
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*
