



## **RESEARCH EDGE**

### **INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: A WORKING MODEL FROM MALAYSIA**

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# INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: A WORKING MODEL FROM MALAYSIA

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Inclusive education is when all students, regardless of any challenges they may have, are placed in age-appropriate general education classes. These classes are in their neighborhood schools where high quality instruction, interventions and supports are rendered to enable them to meet the learning outcomes as per the intended curriculum.

McManis (2017) has shown that:

*“Successful inclusive education happens primarily through accepting, understanding, and attending to student differences and diversities, which can include the physical, cognitive, academic, social, and emotional. This is not to say that students never need to spend time out of regular education classes, because sometimes they do for a very particular purpose - for instance, for speech or occupational therapy. Nonetheless, the goal is that services outside of the classroom should be the exception.”*

The driving principle is to make all students feel welcomed, appropriately challenged with respected work, and supported in their efforts. Hence, it is also critically important that the adults are supported as well. This includes the regular education teacher and the special education teacher as well as all other staff and faculty who are key stakeholders; and this also includes parents.

Malaysia, a developing nation in Southeast Asia, has reached the stage where services for children who require special attention or needs are rapidly changing and growing. Families who have children with special education needs are continuously confronted with challenges to receive adequate developmental services in alignment with the needs of their children.

The aim of this paper is to explore the 25 years journey of a passionate educator in Malaysia who has successfully pioneered inclusive education for all children in early childhood (below the age of 6 years), through an initiative called “The Inclusive Outdoor Classroom (IOC)”. IOC strongly advocates that the Government of Malaysia be more involved in supporting parents of children with special needs financially, and in the provision of services. Family friendly environments are developed for children with special needs, resulting in parents and the community enjoying a developmentally appropriate partnership. The goal of IOC is to provide quality service and expertise while embracing inclusion for all, and to mainstream the project through policy makers and Government support.

This Malaysian case study demonstrates that the more we include children with special needs with typically developing children, both parties grow from the interaction. The typically developing children come to realise that the children with disabilities are not bad, or so different. They are more alike than they are different. This change in mindset is critical for inclusive education to work. Once the attitude can be changed, then the inclusive education approach will be much easier to be adopted.

Within The Bahamas, there has been much discussion and research with varying views and findings regarding special education, and by extension the inclusive classroom. There is a national push on inclusive education by the National Commission for Persons with Disabilities, a statutory body that has been mandated to carry out the provisions of the Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities) Act 2014 (NCPD, 2016). The Act, will play a key role in shifting the negative "cultural attitudes" towards persons with disabilities. Thus, the approach of shifting the attitudes of all the stakeholders, as in the IOC model, may be one approach that will help promote inclusion in schools, and subsequently in the workplace.

In conclusion, there is a desire in The Bahamas for inclusion. How do we make that work? How do we turn this desire to action? How do we realise the desire in real life? Inclusion is a process that takes time to work. Realising inclusion in the schools, workplaces, sports, and other institutions will be done gradually. Nonetheless, the social changes that inclusion imparts on the population will be significant. The barriers and the fears of the unknown will be overcome when individuals with disabilities are better understood.

**Keywords:** *Inclusive education, outdoor classroom, children with special needs, disabilities, Malaysia, The Bahamas*

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Banu Devi is currently attached to the Online Education, at the University of The Bahamas. Previously she served as the Country Director for Pearson Malaysia managing the entire Pearson business from Higher Ed. Qualification, K-12 and English solutions. Prior to that she served in the Global Engagement Office, as the Director for Transnational Education (TNE). Banu was past Dean of Taylor's School of Computing and IT, a position she held for 8 years where she was responsible to implement strategic objectives from the University's mission. Prior to this appointment, Banu served as the Head for Teaching & Learning Centre at Taylor's College Subang Jaya, where her role was instrumental in setting up a centre for the implementation of development programmes for students and lecturers. She initiated a First Year Experience project and the Taylor's Graduate Capabilities in Taylor's. It has always been a personal interest for Banu to work on community outreach projects in her free time and one of them was the Inclusive Outdoor Classroom (IOC) for about 2 years with the founder Anne Subashini. She also initiated and lead a University wide community project called the "1-Taylor's-Bario Project, where she raised a total sum of close to RM800,000 to build a hostel for an indigenous community in Sarawak, Borneo.

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Dr. Janice Kreiner is an Assistant Professor in Special Education at the Faculty of Social & Educational Studies, University of The Bahamas. She received her Ph.D. from Kent State University in Special Education with a Concentration in Transition Services, M.A. also from Kent State University in Motor Development with Handicapping Conditions, and a B.S. in Elementary Education. Dr. Kreiner has implemented numerous disability advocacy programmes across USA, including mentoring special education and general education staff, as well as administrators regarding best practices in special education. Dr. Kreiner previously taught pre-service special education teachers at Baldwin Wallace College, Kent State University, and Ball State University. She was the Founder and Executive Director of the Portage County Traumatic Brain Injury Clubhouse. Jan has a long history of being very passionate about the education of students with disabilities and "making life work" for folks with disabilities.



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Since 1990, Anne Sivanathan has been working with, advocating for and in partnership with agencies, both government and non-profit interested in promoting inclusive education in early childhood and primary school environments. Prior to her work experience she received her formal training in the UK where she majored in Special Education. After leaving the UK upon her graduation she made a conscious decision to return to Malaysia the place of her upbringing to influence the integration of children with special needs in all educational environments. Her beginning years were in several early childhood sites as a teacher, administrator, and director/ owner. In each setting she encouraged parents who had children with special needs to partner with her so that together they could give the child a full developmental appropriate inclusive experience. Now she is at a point in her career shaping public policy by connecting to organizations which can impact change. Even today segregation of children with special needs persists in most educational environments in Malaysia. Her micro interventions at a grassroots level early in her career is now serving as the foundation for macro cross-section involvement which she hopes will change public will and government support leading to a paradigm shift regarding inclusive education in Malaysia. She has presented at local and international conferences on topics concerning inclusion. She consulted for British Council on the programme's sports for all lectures on the topic of disability in Universities locally and internationally. She is a co leader in the inclusion working group- and is also a board member of the International Advisory Group, World Forum Foundation, USA. She serves as an Executive Committee member in the National Association of Early childhood care and education Malaysia (NAECCEM) and National Autism Society of Malaysia (NASOM). Anne has been a scholarship recipient around her work advocating for inclusive education from the World Forum Foundation, USA, Melinda and Bill Gates Foundation, USA, British Council, UK Trade Investment and the Selangor State Government, Malaysia.