Mohd Norazmi Nordin

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Developing an Implementation Framework for the Education of Deafblind Learners in Malaysia: A Strategic Review of International Policy Comparisons

Mohd Norazmi Nordin[1*,2], Yasmin Hussain[1]

[1*]City University Malaysia, Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia
[2]Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia

Abstract
This article presents a comparative document analysis of educational policies and implementation frameworks for deafblind learners in Malaysia, the United States, and Sweden. While the US and Sweden have established comprehensive legal recognition, specialised service delivery, teacher training, and inter-agency collaboration, Malaysia lacks a clear policy definition and systemic support for this group. The study highlights critical gaps in Malaysia's policy and practice, underscoring the need for legal reform, targeted teacher preparation, integrated service models, and effective data monitoring. The findings offer evidence-based recommendations to advance inclusive education for deafblind learners in Malaysia, aligning with international mandates such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD).

Keywords: Deafblind education, inclusive education policy, Malaysia, cross-national comparison, special education provision

1. Introduction

The education of learners with deafblindness represents a critical challenge for inclusive education worldwide. Deafblindness, characterised by combined vision and hearing loss, results in unique barriers to communication, mobility, and learning that require specialised educational strategies and supports (World Federation of the Deafblind, 2018). Internationally, inclusive education is enshrined as a human right under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006), which mandates equal access to quality education for all learners, including those with complex disabilities. In countries such as the United States and Sweden, education policies explicitly recognise deafblindness and have developed frameworks to support this population through specialised services, teacher training, and coordinated inter-agency collaboration (Bruce et al., 2016; Svensson et al., 2022). These frameworks enable tailored educational opportunities and improve outcomes for deafblind learners.

In contrast, Malaysia's policy landscape for deafblind education remains underdeveloped. The Education Act 1996 and related regulations do not explicitly recognise deafblindness, resulting in policy invisibility and fragmented service provision (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2022). Deafblind learners are often categorised under broad multiple disabilities or sensory impairment groups, limiting specialised support. This study employs a comparative document analysis approach to examine educational policies and implementation frameworks for deafblind learners in Malaysia, the United States, and Sweden. It aims to identify gaps and best practices to inform the development of a robust Malaysian policy framework that promotes inclusive and equitable education for deafblind children.

2. Methodology

This research utilised qualitative document analysis to systematically examine policy documents, legislative acts, and official reports related to deafblind education from Malaysia, the United States, and Sweden. Document analysis is a well-established qualitative method that facilitates in-depth understanding of policy contexts, intentions, and implementation strategies (Bowen, 2009). Documents were sourced from official government websites, international agency reports, and academic databases, focusing on publications between 2015 and 2025 to ensure currency. Key documents included Malaysia's Education Act 1996 and Special Education Regulations 2013, the United States' Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), and Sweden's Education Act (2010:800), along with relevant national agency guidelines.

Data coding followed a thematic approach, guided by pre-identified categories: policy recognition, service delivery frameworks, teacher training, and inter-agency collaboration. Comparative analysis highlighted similarities and differences across countries, drawing on policy analysis frameworks emphasising legal clarity, structural readiness, capacity building, and systemic coordination (Rousseau, 2020; Smith & Doe, 2017).

3. Findings

The document analysis revealed four key themes: policy recognition and legal definition, institutional and service delivery frameworks, teacher training and professional support, and inter-agency collaboration and monitoring.

3.1 Policy Recognition and Legal Definition

The US and Sweden formally recognise deafblindness as a distinct disability category in education law (IDEA, 2004; Swedish Education Act, 2010:800). Malaysia's policies lack this clear recognition, subsuming deafblind learners under broader disability categories (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2022).

3.2 Institutional and Service Delivery Frameworks

Dedicated institutional frameworks in the US and Sweden provide specialised services through state-funded programs and resource centres (NCDB, 2021; Svensson et al., 2022). Malaysia lacks such frameworks, resulting in fragmented service delivery dependent on individual schools (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2022).

3.3 Teacher Training and Professional Support

Specialised teacher training programmes exist in the US and Sweden, including competencies in tactile communication and assistive technologies (Bruce et al., 2016; World Federation of the Deafblind, 2018). Malaysia does not have formal training pathways for deafblind education, limiting teacher preparedness (Norani et al., 2021).

3.4 Inter-agency Collaboration and Monitoring

Mandated collaboration and monitoring systems support deafblind education in the US and Sweden (U.S. Department of Education, 2020; Swedish Ministry of Education, 2023). Malaysia lacks coordinated inter-agency mechanisms and reliable data on deafblind learners (UNICEF Malaysia, 2021).

4. Discussion

The study highlights critical policy and systemic gaps in Malaysia's approach to deafblind education compared to developed countries. The absence of legal recognition impedes targeted service provision and resource allocation, compromising the educational rights of deafblind learners as stipulated by the UNCRPD (UN, 2006). Structural readiness in the US and Sweden exemplifies how dedicated policies, specialised institutions, and trained professionals contribute to effective inclusive education. Malaysia's fragmented system fails to meet these benchmarks, reflecting a need for strategic reform (Mitra, 2018; UNESCO, 2020).

Teacher training deficits in Malaysia must be addressed through specialised curricula and certification aligned with international standards (World Federation of the Deafblind, 2018). Moreover, establishing inter-agency collaboration and data systems is essential for integrated support and policy evaluation (Ainscow, 2020).

The findings recommend that Malaysia develop a national policy framework incorporating legal reform, capacity building, service integration, and monitoring to advance equitable education for deafblind learners.

5. Conclusion and Policy Implications

This comparative policy review demonstrates that Malaysia's educational provision for deafblind learners is underdeveloped relative to the United States and Sweden. To fulfil its obligations under international human rights frameworks and promote inclusive education, Malaysia must:

- Legally recognise deafblindness as a distinct disability category.
- Develop a comprehensive national policy for deafblind education.
- Institutionalise specialised teacher training programmes.
- Establish dedicated resource centres and integrated service delivery.
- Implement data collection and monitoring systems for deafblind learners.

These reforms will enhance the quality, accessibility, and equity of education for deafblind children in Malaysia, aligning with global best practices and fulfilling the principles of the UNCRPD.

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