



# Inclusive education in ASEAN countries: how to support children with disabilities in schools

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## Executive Summary

This policy brief provides recommendations to enable equal participation in education among children with disabilities in ASEAN countries. It specifically calls for governments and schools to adopt inclusive education recommendations which include the training of teachers of inclusive principles, the allocation of funding to build relevant infrastructure and the development of new curricula.

## Recommendations

To shift from a culture of exclusion, segregation and integration to inclusion in ASEAN schools, ASEAN members must action the following:

- **Governments need to adopt a definition of inclusive education that secures education equality and equity through a focus on the rights and needs of individual students**

Financial aid has to be allocated to transform regular schools into inclusive schools. The financial aid can be used for building infrastructure, acquiring learning resources, and hiring special needs teachers and professionals in existing local schools.

- **Provide teacher training programmes at all levels**

These include pre-school, primary, secondary, tertiary, vocational and lifelong learning. The programmes need to focus on developing inclusive practices that allow participation and achievement of all learners, among all teachers. These practices include differentiated instruction, universal design for learning, cooperative learning and co-team teaching between mainstream and special education teachers. Teachers should be aware of exclusionary practices and avoid adopting them.

- **School leaders need to promote respect for diverse needs, abilities and characteristics among all stakeholders and eliminate all forms of discrimination in the learning environment**

School leaders need to exercise instructional leadership by encouraging teachers to adopt a learning-centred approach and engage with their own pedagogic growth.

- **School curricula needs to equip children with disabilities with the knowledge and skills for postsecondary and lifelong learning, including higher education and employment**

## Introduction

Inclusive education allows all children, including those with disabilities, equal participation and enjoyment in all school activities, and support to successfully participate in those activities. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) recognises the right to inclusive education for all persons with disabilities and calls for action to ensure children with disabilities obtain their educational rights. Although all ASEAN countries ratified the CRPD, many children with disabilities have to learn in classrooms that are isolated from their peers, thus, are devoid of equal participation and rights. These children are often placed in segregated or integrated instead of inclusive classrooms.





## Importance of inclusive education

Expanding access to quality education to all learners is imperative for the future of ASEAN countries. Education is an investment that advances social cohesion and security, and economic growth. With inclusive education, which focuses on learning for all, it is therefore important to provide:

■ **A pathway towards social justice.** Inclusive education is based on values that maximise educational participation of all in society by minimising exclusionary and discriminatory practices based on diversity in race, social class, ethnicity, religion, gender and ability. Inclusion is an ongoing process that enables both teachers and students to feel comfortable with diversity and to see it as enriching the learning environment.

- **Education for all.** Inclusive teaching strategies do not just benefit the child with disabilities but all other students who have the same needs as the child. For instance, a teacher who supports learning with visual aids is facilitating learning for all children who will benefit from visual aids in the same classroom. Inclusive settings do not just improve academic and social learning for children with disabilities but children without disabilities too.
- **A cost-effective means to education.** Schools that can provide an effective education for the majority of children eventually improve efficiency and ultimately the cost-effectiveness of the entire education system.

## Access to education



### Exclusion

The child with disability is not allowed to attend a school, or is given conditions to attend a school, that all other children in the community attend.



### Segregation

The child with disability attends a school or classroom that is meant only for students with disabilities, and is isolated from all other children. These isolated settings are often known as special schools or special classes. Special schools and classes are self-contained with special educational teachers and resources that are not meant to be accessed by children without disabilities.



### Integration

The child with disability is placed in a regular classroom together with other children but forced to learn using means that do not meet their learning needs. The teacher delivers lessons using approaches that cater only to children who can cope with the approach.



### Inclusion

The child with disability is not only placed in the regular classroom together with other children but the teacher modifies the teaching materials, environment, instructions and assessment to meet the diverse learning needs of all students in the class. An effective inclusive class is collaborative – the regular class teacher, special education teacher and other educational professionals, such as educational psychologists, speech-language therapists and occupational therapists, jointly support the learning of the child.



## Methodology

The policy brief is based on the author's previous research as well as analysis of the educational policies, and reports on, inclusive education in ASEAN countries.

## Context

The Salamanca Framework for Action (1994) was integral to ASEAN's commitments towards inclusive education for children with disabilities. The Framework proclaimed that education systems should meet the needs of the wide diversity of children's characteristics and needs. Children with disabilities must have access to regular schools which should accommodate them within a child-centred pedagogy. Although ASEAN countries recognise that inclusive education is fundamental to the rights of every child, the conceptualisation of inclusive education in ASEAN countries has yet to fully capture the principles of inclusion enshrined in the Framework for Action.

“The Economic Cost of Out-of-School Children in Southeast Asia study by UNESCO Bangkok, shows that countries in Southeast Asia risk losing billions of dollars if millions of children and youth remain out of school.”

Inclusive education is regarded as the provision of education for children with disabilities but there is limited emphasis on equipping regular schools with adequate resources and support to provide this inclusive education.

- In Malaysia, inclusive education entails the placement of children with disabilities in an educational programme that is also attended by other children of a similar age. A child's suitability to attend a public school is determined by a three-month schooling probation in the school (Special Education Regulation 2013; Zero Reject Policy, 2019).
- In Singapore, only children with mild special educational needs attend regular schools while children who require higher levels of support and assistance attend special schools (Ministry of Education, Singapore, 2019).
- Thailand mandates that the government provides educational resources to students of diverse needs but only those who can cope in regular schools are deemed as having the right to education alongside other children (National Education Plan, 2017-2036).

“There is a necessity and urgency of providing education for children, youth and adults with special educational needs within the regular education system.”  
(Salamanca Statement, 1994)





## Challenges

Despite its urgency, the majority of schools in ASEAN are not equipped to provide needs-based support to children with disabilities.

## Conceptualisation of inclusive education

While it is the policy of all countries to provide education on an equal basis to all children, there is a gap between policy and the quality of education provided to children with disabilities. The philosophy is on educating those with mild disabilities in regular schools, while those with more profound needs are being catered for in special classes or schools. **This approach is based on integration and segregation, rather than inclusion.** Schools are moving towards inclusion, via acceptance and integration, rather than being fully inclusive at this point.

## Infrastructure

Existing schools and their surroundings lack infrastructure such as ramps, disabled-friendly toilets, visual enhancers and navigation facilities. Although appropriate and affordable technology can enhance children's success in accessing the school curriculum, to aid communication, mobility and learning, schools do not have the financial provisions to aid communication, mobility and learning.

## Partnership with specialist teachers

Mainstream teachers in general are accepting of children with disabilities but at the same time apprehensive of having these children in their classrooms. Instead of sharing the responsibilities for children with disabilities, responsibilities are distinctly split. Mainstream teachers are viewed as accountable only for children without disabilities and the responsibilities of managing children with disabilities are solely the roles of special education teachers. There is therefore a lack of knowledge, skill and resource sharing between mainstream teachers and special education teachers when it comes to designing and executing lessons, assessments and additional provisions for children with disabilities.

## Pedagogies

Designing an inclusive pedagogy that meets everyone's needs requires attention to differentiated teaching and the adoption of an everybody approach. To achieve this, teachers and schools need training, support programmes, the provision of assistance from specialist teachers, and external support staff such as educational psychologists, social workers, speech-language therapists and occupational therapists. These additional provisions involve substantial financial resources and planning, which are lacking specifically in low or middle income ASEAN countries.

## Conclusion

A key issue that emerges from all ASEAN countries is the need to develop clear and consistent conceptions of inclusion through national policies and local implementation. These must incorporate equipping existing regular schools with the required infrastructure and training for teachers, in order to build capacity and skills. Transforming segregated and integrated schools into inclusive schools will help countries move towards the building of an inclusive community where well-being, independence, freedom of choice, and full and effective participation of persons with disabilities in all areas of life are realised and sustained.

## Further reading

- Wapling, L. (2016). *Inclusive education and children with disabilities: Quality education for all in low and middle income countries*. Cambridge, UK: CBM.
- Schuelka, M., & Johnstone, C. J. (2012). Global trends in meeting the educational rights of children with disabilities: From international institutions to local responses. *Reconsidering Development*, 2(2).
- UNICEF (2017). *Inclusive Education: Understanding Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*. Geneva: UNICEF.

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