Primary 3 is the Malay language for all subjects except English language. It is changed to English from Primary 4 onwards for Science, Mathematics and Geography. In 2005, a total of 102,921 students were enrolled in 164 government and 76 non-government schools (Ministry of Education, 2005).

Statements found in the National Education Policy (Ministry of Education, 1992, p.7) highlight an education system that aims to:

…give all Bruneian children every opportunity to achieve at least an upper secondary or vocational education… To provide opportunities for all children in Brunei Darussalam to develop to their full potential so that they play a useful role in the development of the country…

The focus on providing opportunities for all Bruneian children has led to a practice of admitting children with special needs, especially those with mild disabilities, into regular schools. However, many of these children met with academic failure and subsequently repeated grade levels. This pattern of repeated failures and repeating grade levels among children with special needs, resulting in the presence of many over-aged students across grade levels, was attributed to the lack of remediation available within mainstream schools to adequately address the learning needs of these children (Omar, 2001). Observations that the education system has a strong orientation towards valuing academic performance (Abu Bakar, 1999) as well as being teacher- and curriculum-centred, examination-oriented, rigid and inflexible (Larking, 1993), further exacerbated the negative learning experiences of many children with special needs in the mainstream.

Turning point in the provision of special education

To arrest the large number of students who were failing in the school system, the Ministry of Education introduced special education into mainstream schools to provide the needed assistance to help children and youth with special needs cope better (Csapo & Omar, 1996). The Special Education Proposal (SEU, 1994), presented to the Ministry of Education in 1994, made the following recommendations.

1. The Special Education Unit (SEU) should be set up without delay to begin the planning and implementation of a special education system within mainstream education in Brunei Darussalam.
2. The Learning Assistance Model should be used to deal with the learning problems of students. It was proposed that at least one Learning Assistance Teacher (LAT) be trained for each school.
3. The setting up of the National Advisory Committee on Special Education comprising the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports, Ministry of Law, University of Brunei Darussalam and Parent Representative. This Committee will meet once a month to advise, monitor and facilitate the development of special education in Brunei Darussalam.
4. The Ministry of Education should formulate a clear policy statement of special education to reinforce its commitment to the education of all children.
5. The ministries of Education, Health and Culture and Youth and Sports should formulate a comprehensive plan for people with disabilities with a clearly defined area of responsibilities.

The adoption of the Special Education Proposal by the Ministry of Education in 1994 was a turning point in the development of...
special education in Brunei Darussalam (Koay, 1996). According to Wong and Mak (2005), the SEU was set up at the end of 1994, with the following objectives, roles and responsibilities to:

1. identify students with special educational needs (SEN);
2. increase the awareness of all teachers and school personnel on students with SEN;
3. establish educational services for students with SEN within the inclusive school system;
4. increase the understanding of parents and the public in general on students with SEN;
5. develop resources for students with SEN;
6. keep a national data bank on students with SEN;
7. develop specific primary and secondary programmes, as well as programmes for school staff on special education;
8. evaluate the effectiveness of the special education programmes;
9. initiate and carry out research on special education and education in general;
10. make short- and long-term plans and implement appropriate services within the school system;
11. liaise with national and international agencies in order to provide the most effective services for students with SEN;
12. prepare guidelines and assist in formulating policies for the successful implementation of special educational programmes and services.

Policy initiatives

During the past few decades, there has been a growing worldwide commitment to education for children with special needs, especially through the United Nations’ (UN’s) activities and global statements, which have influenced Brunei Darussalam’s decision to embrace the concept of inclusive education. The Declaration of Rights of Disabled Persons (UN, 1975) calls for member countries to support human rights, education, integration, full employment, and conditions of economic and social progress for persons with disabilities. The Convention on the Rights of the Child reaffirms the rights of all children to equal education without discrimination within the mainstream education system (UN, 1989).

One hundred and fifty-five countries, including Brunei Darussalam, attended the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation’s (UNESCO’s) World Conference of Education for All, held in Jomtien, Thailand, in 1990 (Norjum, 2002). This conference highlighted the basic learning needs of all children and called attention to the unmet needs of students with special needs. UNESCO designated the year 1992 as the ‘Year of Special Needs in the Classroom’, and ministries of education around the world examined and modified their activities in order to increase their assistance to children with special needs. In 1994, representatives from 92 governments (including Brunei Darussalam) and 25 international organisations attended the World Conference on Special Needs Education in Salamanca, Spain (Norjum, 2002). The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994) urged all governments to adopt, as a matter of law or policy, the principles of inclusive education.

In line with world trends towards inclusion, Brunei Darussalam’s Ministry of Education embraced the concept of inclusive education and its philosophy, as stated in the Special Education Policy Guidelines (SEU, 1997), which emphasised that:

All pupils are able to learn given an appropriate learning environment. Appropriate learning environments can be created within the inclusive school. The inclusive school is one that provides appropriate instruction for all pupils based on their level.

The former Minister of Education, during the opening address of the 1st National Conference on Special Education in 1996 (Abdul Aziz, 1996), stressed that:

We must look at how the system can better serve all children, including children with special needs who require special education and related services if they are to realise their full potential... The special education, or special needs agenda in Brunei Darussalam, is an essential element of the drive for education for all. The emphasis is on inclusive education where the aim is to respond to the needs of all children.

The current Minister of Education, during his opening address at the 2nd International National Conference on Special Education (Abdul Rahman, 2005), reiterated the commitment and support towards inclusion:

Brunei Darussalam has recently become the 191st member state of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). In doing so, we have again demonstrated our commitment to ‘education for all’ and the implementation of inclusive education.

Teacher education initiatives

The quality of teachers’ implementation of special education programmes in schools depends on how teachers are trained. At his opening address to the 1st National Conference on Special Education (Abdul Aziz, 1996), the former Minister of Education emphasised that:

There is also a need for trained teachers to teach children with special needs... therefore, teachers must have the knowledge and special skills needed to educate them...

The emphasis on inclusive education, conveyed by the former Minister of Education during his opening address at the 1st National Conference on Special Education in 1996, coincided with as well as stimulated a number of important education reform agendas for school curricula and curricula for teacher training (Koay, Sim & Elkins, 2004). In the mid-1990s, the Ministry of Education introduced a number of major curriculum reforms in the areas of bilingual policy education, information technology and curriculum revisions for various school subjects. These initiatives not only predisposed schools to expect and experience change but also encouraged them to initiate change.
Moving in tandem with these changes at the school level were changes at the teacher training level. In the mid-1990s, the Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah Institute of Education (SHBIE), which is the sole teacher education institute in Brunei Darussalam, undertook a total curriculum reform that involved a major curriculum shift towards greater articulation, balance, coherence and differentiation (the so-called ABCD principles) of its new programme TEACH. This curriculum reform involved the integration of the major components: Teaching praxis, Education studies, Academic studies, Curriculum studies and Helpful other courses (Sim, 1999), and these integrated components are more aligned with the principles and practices of teacher preparation for inclusive education. Prior to these changes, SHBIE had been dissatisfied with the minimal pre-service exposure to special education that it was endeavouring to provide.

For its part, SHBIE adopted a three-pronged strategy for incorporating inclusive education in its programmes (Sim, Koay & Liew, 1999), namely:

1. Pre-service preparation, in terms of:
   - introduction of a core course on inclusive education in the revised primary teacher education programme;
   - inclusion of methods of teaching children with learning problems in several curriculum studies courses.

2. In-service upgrading, in terms of:
   - conversion of upgrading programmes to Bachelor in Education (BEd at the primary education level) in specialised areas, including special education;
   - offering individual courses/modules for in-service courses, including the existing Certificate in Special Education courses, and allowing for exemptions in the upgrading programmes, thereby reducing its total duration.

3. Post-graduate specialisation, in terms of:
   - introduction of new areas of specialisation, including special education, with senate approval of the revised Master’s of Education (MEd) regulations;
   - recruitment of additional highly qualified staff in special education to conduct upgrading and postgraduate programmes at SHBIE, so that the Special Education Unit of the Ministry of Education, as well as SHBIE, can concentrate on developing a critical mass of specialised local staff.

SHBIE jointly mounted, in collaboration with the Special Education Unit at the Ministry of Education, the Certificate in Special Education in January 1995 to train special education teachers, called Special Educational Needs Assistance (SENA) teachers, to cater to the learning needs of students with special needs in regular schools. SENA teachers are equipped with basic skills and knowledge about children with special needs. Their main roles are to conduct screening tests to identify students with special needs and to prepare and implement individualised educational plans (IEPs) for these students. The first cohort of SENA teachers completed their training in May 1996. Beginning June 1996, the Learning Assistance Programme was implemented in regular schools in Brunei Muara District. By December 2005, a total of 235 SENA teachers had been trained.

The BEd (Special Education) and the MEd (Special Education) were offered by SHBIE in August 1999 as opportunities for SENA teachers to upgrade themselves.

**Implementation model**

The implementation of special education into regular schools in Brunei Darussalam is based on the Learning Assistance Model. The SENA teachers are responsible for identifying students with special needs by using various screening tests designed by SEU (SEU, 1998a). A draft IEP is prepared by the SENA teacher, with input from class teachers and parents. The draft IEP is then presented to the School Based Team (SBT), comprising the head teacher as chairperson, SENA teacher, regular class teacher and parents (SEU, 1998c). The SBT discusses the various adaptations/modifications in the draft IEP to ensure that the student receives an appropriate education programme to meet his or her individual needs. Members of the SBT collaborate and discuss ways to ensure the provision of appropriate resources and support for students with special needs at the school level (SEU, 1998b). The teamwork and successful partnerships generated by the SBT help promote decision-making and shared responsibility, thus translating inclusive education into reality (Norjum, 2000).

Once the IEP for a student has been approved, it is implemented and monitored by the SENA teacher in collaboration with regular class teachers. From time to time, depending on the needs of the student, he or she may be pulled out for a short period to the Learning Assistance Centre (LAC) for individual or small group instruction by the SENA teachers. In the LAC, the SENA teachers use a variety of teaching materials and teaching strategies, including direct instruction, task analysis, and reinforcement such as token economy system, precision teaching and record keeping procedures to monitor student progress. The SENA teacher also helps the class teachers to plan and make instructional adaptations for students with special needs, demonstrates teaching techniques and assists in the monitoring of the student’s progress.

**Summary of developments**

Since 1994, a number of major developments has occurred to serve the needs of students with special needs within the regular schools. These developments reflect the country’s efforts to engage in reforms in various areas (e.g., curriculum, teacher education) at different levels (e.g., school levels, tertiary level) across relevant bodies (e.g., Ministries) to achieve quality education for as many students as possible within regular mainstream school settings. These major developments are summarised in Table 1.

**Conclusion**

The provision of special education supports and services for students with special needs within regular schools has grown at a steady rate in the past decade since 1994. To inform the future direction and development of inclusive education policy and practice in Brunei Darussalam, it is important that current practices related to school and tertiary levels be monitored and evaluated. There is an emerging body of research on related
aspects of inclusive education that is shedding light on the status quo of inclusive practices at the school as well as at tertiary levels. Many of these research studies have been completed by postgraduate and undergraduate students enrolled at the University of Brunei Darussalam as partial fulfilment of the requirements of their MEd (Special Education) and BEd (Special Education). These research studies, though preliminary in nature, have contributed to painting quite a positive picture of schools’ responses to inclusive education (e.g., Abdullah, 2000; Alus, 2001; Aziz, 2001; Mak, 2000; Pang, 2001; Osman, 2000; Saibah, 2000; Siti Zaleha, Amran & Bradshaw, 2005; Taibah, 2003).

Omar, Norjum, Pang & Mak (2004) surveyed six groups of respondents from 96 schools on the effectiveness of the Learning Assistance Programmes (LAPs) in primary schools in Brunei Darussalam. The results indicated that head teachers, parents, classroom teachers and pupils with special needs were supportive of the LAPs. This was reinforced by the SENA teachers who felt that their schools appreciated their contributions in the implication of educational programmes for pupils with special needs.

A major study (Koay, Sim & Elkins, 2004) that examined the attitudes and perceptions of Learning Assistance Teachers (SENA

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<th>Year</th>
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<td>1994</td>
<td>Conjoint University of Brunei Darussalam-Ministry of Education (UBD-MOE) Committee set up to prepare a plan for mounting the Certificate of Special Education for training Learning Assistance Teachers.</td>
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<td>1995</td>
<td>First intake of Certificate of Special Education. Dissemination activities of SEU, such as newsletters for schools, radio/television broadcasts for the public and Quarterly Reports for various Departments in MOE.</td>
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<td>1996</td>
<td>Monthly school visits by SEU staff to assist, guide and advise SENA teachers, who were required to attend monthly meetings at the SEU for their continuing education. The 1st National Conference on Special Education was held, to prepare the Policy Guidelines for Special Education.</td>
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<td>1997</td>
<td>MOE approved the Policy Guidelines for Special Education. The 1st International Conference on Special Education, with the theme Inclusive Education: Inclusive Society was held.</td>
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<td>1999</td>
<td>A core course called ‘Inclusive Education’ was offered for the first time in Brunei Darussalam to all pre-service student teachers attending Primary Teachers Education Programmes in SHBIE. First intake of BEd (Special Education) and MEd (Special Education). The 2nd National Conference on Special Education, with the theme Inclusive Education: Teaching to Diversity in the New Millennium, was held. PP2 extended to 18 secondary schools. Pilot Gifted Enrichment Project for selected Primary 4 pupils.</td>
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<td>2000</td>
<td>Pilot Project 1 (PP1), which began in 1998, extended to Primary 3. Pre-Vocational Programme (PP2) extended to Year 2. Second phase of Gifted Enrichment Project for Primary 4 and Primary 5 pupils</td>
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<td>2001</td>
<td>Workshops conducted by SEU staff for school teachers on (a) Visual impairment, (b) Sign Language, (c) Remedial Teaching and (d) Use of various teaching strategies. Evaluation of PP1 and PP2.</td>
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<td>2002</td>
<td>Workshops on dyslexia, autism and teaching Pre-Vocational classes conducted by SEU. Introductory Course on Inclusive Education for teachers from non-government schools conducted by SEU. The Management Information System Resource Centre and Data Bank were developed and implemented.</td>
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<td>2003</td>
<td>A Committee was formed to prepare the Curriculum Guidelines for Students with High Support Needs. Workshop on Coaching Students with SEN in Sport Skills for SENA and Homeroom Teachers. The Independent Living Skills Centre was set up for students with high support needs (HSN) in Brunei-Muara district.</td>
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<td>2004</td>
<td>Curriculum Guidelines for Students with High Support Needs completed and presented to Curriculum Development Department. A four-day Workshop on Effective Strategies for Educators of Individuals with SEN jointly organised by SEU and Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (ISEESCO). The Enrichment Programme Professional Development Training was conducted. The proposal to hire teacher Aides to assist SENA Teachers was approved.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>2nd International Special Education Conference with the theme, Our Children Our Future: Global Approaches was held.</td>
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<td>2006</td>
<td>Ad hoc Committee comprising staff members of SEU and the University of Brunei Darussalam prepared the Proposal for the Education of the Gifted and Talented, which was submitted to the Ministry of Education.</td>
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teachers) and Regular Teachers (RTs) towards inclusive education, was initiated in 2000, with the specific intention of recommending possible improvements to policy and practice regarding inclusive education in Brunei Darussalam. The participants of the study comprised 56 Upgrading SENA teachers (ULs), 96 Practising SENA teachers (PLs), 308 Regular Teachers with experience in teaching children with special needs (RYS) and 308 Regular Teachers with no such experience (RNs).

In terms of quantitative findings, the most consistent results showed significant differences in the attitudes and perceptions towards inclusion, perceived self-efficacy, perceived desirability, feasibility and frequency of use of instructional adaptations for inclusive classrooms; and perceived actual and ideal collaborative roles of SENA teachers and RTs between the SENA teachers and RTs. In general, an invariant order was found, with ULs having the highest means and RNs the lowest.

There were various qualitative differences between the SENA teachers and RTs in their open-ended responses related to perceptions of inclusive education; in their examples of classroom adaptations for instruction; in the supports needed and barriers encountered when using these adaptations; in the examples of collaborative roles for inclusive classrooms; and in their supports needed and barriers encountered during collaborative efforts. It was, however, observed that the strategies they suggested were very similar and not very innovative.

While the findings imply that the current programmes and activities for inclusive education are apparently proceeding in the right direction, they have also been suggestive of some specific changes that might help towards improving policy and practice, not only in schools but also for teacher education in Brunei Darussalam. For example, developing innovative strategies for teaching and managing children with special needs, special attention has to be paid to the collaborative relationships between SENA teachers and RTs. Research into specific collaborative arrangements, including in-depth case studies, comprise one of several possible options for further research.

More recently, Koay, Lim, Sim & Elkins (2006) investigated the perceptions of both learning assistance and regular teachers towards including students with special needs in the regular school environment. The results of this study on teachers’ perceptions towards including students with special needs provide some evidence of the progress of inclusive education hitherto, as well as delineate some areas of concerns for improving the success of inclusive education in Brunei Darussalam.

As inclusive practices occupy a greater part of teachers’ work in regular schools, a more comprehensive body of research is needed to continually monitor, inform and improve current inclusive education efforts in the school system. In the past decade, Brunei Darussalam has achieved significant developments in promoting the practice of inclusive education within its mainstream schools. Further research, when strategically planned and developed, can certainly help in the future development and improvement of inclusive education in Brunei Darussalam.

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Biographical notes

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