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# No Child Left Behind? From Policy to Practice: Exploring Inclusive Education through Malaysia's Zero Reject Initiative.

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## **Abstract**

*This qualitative study examines how Malaysia's Zero Reject Policy (ZRP) is experienced by stakeholders navigating inclusive education in diverse school contexts. Anchored in the broader theme of inclusive and holistic education, the research investigates the lived experiences of parents of children with disabilities (n=12), educators (n=14), and school administrators (n=6) across urban and rural settings through semi-structured interviews analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Findings reveal a significant policy-practice gap: while ZRP has increased formal enrolment and heightened awareness of inclusive education, substantial challenges persist in teacher preparedness, resource allocation, and systemic support, with many schools exhibiting patterns of "compliance inclusion" where students with disabilities are physically present but lack meaningful accommodations, responsive pedagogy, and affirming relationships. The study highlights the emotional burden families experience when navigating bureaucratic barriers and social stigma, while also identifying promising practices in collaborative school cultures and peer support strategies. By situating the Zero Reject Policy within global discourses on educational equity and disability rights, this research contributes empirically grounded insights into the complex realities of translating inclusive education policy into practice, underscoring the need for sustained professional development, strengthened family-school partnerships, and systemic approaches that prioritise not only physical access but also belonging, participation, and holistic well-being for all learners.*

**Keywords:** *Inclusive education; Zero Reject Policy; Educational equity; Disability inclusion; Malaysia*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has moved from the margins of policy debates to the centre of global education agendas, anchored in commitments such as the Salamanca Statement (1994) and Sustainable Development Goal 4, which call for inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all learners, including those with disabilities. Across many educational systems, these commitments have led to visible expansions of access, yet far less certainty remains about what genuine inclusion looks like in the everyday lives of schools, families, and children. Malaysia is no exception. Over the past decade, policy directions articulated in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 and related reforms have sought to reorient the education system toward rights-based, child-centred provision. The Zero Reject Policy (ZRP), introduced in 2019, represents a bold promise: no child with special educational needs would be denied entry into a government school.

In principle, the ZRP signals a decisive shift from viewing disability as grounds for exclusion to recognising all children as rightful members of their neighbourhood schools. The policy aligns with international human rights instruments such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and with UNESCO's guidance on building inclusive, equitable systems that attend not only to access but also to participation, achievement, and well-being. Ideally, an inclusive system under ZRP would ensure that children with disabilities enrol in local schools without bureaucratic obstruction, that teachers feel confident and supported to differentiate instruction, that schools are resourced with appropriate infrastructure and specialist support, and that families experience school as a site of partnership rather than struggle. Yet emerging reports from teachers, school leaders, and parents suggest that this ideal remains only partially realised. While enrolment numbers have increased and awareness of inclusion has grown, many schools continue to grapple with large class sizes, limited specialist support, and uneven readiness to respond to diverse learner needs.

### A. THE POLICY-PRACTICE IMPLEMENTATION GAP

Existing research in Malaysia has begun to document important aspects of this implementation gap. Studies examining teacher readiness and attitudes under the ZRP point to moderate levels of acceptance and perceived preparedness, but also highlight significant constraints relating to training, workload, and school culture, particularly in rural and under-resourced settings. Other scholarship

focuses on structural and policy dimensions, such as headteachers' understanding of inclusive education or administrative mechanisms for identifying and placing students with special educational needs. Comparative and policy-oriented analyses often frame inclusion through indicators of access, enrolment, or formal provision of services, drawing attention to governance arrangements but paying less attention to the lived realities of those who navigate the system daily.

At the same time, international scholarship underscores how stigma, low expectations, and deficit views of disability continue to undermine the promise of inclusion, even in systems with progressive policies on paper. What remains much less visible in the Malaysian literature are rich, qualitative accounts of how ZRP is experienced by parents who advocate for their children, by teachers who must translate policy into practice within crowded, examination-driven classrooms, and by school administrators who mediate between national directives and local constraints. Global research on families of children with disabilities demonstrates that parents frequently shoulder a disproportionate emotional and logistical burden: negotiating complex bureaucracies, absorbing subtle and overt forms of blame, and contending with social stigma that may silence or isolate them. Yet there is limited empirical work capturing how Malaysian families, situated within particular cultural, religious, and socioeconomic contexts, interpret and experience the promise and limits of "zero rejection." Similarly, while research on teacher preparedness often measures attitudes and self-efficacy through surveys, it tends to give less space to teachers' own narratives about uncertainty, improvisation, and the emotional labour of striving to be inclusive without adequate training or systemic backing.

### B. KNOWLEDGE GAPS AND RESEARCH CONTRIBUTION

This study responds to these gaps by examining the implementation of Malaysia's Zero Reject Policy through the lived experiences of three interconnected stakeholder groups: parents of children with disabilities, educators working in mainstream and special education settings, and school administrators across diverse contexts. Drawing on a qualitative, phenomenological approach informed by the social model of disability and ecological systems perspective, the research explores how policy intentions are taken up, adapted, or constrained at the levels of classroom practice, school organisation, and family-school relationships. In doing so, it pays particular attention to two dimensions often underplayed in policy

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discourse: the emotional toll of navigating exclusionary barriers, and the role of relationship-based practice in fostering genuine belonging.

The primary contribution of this research lies in foregrounding voices that have been relatively marginal in existing scholarship on inclusion in Malaysia. By centring the lived experiences of families navigating systemic barriers, teachers attempting to translate policy into classroom reality, and administrators mediating between policy mandates and school-level constraints, the study offers a more complete picture of what inclusion entails in practice. Moreover, by attending to emotional dimensions—the hope, disappointment, exhaustion, and resilience that families and educators experience—the research challenges a technocratic framing of inclusion as merely a matter of policy compliance or resource allocation. Instead, it positions inclusion as fundamentally relational and transformative, requiring shifts in school culture, teacher-family partnerships, and community attitudes alongside structural supports.

### **C. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND SIGNIFICANCE**

This study is guided by two primary research questions:

**RQ1:** How do parents, teachers, and school administrators experience and interpret the Zero Reject Policy in their respective roles?

**RQ2:** What structural, cultural, and relational factors enable or constrain the translation of ZRP from policy mandate to inclusive practice?

To address these questions, the study pursues four interconnected objectives: (1) to explore how different stakeholder groups understand and experience the Zero Reject Policy in their everyday contexts; (2) to identify key enablers and barriers—structural, cultural, and relational—that shape the movement from policy to practice; (3) to examine how issues of emotional support, stigma, and responsive teaching intersect with questions of access and equity; and (4) to generate context-sensitive, evidence-based recommendations for strengthening ZRP implementation so that schools become not merely open to children with disabilities but also affirming and responsive spaces that support their holistic well-being.

### **D. Significance of the Study**

The significance of this research spans academic, practical, and ethical dimensions. Academically, the study addresses identified gaps in qualitative, lived-

experience research on inclusive education implementation in Malaysia, a context that has received less scholarly attention than other ASEAN nations despite its ambitious policy commitments. It contributes to theory by integrating frameworks from disability studies, systems thinking, and well-being research—an integration that remains underexplored in the Malaysian inclusion literature. The adoption of a phenomenological approach allows for deep examination of how policy is interpreted and enacted in specific cultural and institutional contexts, thereby enriching broader debates about the relationship between policy intention and implementation reality.

From a practical standpoint, the research generates empirically grounded insights that can inform professional development for teachers, policy refinement for administrators, and advocacy strategies for families and disability rights organisations. By documenting specific barriers and promising practices, the findings offer actionable pathways for improving inclusive education rather than abstract prescriptions. Ethically and socially, the study amplifies the voices of families and educators who have been navigating the complexities of ZRP implementation, often with limited recognition or support. By documenting their experiences with honesty and nuance, the research honours their expertise and advocates for systemic approaches to inclusion that prioritise both access and belonging, both compliance and care.

### **E. PAPER ORGANISATION AND METHODOLOGY**

This paper is organised as follows. The Literature Review examines relevant scholarship organised thematically around global policy frameworks, the Malaysian education policy context, teacher preparedness and professional development, family experiences and barriers to inclusion, and holistic well-being approaches. The Methodology section describes the qualitative research design, sampling strategy, data collection procedures, and thematic analysis approach, with attention to trustworthiness and ethical considerations. The Results section presents four major themes that emerged from participant narratives: Access and Enrolment Under ZRP, Teacher Readiness and Implementation Barriers, Family Experiences and Systemic Strain, and Emerging Practices Toward Meaningful Inclusion. The Discussion interprets these findings in light of existing literature, addresses the research questions, explores limitations, and articulates implications for practice and policy. The Conclusion synthesises key insights and proposes a future

research agenda for advancing inclusive education in Malaysia and beyond.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on inclusive education has expanded significantly since international frameworks such as the Salamanca Statement and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities positioned inclusion as a rights-based imperative rather than a discretionary policy choice. At the same time, there is growing recognition that formal commitments to “education for all” do not automatically translate into equitable experiences for learners with disabilities, whose participation and well-being continue to be shaped by structural, cultural, and relational factors within schools and communities. This chapter examines key strands of scholarship relevant to Malaysia’s Zero Reject Policy (ZRP): global and national policy frameworks on inclusion, empirical work on ZRP and inclusive schooling in Malaysia, research on teacher preparedness and school readiness, studies of family experience and stigma, and emerging perspectives on culturally responsive and holistic approaches to inclusion.

### A. Global Frameworks for Inclusive and Equitable Education

Internationally, inclusive education has been framed as both a human right and a condition for achieving wider social justice objectives. The Salamanca Statement called for ordinary schools to accommodate all children, arguing that inclusive schools are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, building inclusive societies, and improving the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of education systems. Subsequent guidance from UNESCO and the Sustainable Development Goals has broadened the focus from mere access to issues of participation, learning outcomes, and well-being, emphasising the removal of barriers and the creation of supportive environments for diverse learners. These frameworks stress that inclusion is a systemic project requiring changes in policy, resource allocation, school culture, pedagogy, and assessment, rather than a matter of simply placing students with disabilities into existing structures.

### B. Inclusive Education Policy in Malaysia and the Zero Reject Policy

Malaysia’s commitment to inclusive education is articulated in policy documents such as the Malaysia Education Blueprint (PPPM 2013–2025), which sets targets for increasing the proportion of students with special educational needs in inclusive programmes and mainstream

settings. The ZRP, introduced in 2019, operationalises a “no rejection” principle by mandating that all government schools register learners with disabilities, thereby removing formal barriers to entry at the point of enrolment. Scholars describe this as a major shift from segregated or selective provision towards a more inclusive, rights-based model, aligned with international obligations. However, studies also note that policy texts offer limited guidance on implementation details, such as teacher deployment, support services, coordination between mainstream and special education personnel, and mechanisms for monitoring the quality of inclusive practice. This lack of operational clarity contributes to variability in how ZRP is interpreted and enacted at school level.

### C. Teacher Preparedness, School Readiness, and Systemic Constraints

Research on inclusive education consistently identifies teacher beliefs, knowledge, and skills as central to effective practice. In Malaysia, several studies examine teacher readiness for ZRP and inclusive schooling, often using survey-based measures of attitudes and self-efficacy. Findings typically show moderate to high levels of stated acceptance of students with special needs, alongside persistent concerns about workload, inadequate training, limited support staff, and lack of appropriate materials. Work focusing on rural schools suggests that teachers may endorse inclusion in principle but feel underprepared to differentiate instruction, manage diverse classrooms, and collaborate with specialists, especially where multi-grade teaching and resource scarcity are prevalent. International studies echo these patterns, indicating that one-off workshops and generic professional development do little to change practice unless accompanied by sustained, context-embedded support such as coaching, collaborative inquiry, and reflective practice opportunities.

At the school level, “readiness” for inclusion is influenced not only by individual teacher capacity but also by leadership, organisational culture, and the availability of support systems. Research on headteachers and administrators in Malaysia suggests that understanding of inclusive education varies, with some leaders viewing ZRP as primarily an administrative compliance task rather than a catalyst for transforming teaching and learning. Studies highlight challenges such as large class sizes, inflexible curricula, exam-oriented accountability pressures, and inadequate infrastructure, all of which constrain schools’ ability to provide meaningful support to learners with disabilities despite formal acceptance at the point of enrolment. These constraints underscore the need to see teacher preparedness as nested within wider structures, not

as an individual deficit to be remedied solely through training.

#### **D.Family Experiences, Stigma, and Emotional Labour**

While policy and school-based research is relatively well developed, scholarship focusing on families of children with disabilities, particularly in the Malaysian context, is more limited. Global studies indicate that families often carry a disproportionate share of the burden of making inclusion work: they navigate fragmented services, advocate for accommodations, and absorb the emotional costs of repeated encounters with stigma and bureaucratic resistance. Parents describe experiences of being blamed for their child's difficulties, facing subtle discouragement from enrolling in mainstream schools, and encountering environments where their children are physically present but socially marginalised. These dynamics can erode trust in schools and contribute to parental burnout, especially where support networks are weak and socioeconomic resources are constrained.

In many Asian contexts, including Malaysia, disability intersects with cultural norms around academic success, family honour, and religious interpretations, which can either exacerbate or mitigate stigma. Yet empirical work capturing how Malaysian parents interpret and respond to ZRP, how they experience school–family communication, and how they negotiate tensions between policy promises and everyday realities remains sparse. Existing local research tends to foreground professional or policy-maker perspectives, leaving family voices comparatively underrepresented. This gap is significant because inclusive education, as conceptualised in global frameworks, depends on genuine partnerships with families rather than episodic, problem-driven contact.

#### **E.Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, Holistic Well-Being, and Inclusion**

Another strand of literature relevant to ZRP concerns culturally responsive pedagogy and holistic approaches to student well-being. Culturally responsive teaching views learners' cultural, linguistic, and experiential backgrounds as assets, arguing that instruction should affirm identities, build on prior knowledge, and connect learning to students' lived realities. Research suggests that such approaches can enhance engagement and achievement for students from marginalised groups, including those with disabilities, when combined with differentiated instruction and flexible assessment. In parallel, work on social-emotional learning and holistic education links inclusive environments to broader indicators of well-being, such as sense of belonging, positive relationships,

and emotional safety, not just academic performance.

Despite this, much of the implementation discourse around ZRP remains framed in terms of access and basic support services, with less attention to whether classrooms affirm the identities and strengths of learners with disabilities or support their social-emotional development. There is limited empirical evidence on how Malaysian teachers integrate culturally responsive strategies into inclusive practice, how school climates support or undermine belonging for students with disabilities, or how well-being is conceptualised by families and educators in relation to inclusion. Integrating these perspectives into the study of ZRP implementation offers a way to move beyond narrow metrics of access towards a more holistic understanding of what it means for children to flourish in school.

#### **F. Positioning the Present Study**

Taken together, the literature indicates that Malaysia's ZRP sits at the intersection of ambitious rights-based policy, uneven school-level capacity, and underexplored family and cultural dynamics. Existing work has illuminated structural reforms, teacher attitudes, and some aspects of school readiness, but has largely approached inclusion from the perspective of systems and professionals rather than the intertwined lived experiences of parents, teachers, and administrators in specific communities. There is a particular paucity of qualitative research that foregrounds the emotional and relational dimensions of implementing ZRP—how hope, frustration, resilience, and fatigue shape actors' engagement with policy—and that considers how culturally responsive practice and holistic notions of well-being might reframe what successful inclusion looks like.

By adopting a qualitative, phenomenological design and drawing on frameworks from the social model of disability, ecological systems theory, and culturally responsive pedagogy, the present study seeks to address these gaps. It builds on prior scholarship by situating Malaysia's ZRP within global discourses on inclusive education and equity, while contributing new insights into how policy is translated, contested, and reimagined in everyday settings by those most directly affected. In doing so, it aims to inform both academic debates and practical efforts to create schools that are not only formally open to students with disabilities, but also **genuinely** inclusive spaces that support their participation, learning, and well-being.

### **III . RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study adopts a qualitative research design to capture the nuanced, context-bound ways

in which Malaysia's Zero Reject Policy (ZRP) is interpreted and enacted by those who live and work within the school system. A qualitative approach is particularly appropriate for this inquiry because the aim is not to measure attitudes at scale or test predetermined hypotheses, but rather to understand how policies are experienced, negotiated, and sometimes resisted in everyday practice. The decision to pursue qualitative inquiry stems from the recognition that existing research on ZRP implementation has been dominated by survey-based studies that, while valuable for establishing broad patterns, offer limited insight into the processes, relationships, and emotional realities that shape inclusive education on the ground. By foregrounding the voices of parents, teachers, and school administrators, this methodology is aligned with the social model of disability, which locates disability in the interaction between individuals and their environments rather than in individual deficits, and with ecological perspectives that view schools as nested within wider policy and community systems.

#### A. Research Design

The study is framed within a phenomenological tradition, which seeks to explore how participants make sense of particular phenomena in this case, inclusion under the ZRP within their own lifeworld's. Phenomenology is well suited to examining how policies are translated into lived realities because it privileges participants' meanings, emotions, and relationships over externally imposed categories. At the same time, the study incorporates elements of an interpretivist case study approach, focusing on a bounded set of schools and communities to allow in-depth exploration of context while still engaging broader questions about inclusive education policy and practice in Malaysia. This combination enables both rich description of individual experiences and analytic attention to patterns that cut across roles and sites.

#### B. Research Setting and Participant Selection

The research was conducted in a purposive sample of government primary schools across three Malaysian states—Selangor, Perak, and Sabah—selected to reflect variation in geography (urban and rural), socioeconomic resource levels, and prior experience with inclusive education initiatives. Selangor provided access to well-resourced urban schools in the Klang Valley, Perak represented semi-urban and rural contexts in peninsular Malaysia, and Sabah offered insight into implementation challenges in East Malaysia where linguistic diversity and infrastructure constraints are more pronounced.

Within these settings, three groups of participants were recruited through purposive sampling: (1)

parents or primary caregivers of children with disabilities enrolled under the ZRP; (2) teachers working in mainstream classrooms or special education programmes; and (3) school administrators such as headteachers, senior assistants, or special education coordinators. Purposive sampling was employed to identify information-rich cases—participants who had direct, sustained engagement with ZRP processes and inclusive schooling, and whose perspectives could illuminate key dimensions of policy implementation.

Parent participants (n=12) were approached through school referrals, parent-teacher associations, and disability advocacy organisations. Sampling aimed to include diversity across several dimensions: disability categories (physical disabilities, learning disabilities, autism spectrum disorder, intellectual disabilities), socioeconomic backgrounds (low-income families receiving welfare support to middle-class families), ethnic groups (Malay, Chinese, Indian), and school settings (urban, semi-urban, rural). All parent participants had at least one child enrolled in a government primary school under the ZRP for a minimum of one academic year, ensuring they had substantial experience with implementation processes.

Teacher participants (n=14) were selected to represent variation in professional backgrounds and roles. The sample included mainstream classroom teachers without formal special education training (n=8), teachers with special education qualifications working in inclusive settings (n=4), and special education teachers in integrated programmes (n=2). Teachers ranged in experience from early-career (2-5 years) to veteran educators (15+ years), taught across different grade levels (Year 1 to Year 6), and represented multiple subject specialisations. Deliberate effort was made to recruit teachers from both urban schools with access to professional development and rural schools where training opportunities are limited.

Administrator participants (n=6) comprised headteachers (n=3), senior assistants responsible for student affairs or special education coordination (n=2), and one district education officer with oversight responsibilities for inclusive education. Administrators were selected based on their direct involvement in ZRP implementation, including enrolment decisions, resource allocation, teacher deployment, and liaison with parents and district authorities.

The final sample size of 32 participants was determined by the principle of information richness and adequacy for thematic analysis rather than by predetermined statistical targets. Data collection continued until the research team observed

substantial recurrence of themes across interviews—a working criterion indicating that major patterns had been captured, though we acknowledge that additional interviews might have revealed further nuances. Three eligible parents declined participation due to time constraints or reluctance to discuss sensitive experiences, and two teachers initially recruited withdrew before interviews due to transfer to other schools. No administrators declined participation.

This study adopts a qualitative research design to capture the nuanced, context-bound ways in which Malaysia's Zero Reject Policy (ZRP) is interpreted and enacted by those who live and work within the school system. A qualitative approach is appropriate where the aim is not to measure attitudes at scale, but to understand how policies are experienced, negotiated, and sometimes resisted in everyday practice. By foregrounding the voices of parents, teachers, and school administrators, the methodology is aligned with the social model of disability, which locates disability in the interaction between individuals and their environments rather than in individual deficits, and with ecological perspectives that view schools as nested within wider policy and community systems.

### C. Data Collection Procedures

Data were generated primarily through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted between March and October 2024. Semi-structured interviews offer a balance between comparability across participants and flexibility to follow issues that emerge as particularly salient. Separate interview protocols were developed for parents, teachers, and administrators, each organised around key domains while remaining open to emergent themes.

**Interview protocols** addressed the following areas:

*For parents:*

- Understanding of the Zero Reject Policy and how they first learned about it
- Experiences with school enrolment and placement processes
- Perceptions of their child's daily school experiences, academic progress, and social relationships
- Nature and quality of communication with teachers and school administrators

- Support systems, challenges, and emotional experiences of advocating for their child
- Cultural, religious, or community factors influencing their approach to inclusion
- Suggestions for improving inclusive education

*For teachers:*

- Understanding and interpretation of the Zero Reject Policy
- Experiences preparing for and teaching students with disabilities in their classrooms
- Pedagogical strategies, adaptations, and challenges encountered
- Access to training, resources, and collegial or administrative support
- Perceptions of their own preparedness and self-efficacy
- Experiences collaborating with special educators, counsellors, or parents
- Emotional dimensions of inclusive teaching (satisfaction, frustration, uncertainty)
- Recommendations for policy and practice improvement

*For administrators:*

- Role in implementing ZRP at the school level (enrolment, placement, resource allocation)
- Understanding of policy requirements and guidance from district/ministry
- Challenges in managing inclusive education within existing school structures
- Strategies for supporting teachers and engaging families
- Perceptions of school readiness and gaps in infrastructure, staffing, or expertise
- Views on how ZRP aligns with broader school priorities and accountability pressures
- Recommendations for systemic support

Interviews were conducted in participants' preferred language-Bahasa Malaysia (n=18) or English (n=14)-to ensure comfort and authentic expression.

Settings were chosen to maximise confidentiality and participant comfort: most teacher and administrator interviews took place in quiet school meeting rooms outside instructional hours, while parent interviews were conducted either at school (n=5), in participants' homes (n=6), or at neutral community locations such as cafés (n=1). Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with informed consent. Immediately following each interview, the researcher completed field notes capturing non-verbal cues, contextual information (e.g., school environment observations), and initial analytic impressions. For four parent participants and two teachers, brief follow-up conversations (15-30 minutes) were conducted by phone or in person to clarify ambiguous points or explore emergent themes in greater depth.

#### D. Translation Procedures

Interviews conducted in Bahasa Malaysia were transcribed verbatim in the original language by a trained research assistant fluent in both Bahasa Malaysia and English. Transcripts were then translated into English by the same assistant, with careful attention to preserving semantic meaning, emotional tone, and culturally specific terms. Where direct translation risked losing nuance, the translator provided both a literal translation and a contextual explanation (e.g., phrases related to *rezeki*, religious framing of disability, or culturally embedded concepts of family obligation).

To ensure translation quality, a subset of five transcripts was independently back-translated from English to Bahasa Malaysia by a second bilingual researcher who had not seen the original audio. Discrepancies between the original and back-translated versions were reviewed collaboratively to refine translation protocols. Additionally, three Bahasa Malaysia-speaking participants were invited to review translated excerpts of their own interviews and confirm that meanings had been accurately conveyed; all three confirmed fidelity. Culturally significant terms that lack direct English equivalents (e.g., *amanah* [trust/responsibility], *gotong-royong* [communal cooperation]) were retained in the original language and italicised, with explanatory footnotes in the manuscript.

#### E. Data Management and Thematic Analysis

Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and anonymised by removing identifying details (names of individuals, schools, specific locations) and assigning pseudonyms to participants and institutions. Transcripts were managed using NVivo 12 qualitative analysis software, with separate but linked files for each participant group to facilitate both within-group and cross-group analysis.

The study employed reflexive thematic analysis, following the iterative six-phase process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019): (1) familiarisation with the data; (2) generation of initial codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing the analytic narrative.

**Phase 1: Familiarisation.** The lead researcher read and re-read all 32 transcripts multiple times to gain a holistic sense of the data, noting initial ideas about patterns, contrasts, and emotionally resonant moments. This immersive engagement included listening to audio recordings while reading transcripts to attune to tone, pauses, and emphasis.

**Phase 2: Initial coding.** Coding began inductively, with descriptive labels applied to meaningful segments of text. Initial codes were closely aligned with participant language and concerned both semantic content (what was said) and latent meaning (underlying assumptions, emotions). Examples of early codes included "bureaucratic navigation," "informal peer support," "blame and defensiveness," "improvisation without training," "cultural expectations of academic success," and "hope mixed with exhaustion." This phase generated approximately 180 initial codes.

**Phase 3: Searching for themes.** Codes were compared and clustered into candidate themes by identifying patterns of shared meaning. For example, codes related to "token enrolment," "physical presence without support," and "nominal compliance" were grouped under a candidate theme initially labelled "Inclusion in name only." Similarly, codes concerning "parental advocacy burden," "repeated school visits," "emotional exhaustion," and "fear of being seen as troublesome" were grouped under "Family navigation and emotional labour."

**Phase 4: Reviewing themes.** Candidate themes were reviewed against the full data set to ensure internal coherence (all coded extracts within a theme fit together meaningfully) and external distinctiveness (themes are clearly differentiated from one another). Some themes were merged (e.g., "Teacher uncertainty" and "Lack of training" were integrated into "Teacher readiness and systemic constraints"), others were split to capture important distinctions, and a few were discarded as insufficiently grounded. This iterative process involved creating thematic maps to visualise relationships between themes and subthemes.

**Phase 5: Defining and naming themes.** The final thematic structure comprised four overarching themes, each with 2-4 subthemes: (A) Access and Enrolment Under the Zero Reject Policy; (B) Teacher Readiness and the Reality of Classroom Inclusion; (C) Family Experiences, Stigma, and

Emotional Labour; and (D) Emerging Practices Toward Meaningful Inclusion. Each theme was defined with attention to its scope, internal variation, and relationship to the research questions.

**Phase 6: Producing the analytic narrative.** Writing the results involved selecting illustrative quotations, contextualising them within themes, and weaving them into a coherent narrative that addressed the research questions. Throughout analysis, analytic memos were used to document interpretive decisions, note tensions and contradictions, and link emergent insights to the conceptual frameworks guiding the study.

While coding was conducted primarily by the lead researcher, two team meetings were held with co-investigators to review emerging themes, discuss alternative interpretations, and ensure that analysis remained grounded in participant perspectives rather than researcher assumptions. These discussions functioned as a form of investigator triangulation, enhancing the credibility of interpretations.

#### **F. Trustworthiness and Researcher Reflexivity**

Several strategies were employed to enhance trustworthiness. **Credibility** was supported through prolonged engagement (seven months of fieldwork), triangulation of perspectives across three stakeholder groups, and member checking. Preliminary findings were shared with a subset of six participants (two parents, three teachers, one administrator) who confirmed that interpretations resonated with their experiences and offered additional reflections that enriched the analysis. **Dependability and confirmability** were strengthened by maintaining a detailed audit trail documenting sampling decisions, interview protocols, coding frameworks, theme development, and analytic revisions. **Transferability** is supported by thick description of context, participants, and findings, enabling readers to assess the applicability of insights to other settings.

**Reflexivity** was integral throughout the research process. The lead researcher maintained a reflexive journal to record assumptions, emotional reactions, methodological decisions, and positionality in relation to disability, inclusion, and the Malaysian education system. As an educator with a background in special needs education and personal connections to families of children with disabilities, the researcher entered the study with both insider knowledge and potential biases—including tendencies to empathise strongly with families and to view teachers' constraints sympathetically. These pre-existing orientations were interrogated through journaling and team discussions, prompting deliberate efforts to attend to disconfirming evidence (e.g., instances where teachers resisted inclusion for reasons they articulated as legitimate

concerns, or where parents expressed satisfaction despite challenges).

Recognising that power dynamics can shape what participants feel able to disclose, particular care was taken to frame interviews as conversations rather than evaluations, to emphasise confidentiality, and to avoid language that positioned parents or teachers as problems to be fixed. Interviews began with open-ended questions inviting participants to share their stories in their own terms, and the researcher used active listening and empathic responses to build rapport while maintaining analytic distance.

diagnoses, specific school achievements) were generalised or omitted.

Given the sensitive nature of some experiences discussed—such as stigma, exclusion, discrimination, or conflict with school personnel—interviews were conducted with attention to participants' emotional well-being. Participants were informed at the outset that they could pause, skip questions, or end the conversation at any time. The researcher monitored for signs of distress and offered breaks when needed. Information about counselling and support services (e.g., parent support groups, teacher well-being helplines) was provided to all participants. Two parents became visibly emotional when recounting difficult experiences; in both cases, the researcher paused recording, offered support, and allowed participants to decide whether to continue.

#### **IV. RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

This section presents and interprets the main themes that emerged from interviews with parents, teachers, and school administrators. The findings are organised around four overarching themes: (A) Access and Enrolment Under the Zero Reject Policy, (B) Teacher Readiness and the Reality of Classroom Inclusion, (C) Family Experiences, Stigma, and Emotional Labour, and (D) Emerging Practices Toward Meaningful Inclusion. Each theme combines descriptive results with interpretive discussion to show how the Zero Reject Policy is translated into everyday practice.

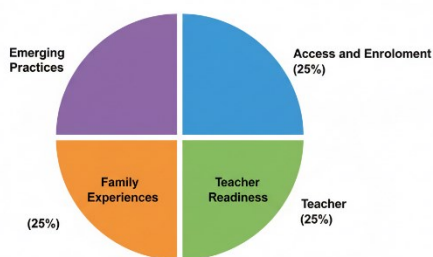


Figure 1: Overview of Four Main Themes from Thematic Analysis

**Figure 1. Overview of the four main themes that emerged from the thematic analysis of stakeholder interviews.**

Overall, four major, interrelated themes were identified through reflexive thematic analysis, capturing experiences at the points of access, classroom practice, family-school relationships, and pathways toward more holistic inclusion. These themes and their relative prominence in the data are summarised in Figure 1.

#### **A. Access and Enrolment Under the Zero Reject Policy**

Across all sites, participants acknowledged that the Zero Reject Policy has substantially reduced overt refusals at the point of school registration. Most parents and administrators reported that enrolment processes have become more straightforward since ZRP implementation, particularly for families who previously encountered informal gatekeeping. As Siti, a parent from a semi-urban school in Perak whose daughter has Down syndrome, explained: “Before, when I went to enrol her in Year 1, the school office told me maybe I should look at the special school first. This time, with the new policy, they just took my forms and registered her. No questions about whether she can cope.” Similarly, Encik Rahman, a headteacher in rural Sabah, confirmed: “We have clear instructions from the ministry—we must register all children, including those with special needs. I tell my staff, no more saying ‘we cannot take this child’” (Encik Rahman, Administrator-Rural-Headteacher).

However, acceptance at enrolment did not consistently translate into adequate preparation or support once children entered school. Several parents described a pattern in which their children were formally enrolled and assigned to mainstream classes, but little else changed. “They accepted him, yes, but after that... nothing. No plan, no meeting with the teacher to discuss what he needs. He just sits in class” (Amir, Parent-Urban-ADHD). Teachers corroborated this experience: “We get the

class list in January, and suddenly there are names we’ve never heard of, children with autism, dyslexia, whatever. Nobody tells us in advance. Nobody asks if we know how to teach them” (Nurul, Teacher-Rural-8yrs). In rural schools, participants also noted infrastructural constraints, such as lack of ramps or accessible toilets, that further limited participation for some students with physical disabilities.

These findings suggest that ZRP has largely fulfilled its narrow goal of eliminating formal enrolment refusals, but has only partially achieved its broader aim of fostering meaningful inclusion. The notion of “compliance inclusion” that emerged from participants’ language captures this tension: schools comply with the policy by accepting students with disabilities, yet often do so without accompanying planning, resources, or structural adjustments. In line with international literature on inclusive education, this pattern indicates that access alone is insufficient; without parallel attention to participation, support, and outcomes, inclusion risks becoming symbolic rather than substantive. The rural-urban variation in infrastructure also highlights how existing spatial inequalities intersect with disability to shape the quality of inclusion, underscoring the need for context-sensitive implementation of ZRP.

#### **B. Teacher Readiness and the Reality of Classroom Inclusion**

##### **Results**

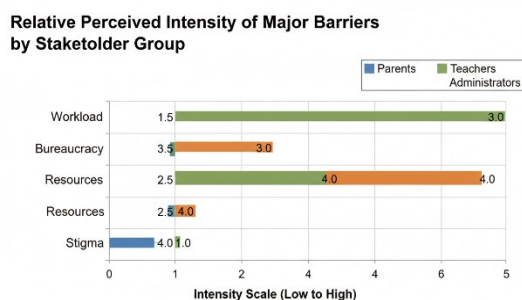
Nearly all teachers expressed a strong moral commitment to the principle that every child deserves schooling, yet most simultaneously reported feeling underprepared to teach students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms. Teachers without formal special education training described uncertainty about how to differentiate instruction, manage behaviour constructively, and assess learning fairly. As Farah noted: “We had one workshop, maybe three hours, where someone from the district office showed slides about autism and dyslexia. Then they said, ‘Do your best.’ That was it” (Farah, Teacher-Semi-urban-4yrs). Even teachers who attended multiple courses often characterised them as “too general” and disconnected from the realities of teaching classes of 35–40 students.

In response, many teachers relied on trial-and-error strategies and informal peer support to create ad hoc accommodations, such as simplified worksheets, preferential seating, and flexible homework expectations. “I make two versions of my worksheets now—one regular, one with pictures and simpler words. It takes hours, but what choice do I have?” (Kavitha, Teacher-Urban-7yrs). While some reported rewarding moments when students with disabilities progressed, these efforts were

experienced as additional, largely unrecognised labour. Several teachers described feelings of guilt and inadequacy, particularly when they perceived that they could not meet the needs of all students: “I feel guilty every day. I know I’m not giving these children what they need, but I also have 35 other students to teach” (Sarah, Teacher-Rural-6yrs).

Rural teachers highlighted additional constraints, including multi-grade teaching responsibilities, limited local expertise, and scarce materials. In the absence of on-site special educators, some relied on informal WhatsApp networks with colleagues in other schools to seek advice. A small subset of teachers with special education training reported higher confidence and more systematic approaches, but emphasised that their effectiveness depended heavily on supportive leadership and reasonable class sizes.

Figure 2 illustrates, in a simplified form, how different stakeholder groups perceived the relative intensity of key barriers such as workload, bureaucratic procedures, resource constraints, and stigma. Teachers consistently rated workload and lack of support as especially pressing issues.



**Figure 2. Relative perceived intensity of major barriers (workload, bureaucracy, resources, stigma) as reported by parents, teachers, and administrators.**

These findings reinforce earlier survey-based studies indicating that teacher readiness for inclusion in Malaysia is constrained more by systemic factors—class size, limited training, minimal support structures—than by outright resistance to inclusive ideals. The heavy reliance on individual improvisation and informal peer networks suggests that inclusive practices are currently sustained by personal commitment rather than institutional design. From a policy perspective, this pattern underlines the need to reconceptualise teacher preparedness as a collective and ongoing process embedded in school structures and supported by coherent professional development, rather than as an individual characteristic to be

addressed through one-off workshops. Without such shifts, ZRP risks placing unrealistic expectations on teachers, generating burnout and limiting the depth of inclusive practice.

### C. Family Experiences, Stigma, and Emotional Labour

#### Results

Parents’ accounts revealed that, despite ZRP, families continue to shoulder a substantial emotional and logistical burden in making inclusion work. Many described having to repeatedly advocate for accommodations, attend multiple meetings, or “prove” that their child could cope in a mainstream setting. “I had all the medical reports, the assessments, everything. But they kept asking, ‘Are you sure? Maybe the special programme is better?’ I had to insist five, six times” (Letchumi, Parent-Semi-Urban-Intellectual Disability). For some, school responses to concerns were perceived as defensive or discouraging: “When I raised concerns in a meeting, the headmaster said, ‘If you’re not happy, maybe homeschool is better.’ That’s not zero rejection—that’s pushing us out politely” (Faridah, Parent-Urban-Autism).

Stigma emerged as a cross-cutting concern. Parents reported hurtful comments from other parents, assumptions that their child was a “disruption,” and situations in which their child was automatically blamed in peer conflicts. “At a parent-teacher meeting, another mother said loudly, ‘Why is that boy here? He makes noise, my daughter can’t concentrate.’ I wanted to disappear” (Zainab, Parent-Rural-ADHD). Some parents internalised these messages and became hesitant to advocate too strongly for fear of jeopardising their child’s acceptance: “I don’t want them to think we’re difficult. If I complain too much, maybe they’ll say she’s too much trouble and suggest we leave” (Halimah, Parent-Rural-Autism).

At the same time, several parents described instances of supportive relationships with teachers and peers that offered a counterpoint to these challenges. Messages from teachers celebrating small successes, or classmates who voluntarily assisted their child, were frequently mentioned as sources of hope and motivation to persevere.

These findings highlight that, even under a zero-rejection policy, families remain key, often invisible, implementers of inclusion, investing considerable emotional and advocacy labour to secure what the policy ostensibly guarantees. The persistence of stigma and subtle gatekeeping practices indicates that legal or policy changes alone are insufficient to transform school cultures. The

tendency of some parents to self-silence suggests that, for them, ZRP's promise of guaranteed access is experienced as fragile and conditional, contingent on not asking "too much." This has serious implications for equity, as more advantaged families may be better positioned to persist in advocacy, potentially widening disparities among students with disabilities. Strengthening family-school partnerships, and explicitly addressing stigma in school improvement efforts, is therefore essential if ZRP is to move from formal access to genuine belonging.

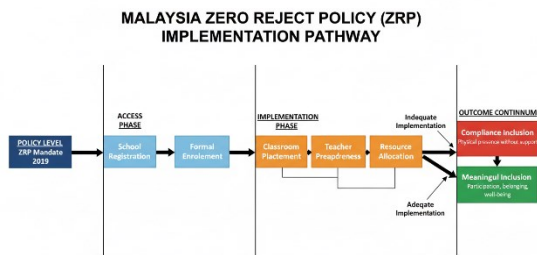


Figure 3. Implementation pathway from ZRP policy mandate to inclusion outcomes, illustrating how structural and relational factors at each stage determine whether schools achieve compliance inclusion or meaningful inclusion.

These findings suggest that ZRP has largely fulfilled its narrow goal of eliminating formal enrolment refusals, but has only partially achieved its broader aim of fostering meaningful inclusion. The notion of "compliance inclusion" that emerged from participants' language captures this tension: schools comply with the policy by accepting students with disabilities, yet often do so without accompanying planning, resources, or structural adjustments.

#### D. Emerging Practices Toward Meaningful Inclusion

Despite the challenges documented, the data also revealed examples of practices that point toward more meaningful, relational forms of inclusion. Some teachers described deliberately integrating students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds into lessons to make content accessible and affirming. "I use stories from our community—about the longhouse, about fishing, things the children know—and adapt them for all levels. The child with learning difficulties can draw the story, write simple sentences. He's included in the same lesson as everyone" (Ahmad, Teacher-Rural-14yrs). Others used images and examples reflecting Malaysia's cultural diversity to normalise difference in the classroom context.

Peer support was another recurring element in more inclusive classrooms. In one case, a teacher explained: "I told the class that everyone learns differently, and we can all help each other. Now some of the girls volunteer to read with her, to explain tasks. It's beautiful to watch" (Nurul, Teacher-Rural-8yrs). Parents also noticed these dynamics, describing peers who spontaneously interpreted instructions, ensured their child was included in group activities, or defended them in social situations.

At the school level, a few administrators had initiated informal "inclusive teams" composed of mainstream teachers, special educators, and counsellors who met regularly to discuss individual students, coordinate strategies, and share responsibility. "Every month we sit together, maybe 45 minutes, and go through cases. 'This student is struggling in maths—what can we try?' It's not formal, no extra budget, but it helps" (Puan Azizah, Administrator-Urban-Senior Assistant). In these schools, both teachers and parents described greater trust, more consistent communication, and a sense that inclusion, while demanding, was a shared endeavour.

#### Discussion

Although these promising practices were not widespread, they illustrate concrete ways in which inclusion can move beyond physical presence toward participation, recognition, and mutual support. The use of culturally responsive pedagogy demonstrates that inclusive teaching can be aligned with local contexts rather than imported as a generic model, while peer support structures show how social relationships among students can be mobilised to enhance both learning and belonging. Informal inclusive teams indicate that, even in resource-constrained environments, leadership and collaboration can distribute responsibility for inclusion more equitably. The fact that such practices currently depend on individual initiative reinforces the need to institutionalise them through policy guidance, leadership training, and professional development so they are not vulnerable to staff turnover or changing priorities.

#### E. Integrating Findings with Theory and Prior Research

The findings highlight the limits of understanding inclusion primarily as a matter of enrolment and policy compliance. Although ZRP has reduced overt rejection, many students with disabilities experience what participants described as "compliance inclusion," where physical presence is not matched by meaningful participation or support. This reinforces theoretical arguments that inclusive education must be conceptualised as a

transformation of school culture, pedagogy, and relationships rather than simple placement (Florian & Spratt, 2013; Slee, 2011).

The study also underscores the importance of viewing inclusion through an ecological and relational lens. Teachers' and families' experiences are shaped by interacting factors at multiple levels: policy mandates, school leadership, resource allocation, community attitudes, and cultural norms about disability and academic success. This resonates with ecological systems theory, which emphasises how conditions at different system levels enable or constrain inclusion (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), and with disability studies perspectives that locate disablement in the interaction between individuals and their environments rather than in individual deficits (Shakespeare, 2014).

#### **F. Limitations**

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. First, the study used purposive sampling in three states, which enabled rich, context-specific insights but limits statistical generalisability to all Malaysian schools. Families who have withdrawn from the system or teachers who left the profession due to stress may hold different perspectives that are not captured here. Second, the data rely on self-reported accounts, which are subject to recall bias and social desirability; the study did not include classroom observations or document analysis that could triangulate practices described in interviews. Third, students with disabilities themselves were not directly interviewed, representing a significant gap given that they are the primary stakeholders in inclusive education.

Finally, the cross-sectional design captures a snapshot of ZRP implementation approximately five years after its introduction and cannot show how practices evolve over time. Longitudinal and comparative work across additional regions and school types would help clarify whether the patterns documented here represent early implementation challenges or more entrenched systemic issues.

#### **G. Implications for Policy and Practice**

The study points to several practical implications for strengthening ZRP. At policy level, there is a need to move beyond enrolment targets toward clearer guidance and resourcing for post-enrolment support, including class size norms in inclusive settings, access to specialist staff, and mechanisms for monitoring the quality—not just the quantity—of inclusion. Teacher education and professional

development should shift from one-off awareness workshops to sustained, school-embedded learning communities that focus on concrete strategies for differentiation, collaboration, and problem-solving in real classrooms (Sharma & Sokal, 2015).

At school level, the promising practices identified—culturally responsive teaching, structured peer support, and informal inclusive teams—suggest feasible starting points for building more relational and holistic inclusion even within current constraints. Systematising these practices through leadership support, time allocation, and recognition could reduce reliance on individual goodwill and make inclusion less fragile. Strengthening family-school partnerships, including proactive communication and shared planning around support, is also critical given the emotional and advocacy labour currently carried by parents.

Future research should extend this work by incorporating student voice through child-friendly and accessible methods, and by using mixed-methods or longitudinal designs to examine how ZRP implementation varies across regions, evolves over time, and responds to specific interventions. Comparative studies across ASEAN countries with similar inclusive policy commitments could further illuminate which configurations of policy, culture, and school organisation most effectively support meaningful inclusion.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

This study examined the implementation of Malaysia's Zero Reject Policy by foregrounding the lived experiences of parents, teachers, and school administrators navigating inclusive education in diverse contexts. The findings reveal a significant and persistent gap between policy aspiration and educational reality. While ZRP has successfully eliminated formal barriers to enrolment, translating this access into genuine inclusion—characterised by meaningful participation, responsive pedagogy, affirming relationships, and holistic well-being—remains an unfinished project for the majority of Malaysian schools and families in this study.

The concept of "compliance inclusion" that emerged from participant accounts captures this paradox succinctly: schools are following the letter of the policy by accepting students with disabilities, yet many have not transformed their structures, cultures, or practices to ensure these students truly belong and thrive. Teachers express moral commitment to inclusive ideals but feel underprepared, under-resourced, and overwhelmed by the gap between what they are asked to do and what they are enabled to do. Families, despite formal guarantees of access, continue to engage in exhausting advocacy, navigate stigma and subtle gatekeeping, and shoulder

emotional burdens that the policy was meant to alleviate. These patterns reflect not individual failures but systemic insufficiencies: inadequate teacher preparation, absent support structures, large class sizes, limited resources, and the persistence of cultural attitudes that position disability as deficit rather than difference.

Yet the study also documented moments and practices that illuminate pathways toward more meaningful inclusion: teachers using culturally responsive pedagogy to affirm diverse identities, peers spontaneously offering friendship and support, administrators establishing collaborative teams that distribute responsibility, families and educators building trusting partnerships. These examples, though unevenly distributed and often dependent on individual initiative, demonstrate that authentic inclusion is possible within Malaysian educational contexts. They remind us that inclusion is not merely a technical challenge to be solved through policy mandates and resource allocation, but a relational and cultural transformation requiring empathy, creativity, sustained commitment, and systems that support rather than exhaust those doing the work. Moving forward, advancing inclusive education in Malaysia will require action on multiple fronts simultaneously. Policy makers must move beyond access mandates to operationalise the conditions for meaningful participation, including evidence-based teacher-student ratios, differentiated funding, and detailed implementation guidance. Teacher education institutions must embed inclusive pedagogy throughout pre-service preparation and redesign professional development as sustained, job-embedded learning. School leaders must institutionalise collaborative structures, family partnerships, and whole-school cultures of inclusion. Communities must interrogate and shift

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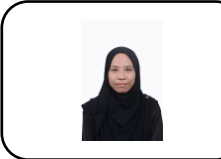
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