HEADMASTERS' UNDERSTANDING AND READINESS IN IMPLEMENTING ZERO REJECT POLICY AT PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN SELANGOR, MALAYSIA

By

HANIZAN BIN CHE MAT

Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Master of Science

February 2023

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to:

Hj. Che Mat bin Yusoff and Wan Soom binti Wan Seman

Abah, I yearn for your presence
To share with you my tale of resilience
Your courage instilled belief in me
That I can overcome any difficulty

You are my rock, my unwavering strength
Your spirit drives me to go the length
I owe my success to your loving care
Abah, I wish you here to share

Mak, my journey is for you
Every step I take, I dedicated to you
Your inspiration and motivation
Illuminate the path of my destination

You thought me to shine, to be unapologetic
To embrace my flaws, to be authentic
I owe my existence to your grace
Mak, you forever hold a special place

Mak and Abah, your love is eternal
May Allah grant you Jannah, the highest pedestal
My heart is filled with gratitude
For blessing bestowed by both of you

Finally, to all special education practitioners, keep fighting to provide the right to
education for our beloved special children. Let's prove to the world that children with
special needs also have a place in this world

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February 2023

Chairman : **Associate Professor Ts. Muhd Khaizer bin Omar, PhD**
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Malaysia has a long history of providing education for children with special needs. Special education in the country is governed by the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025, which aims to improve access and inclusiveness among all schools in the country. This study aimed to study headmasters' understanding and readiness in implementing a newly rebranded policy introduced by the Ministry of Education Malaysia. The study adapted a phenomenology design that involved six headmasters of primary schools in Selangor who were chosen from purposive sampling based on inclusion and exclusion criteria sets. The study was guided by two research questions: (1) To what extent do the headmasters of primary schools in Selangor understand the implementation of the Zero Reject Policy (ZRP)? and (2) How ready were the headmasters of primary schools in Selangor to implement the ZRP? Three qualitative data collection methods were used which include semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and observation. Data collected was analysed by using ATLAS.ti (Version 9) software and five themes emerged from the analysis. The study found that most headmasters understand the objectives of the ZRP in providing access to education. However, issues such as poor infrastructure have presented a big challenge for headmasters to properly implement the policy. The data revealed that the headmasters demanded more knowledge on special education during their leadership preparation program. The impact of the policy showed that the headmasters gained knowledge on special education however, schools became more crowded with special educational needs students. The study concludes that the implementation of ZRP has challenged headmasters in three different perspectives, which are awareness, leadership skills, and access to education. The ZRP requires parents and teachers to have a good relationship to promote the right to education for all special education needs children, regardless of their background, location, and socio-economics.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Master Sains

KEFAHAMAN DAN KESEDIAAN GURU BESAR DALAM MELAKSANAKAN DASAR SIFAR PENOLAKAN DI SEKOLAH RENDAH NEGERI SELANGOR, MALAYSIA

Oleh

HANIZAN BIN CHE MAT

Februari 2023

Pengerusi : **Profesor Madya Ts. Muhd Khaizer bin Omar, PhD**
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Malaysia mempunyai sejarah yang panjang dalam menyediakan pendidikan bagi murid berkeperluan khas. Pendidikan khas di Malaysia kini diterajui oleh Pelan Pembangunan Pendidikan Malaysia 2013-2025 yang bertujuan menyediakan akses yang lebih baik kepada murid berkeperluan khas serta menerapkan nilai inkulsif dalam kalangan warga sekolah. Fokus kajian ini adalah meneroka kefahaman dan kesediaan guru besar dalam melaksanakan Dasar Sifar Penolakan (ZRP) yang telah diberi nafas baharu oleh Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia. Reka bentuk kajian ini menggunakan pendekatan fenomenologi dan melibatkan enam responden dalam kalangan guru besar sekolah rendah di Selangor yang dipilih dengan menggunakan kaedah pensampelan bertujuan serta mematuhi kriteria *inclusion* dan *exclusion* yang telah ditetapkan. Kajian ini berlandaskan dua persoalan kajian iaitu (1) sejauh manakah pemahaman guru besar sekolah rendah di negeri Selangor dalam melaksanakan ZRP? dan (2) berapa sediakah guru besar sekolah rendah di negeri Selangor untuk melaksanakan ZRP? Tiga kaedah pengumpulan data kualitatif digunakan dalam penyelidikan ini iaitu temuduga separa struktur, analisis dokumen dan pemerhatian. Data yang telah dikutip dianalisis dengan menggunakan perisian ATLAS.ti (Versi 9) dan lima tema terhasil daripada analisis tersebut. Kajian mendapati bahawa kebanyakan guru besar memahami objektif ZRP iaitu ke arah menyediakan akses kepada pendidikan. Data menunjukkan bahawa pelaksanaan dasar ini telah membantu meningkatkan kesedaran dalam kalangan warga sekolah. Selain itu, guru besar memerlukan lebih pengetahuan mengenai pendidikan khas dalam program kesediaan kepimpinan mereka. Impak daripada pelaksanaan dasar menunjukkan peningkatan pengetahuan mengenai pendidikan khas dalam kalangan guru besar, namun pada masa yang sama sekolah mereka menjadi lebih sesak dan kurang kondusif. Kesimpulannya, kajian mendapati bahawa pelaksanaan dasar ini memberikan cabaran kepada guru besar dalam tiga aspek iaitu kesedaran, kemahiran kepimpinan dan akses kepada pendidikan. ZRP menuntut supaya semua pihak mempunyai hubungan yang baik dalam memastikan murid berkeperluan pendidikan khas terus diberikan hak

terhadap pendidikan yang berkualiti tanpa mengira latar belakang, lokaliti dan sosio-ekonomi mereka.

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Success ultimately comes from Allah, and I pray that He continues to guide us on the straight path. With that note, Assalamualaikum W.B.T.

This thesis was submitted to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia and has been accepted as fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Science. The members of the Supervisory Committee were as follows:

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I hereby confirm that:
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This is to confirm that:
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BPG	Teacher Professionalism Division
EMK	Elaun Murid Khas/ Allowance for SEN
EPRD	Education Planning and Policy Research Division
IAB	Institut Aminuddin Baki
IEP	Inclusive Education Program
IPG	Institute for Teacher Education
JKEUPM	The Ethics Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects
JPN	Jabatan Pendidikan Negeri/ State Education Office
MAMPU	Malaysian Administrative Modernization and Management Planning Unit
MEB	Malaysia Education Blueprint
MOE	Ministry of Education
MOH	Ministry of Health
NGO	Non-Government Organizations
NPQEL	National Professional Qualification for Educational Leaders
PADU	The Education Performance and Delivery Unit
PASR	Pentaksiran Alternatif Sekolah Rendah
PIBG	Persatuan Ibu Bapa dan Guru
PPD	Pejabat Pendidikan Daerah/ District Education Office
PPKI	Program Pendidikan Khas Integrasi
PPUM	University Malaya Medical Centre
PWDs	Persons With Disabilities
SA	Senior Assistant
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SEIP	Special Education Integration Program

SEN	Special Educational Needs
SES	Special Education School
UDL	Universal Design for Learning
UN	United Nations
UNCRPD	The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
UNESCO	The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
WCEFA	World Conference on Education for All
ZRP	Zero Reject Policy
3PK	Pusat Perkhidmatan Pendidikan Khas

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Serving in the Special Education Division for an about nine years has led the researcher to recognize the potential to provide more than just teaching and the best education for all children, whether they are typical students or students with special needs. When the Zero Reject Policy (ZRP) was first announced and implemented in January 2019, the researcher was in awe of the headmasters who played a crucial role in providing formal education access to special educational need (SEN) children. These headmasters, as key policy implementers, seized the opportunity to increase the enrolment of special students in their schools. However, the researcher questions whether these headmasters are equipped with adequate knowledge and understanding of special education, as the special education syllabus in formal leadership training for school leaders is limited in scope.

Given the researcher's curiosity and interest in understanding the implementation of the ZRP, the researcher decided to study the headmaster understanding and readiness during this time. As such, this chapter focuses on the discussion of the world declaration on special education, the background of the ZRP, the background of special education in Malaysia, and the need for headmasters to have comprehensive knowledge of special education. Additionally, the chapter includes information on the background of the study, problem statement, research questions, research objectives, significance of study, scope, and limitations of the study, and concludes with a summary of the chapter.

1.1   Background of the Study

Education is a significant key factor in the development of human capital and the economy in every country. It is the foundation of every society, and the government's efforts in education have contributed to the betterment of national development (Sakz & Woods, 2015). Moreover, education plays a significant role in developing a highly-skilled, innovative workforce, which is crucial for social, cultural, and economic growth. To address the challenges and gaps in education, including education for marginalized groups, various initiatives and policies have been implemented. Starting in 2015, there has been a global effort to encourage countries to pledge their commitment towards providing free, compulsory, and high-quality primary education for all (Ainscow, 2020). Additionally, The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) has played a significant role in advocating for the rights of individuals with disabilities to receive an education. According to the UNCRPD, every individual has the right to education without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity (Kauffman & Hornby, 2020). This right extends to individuals with disabilities, who have the right to be educated in an inclusive environment that accommodates their diverse learning needs.

To ensure that individuals with disabilities are able to receive an education that is tailored to their needs, there has been a shift towards a more personalized and student-cantered

approach to special education. This approach emphasizes the importance of individualized education plans, accommodations, and modifications to support students with disabilities in accessing the curriculum (Kenny et al., 2020). As the field of special education continues to evolve, it is critical that policymakers and educators work together to create inclusive learning environments that allow all students to reach their full potential. In some countries, individuals with disabilities are not provided with the necessary resources to attend school, while in others they may be excluded from mainstream education or placed in segregated settings (Hunt, 2021; Karisa et al., 2020).

In Malaysia, special education was formally established in 1900 until 1957 during the pre-independence era, with the creation of education for two main disability groups, visual impairment, and hearing impairment. The evolution of special education in Malaysia experienced rapid growth during the post-independence years, with support from the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), which advocates for inclusive education for all students. Since then, Malaysia has proactively facilitated a platform for SEN students to thrive via inclusive education by engaging in various international conferences. This active involvement serves to advocate for the rights of persons with disabilities, including those with SEN, by promoting their participation in mainstream educational settings (Ensimau et al., 2023). During this period, the Ministry of Education (MOE) provided more options for formal education for SEN children in special education schools (SES) and in mainstream schools through programs such as the Special Education Integration Program (SEIP) and the Inclusive Education Program (IEP) (Lee & Low, 2014). With the increased schooling options for children with SEN provided by the MOE, more children with disabilities are enrolling in the Malaysia education system.

1.1.1 Special Education in Malaysia

The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (1994) stated that students with SEN must have access to mainstream schools with an inclusive orientation, in order to overcome discriminatory attitudes, create welcoming communities, and build inclusive societies (UNESCO, 1994). Additionally, the Education for All goal under Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4: "Quality Education" acknowledges various barriers to universal education and aims to address these by providing gender-sensitive and disability-inclusive facilities (UNESCO, 2017, p. 7-9). Article 28 of Malaysia's Person with Disabilities Act 2008 also affirms that children with special needs should receive the necessary support to participate in teaching and learning sessions.

Malaysia supports these international declarations by providing better access to education for children with disabilities. Additionally, Malaysia has a legal framework for compulsory education outlined in the Education Act (Act 550). The Education Act 1996 (Act 550) clearly states under Section 29A that the minister has the power to prescribe primary education as compulsory education, as published in the Gazette. Every parent living in Malaysia must ensure that their child, who must be six years old by the first day of January of the current school year, is enrolled in primary school and remains a pupil in primary school for the duration of compulsory education. This amendment

applies to all types of schoolchildren, including those with SEN who require special education based on their disabilities.

To ensure that every SEN child is eligible to join the education system, the MOE has provided three education settings for SEN: (1) SES meaning for special schools for students with SEN, (2) SEIP meaning for special classes for students with SEN in regular schools, and (3) IEP meaning for students with SEN learning in mainstream classes in regular schools. The evolution in providing access to education for children with disabilities in Malaysia is evident in the form of a tremendous increase in the number of children registered in schools under MOE supervision (Special Education Division, 2021).

1.1.2 Overview on Zero Reject Policy

The former Minister of Education in Malaysia, MOE, announced the implementation of the ZRP policy during a parliamentary session in 2018 (Government of Malaysia, 2018). ZRP aims to enhance the education experience for students with SEN and to ensure they receive an education that is suitable to their capabilities, whether in mainstream schools or special schools. The policy focuses on three key objectives, including providing disabled-friendly facilities in schools, implementing a comprehensive Holistic Model of Special Educational Needs Program and continuous professional development courses for teachers (Azmi, 2018).

Since its introduction in January 2019, there has been a significant increase in the enrolment of SEN students at primary school, from 46,450 in 2018 to 49,665 in 2019, a difference of +3,215 students. This has resulted in an increase of +6.92% in the number of SEN students registered at all primary schools and +3,124 (+8.49%) in the SEIP program. Over four years, the number of SEN students registered at primary school has risen to 52,276. This constructive number demonstrates that Malaysian parents are eager and pleased to send their SEN children to receive formal education at government schools rather than keeping them at home or other rehabilitation centers for children with special needs. Study by Othman and Matore (2020) have shown that the implementation of ZRP has created more opportunities for SEN students to enrol in schools and receive a quality education. This has been reflected in the increased enrolment numbers, as well as high acceptance among parents of SEN students towards the policy. ZRP has also given mainstream students the opportunity to get to know and interact with their SEN peers in school. The enrolment data for SEN students in government and government-aided schools from 2018 to 2021 is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Special Education Data 2018 to 2021

Program	Special Educational Needs Children in Primary School			
	2018	2019	2020	2021
Special Education School	1,266	1,272	1,387	1,476
Special Education Integration Program	36,801	39,925	42,596	43,029
Inclusive Education Program	8,383	8,468	8,546	7,762
Total	46,450	49,665	52,529	52,276

(Special Education Division, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022)

1.1.3   Headmaster Experience in Special Education

The Malaysia Education Blueprint (MEB) 2013-2025 outlines an ambitious strategy to ensure that every school has high-performing leaders with a focus on educational leadership (Ministry of Education, 2013, p. E-27). Research in Malaysia by Saidun et al. (2015) has found that isolation concerns, lack of awareness, and a failure to combine theories and experience are challenges faced by inexperienced principals. Special education is a specialized field that requires special skills and expertise (Lawson & Cruz, 2018). Regardless of who is involved in special education, they should be aware that every student has a place in the education system. The readiness of administrators to receive students with SEN is a major factor in determining the success of special education in schools, and their knowledge of special education is crucial (Hanafi et al., 2019). However, the process of acceptance may take longer than it should. A comparison studies between Ali et al. (2006) and Hanafi et al. (2019) shows that the acceptance of SEN by school administrators increased from 66% to 85% over a 10-year period.

Apart from that, leaders play an important role in ensuring that SEN children have a place in schools for formal education. Headmasters have a responsibility to ensure that these children have access to free education in any school, regardless of their abilities or disabilities. Headmasters must possess knowledge, leadership style, attitude, experience, and qualifications to create a positive culture in their organization (Nordin et al., 2020). Thus, the leader is the key to implementing policies and ensuring the registration of new SEN in the education system.

Every year MOE provides in-service training and short courses to leaders every year to prepare them to lead an inclusive school with a diverse student population. However, leaders believe that direct participation in special education practices will enable them to gain knowledge and develop their skills (Rodl et al., 2018). Many leaders are not confident in managing SEN children with physical impairments, low cognitive levels, or moderate behavioural issues (Hanafi et al., 2019). The lack of experience in managing schools with special education programs, not attending courses related to special education, and lack of exposure to special kids may be the reason that administrators are not fully confident and capable of leading schools with special education programs.

1.2 Problem Statement

Over the years, there has been a global increase in the number of children with SEN enrolled in special education systems. The 2030 Agenda acknowledges the significance of tackling the growing numbers of SEN and inequalities among SEN children by promoting quality education, access to education, and inclusive education initiatives (UNESCO, 2017). It prioritizes the vital role of inclusive education, equitable and high-quality education, and the promotion of lifelong learning opportunities for all (Arnaiz-Sánchez et al., 2022; Khan et al., 2023; McVicar, 2018) as well as ensuring that every child with SEN has access to free education in an appropriate environment (Kaushik, 2018). In Malaysia, MOE through its Special Education Division, offers specialized educational services to all students with SEN who are enrolled in the Malaysian education system. One of the measures aimed at supporting SEN students is providing an educational environment that is tailored to their specific disabilities. Despite the efforts made by the MOE to ensure the provision of such settings, there are still reports of issues, such as students dropping out or being denied their access to the formal education settings provided by the government.

ZRP refers to the placement of students with SEN in government schools and government-aided schools (Government of Malaysia, 2018). The policy aims to ensure that SEN students receive education that is relevant to their abilities. The introduction of the policy in September 2018 was well-received by both students with SEN and their parents, as it facilitated student with SEN enrolment in formal educational settings starting January 2019 (Chin, 2020; Zaki & Ismail, 2021). ZRP ensures that SEN children receive quality education that corresponds to their individual abilities, either through SES or mainstream schools through IEP and SEIP covering preschool to secondary levels (Special Education Division, 2015, 2018). The implementation of ZRP has provided the necessary push to ensure that SEN students have access to education that is tailored to their abilities. Data shows that the number of SEN students enrolled in government and government-aided schools spiked at 6.92% (+3.215) in 2019 following the announcement of the implementation of the ZRP (Special Education Division, 2020). To enable these students to join their peers in formal educational settings, headmasters must be able to provide appropriate accommodations that take into account the children's disabilities and the existing school environment.

The MOE has initiated the implementation of the ZRP in all schools. The policy was announced three months prior to its implementation, leaving headmasters with insufficient time to adequately prepare their schools. Existing evidence shows that there is lack of resources available in the management of the policy (Othman & Matore, 2020). There appears to be a pattern whereby the knowledge of headmasters to provide access to education and preparing reasonable accommodation for student with SEN by implementing the ZRP is significantly influenced by their understanding and readiness to implement the ZRP itself. Sun and Xin (2020) in their study mentioned that school leaders must possess adequate knowledge and understandings in special education then only they can play an active leadership role in providing special education services and programs. In order to provide a proper education for students with SEN, headmasters must first have a thorough understanding of special education and the policy itself. In

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response to the policy implementation, the headmaster should serve as a reference in providing access to education for SEN students.

To achieve the aim of the ZRP, the MOE needs to focus on managing existing resources, increasing the competency of special education teachers and leaders, as well as increasing their readiness to accept special education and SEN students in our education system (Othman & Matore, 2020). Towards preparing school leaders for the future, the education system in Malaysia has made significant progress in ensuring all school leaders are ready to execute special education and provide access to education for SEN students. To meet its goal, "…MOE has targeted to ensure every school will have a high-performing principal who is relentless in their focus on improving student outcomes, both academic and non-academic…" (Ministry of Education, 2013, p. E-17). During Wave 1 of MEB, from 2013 to 2015, the focus was on enhancing selection standards and the preparation process for new school leaders. The aim was to improve the capabilities of current school leaders through continuous professional development programs and reinforcing the connection between performance and competencies. In Wave 2, from 2016 to 2020, the MOE pledged to review the state of facilities and make any necessary upgrades to ensure a suitable learning environment for students with SEN. Therefore, SES and mainstream schools with IEP and SEIP must be equipped with disability-friendly facilities, including handrails, ramps, mobility parking spaces, and accessible toilets (Special Education Division, 2018). However, an earlier study conducted by Nasir & Efendi (2016) found that there is still a shortage of disability-friendly facilities in schools, which hinders the ability of students with disabilities to fully engage in the learning process. Additionally, a news article reported that in 2018, the MOE Malaysia stated that out of more than 10,000 schools in the country, only 170 schools were equipped with facilities for people with disabilities (PWDs), such as ramps, railings, toilets, and parking (Azmi, 2018).

Considering the issues and challenges highlighted regarding headmasters' understanding and readiness for implementing the ZRP, it can be seen that they face significant challenges in this regard. Additionally, there have been no studies conducted to evaluate the feasibility of ZRP implementation prior to its announcement, and limited literature is available on its implementation locally or internationally. Furthermore, as of today, MOE has not published any guidelines to aid school leaders in implementing the ZRP effectively. Therefore, it is crucial to examine and document headmasters' understanding and readiness for implementing the ZRP, given their lack of prior experience with such policies. This research will provide valuable insights for future implementation efforts and contribute to the body of research and literature on this topic. Consequently, this research aims to study headmasters' understanding and readiness in implementing ZRP at primary schools in the state of Selangor.

1.3   Purpose of Study

A purpose statement outlines the direction of the research and enables the researcher to develop a specific synopsis that provides an overview of the study (McCaslin & Scott, 2003). A phenomenological study is conducted to describe what is common among

respondents as they have experienced a specific phenomenon (Creswell, 2012; Englander, 2012).

Therefore, this phenomenological research is conducted using a phenomenological approach to study the readiness of headmasters involved in the implementation of ZRP in January 2019. The knowledge gained from understanding the readiness of headmasters can serve as a starting point for exploring further ways to prepare future headmasters who are more ready and able to demonstrate their professionalism in managing schools. Additionally, it can help increase knowledge of the policy and prevent flaws. This phenomenological research aims to study the experiences through the data collection process, which involves multiple sources of information such as in-depth interview transcripts, observations, and relevant documents related to the implementation of ZRP.

1.4   Research Question

The research questions for this study are based from my observation during the implementation ZRP. This research is important to develop a substantive description from the collected data. This research determines to find the answer for the following research questions:

  i   To what extent do the headmasters of primary schools in Selangor understand the implementation of ZRP?

  ii   How ready were the headmasters of primary school in Selangor to implement the ZRP?

1.5   Research Objective

This research aims to understand the headmasters' understanding and readiness in implementing ZRP at primary schools in Selangor. This study specifically looks to study how headmasters in Selangor implemented ZRP school. The main objectives of this study are:

  i   To explore the understanding of primary schools headmasters in Selangor to implement ZRP.

  ii   To explore the readiness of primary schools headmasters in Selangor to implement ZRP.

1.6   Research Assumptions

This thesis represents what I felt was true of the phenomena from my point of view from the beginning to the end of the analysis. I have made three assumptions based on my professional experience as a public relations officer who manages comments and

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complaints at the ministry level, as a member of a committee monitoring the implementation of ZRP, and as part of the team that prepared a report at the ministry level.

The following are the three assumptions made: (1) headmasters can benefit from the experience gained to improve their understanding and readiness, (2), there is a shortage of facilities for individuals with disabilities in government schools, and (3) there is a low level of awareness of special education among headmasters, causing them to be unable to provide support to students with SEN when needed.

1.7 Significance of the Study

The field of special education has been and continues to be significantly influenced by public policy (Nagro et al., 2018). One such policy, the ZRP, has had a significant impact on SEN children who were previously denied access to education, offering them new hope and opportunities (Government of Malaysia [GoM], 2018, p. 19). This research try to understand the experiences of headmasters in implementing the ZRP. The study's findings are expected to make significant contributions to the existing literature on the implementation of the ZRP in Malaysian schools. Additionally, the findings of this study are expected to contribute to the improved implementation of the ZRP in Malaysian schools, increasing access to education for SEN children as well as assisting the MOE to produce guideline for the implementation of ZRP. This research also could contribute to the field of study by equipping headmasters with holistic leadership knowledge through policy implementation. Furthermore, this study may help provide better access to education for students with SEN and broaden the concept of ZRP. Overall, this study has the potential to advance knowledge on the implementation of policies in the education sector, particularly with regard to inclusive education for students with SEN.

1.7.1 School and Professional Leadership

The MOE has pledged to provide reasonable accommodations in stages to minimize the impact of a student's disability and enhance their motivation to participate in the teaching and learning process in school (Azmi, 2018). Moreover, the findings of this research can contribute to the provision of an accessible and accommodating school environment, including basic facilities for persons with disabilities, safe, and sufficient classrooms, as outlined in the Code of Practice for Universal Design and Accessibility in the Built Environment for Persons with Disabilities (Department of Standards Malaysia, 2014, 2017).

This research focuses on headmasters as the primary subject and will be beneficial to all school leaders in similar positions who deal with students with SEN. The findings of this research are also intended to prepare leaders for future challenges in implementing the ZRP and equip them with the necessary knowledge to manage SEN and special education programs. These findings will benefit all leaders impacted by the ZRP in providing appropriate education and ensuring that students with special needs have equal access to the education system.

1.7.2   Way Forward for Access to Education

As the MEB 2013-2025 has put into words their five system aspirations in education to prepare students for rapidly globalizing world with access and equity to education has been indicated as pivotal for the success of the system. As the implementation of the ZRP progresses, it is crucial to understand the challenges and difficulties that arise, especially in light of the system aspirations outlined in the MEB. Thus, there is a significant need to understand the challenges arising within the execution of ZRP and the system aspirations stated in MEB 2013-2025 which is now already in wave three. Therefore, it is important to explore and document the specific challenges, requirements, and difficulties in the implementation of ZRP, so that the findings can be used to benefit special education policy makers and practitioners in providing access to education for children with SEN and ensuring that the education provided is reasonable and based on their abilities and accessibilities.

1.7.3   Literature on Zero Reject Policy

The gap between knowledge among headmasters in administering schools with students who have SEN as revealed in literature reviews and other scholarly findings will aid the researcher in finding ways to prepare these school leaders for effectively serving this student population. Given that the ZRP policy was only implemented in 2019, there is limited comprehensive literature available on the subject within the Malaysian context. This research can serve as a starting point for further exploration of the ZRP and the readiness of school leaders to implement the policy within their jurisdiction. Furthermore, it will raise awareness and promote unity among stakeholders in the field of special education, and encourage collaboration between government agencies and private organizations to support the MOE in providing the best education possible for students with SEN

1.7.4   Contribution to Agency Bodies

In addition, this research will provide valuable insights to develop more effective strategies to improve access to education for children with SEN. The Special Education Division, the MOE, the Department of Social Welfare Malaysia, and the Ministry of Health (MOH) will have access to well-documented findings and references from this study. As ZRP is a newly implemented policy by MOE, these findings will serve as a starting point for these agencies to improve and further enhance its implementation in government and government-aided schools. It is hoped that MOE will take these findings into account and use them to create guidelines for special education practitioners to effectively implement ZRP.

1.8   Scope and Limitation

Basically, limitations are settings that restrict the reach of study and which impact the outcomes of the research and are not beyond the capacity of the researcher to handle

them (Creswell, 2012). This research primarily focuses on schools in Selangor, covering both urban and rural areas in the state. The respondents must be in the position of headmaster when this policy is implemented. Therefore, for this research, the headmasters considered are those who held the position before January 2019. During the implementation of ZRP, the selected school must have enrolled at least one student with SEN. The schools must have a SEIP program with a higher than normal enrolment of students with SEN, which is 1 class : 6.5 students. The scope of this research will focus on the planning and implementation of the ZRP. The research will examine the steps taken by headmasters when they received instructions from MOE to implement the policy. Additionally, this research will also examine the implementation and execution of the policy during 2019, when new SEN students came to school and registered in the education system.

The researcher acknowledges that this research could be more impactful if there is a comprehensive report on the implementation of the ZRP in 2019. Within the scope of this research, one of the limitations is the lack of a report on the implementation of the ZRP produced by the MOE. As 2019 marked the first year of policy implementation, it would be valuable for future researchers if the MOE released a report on the outcomes and reflections of the implementation to aid in improving educational services. Since this is a qualitative study, supporting documents are necessary to triangulate with the data collected from interviews. The researcher faces challenges in obtaining statistics on the number of SEN children enrolled in SEIP classes after the implementation of ZRP. These numbers and statistics could be useful for conducting further research and gaining a better understanding of the challenges faced. Besides that, the limitations of this study being conducted in Selangor should be noted as the results may not be applicable to all states in Malaysia. The distribution of SEN children and their severity levels may vary in rural, suburban, and urban areas. Selangor is one of the states with the highest number of registered SEN children in the SEIP (Special Education Division, 2020). This is due to its large population of 9.528 million as recorded in 2017 (MAMPU, 2018). Aside from that, given the fact that the researcher is a former Special Education Division officer who was directly involved in ZRP preparation in 2018, there is a possibility for bias or preferences to arise from the collection of data or data analysis, even though the researcher has already applied checks throughout the process.

1.9   Definition of Terms

The study intends to study headmasters' understanding and readiness in implementing ZRP in primary schools in Selangor. The researcher utilizes specific key terms to accurately convey the intended meaning of the study.

1.9.1   Zero Reject Policy

A policy established a general parameter for the decision-maker rather than specifically stating what should or should not be accomplished. The policy typically contains an ambiguous term that leaves interpretation up to the decision-maker (Robbins & Coulter, 2012). ZRP is referring to schooling placement for SEN in government schools and government-aided schools without denying their right to formal education which is

relevant to their ability and disability across all levels of education from preschool, primary, secondary and upper secondary.

1.9.2 Implementation of Zero Reject Policy

The policy was first introduced by former Minister of Education Malaysia, in the parliamentary session (Government of Malaysia, 2018). Under this policy, all government and government-aided schools are required to provide access to education for SEN students, regardless of their abilities or disabilities. Schools are responsible for placing these students in an appropriate program, and they can register at any school of their choice. The implementation of ZRP was designed to guarantee that SEN children have equal access to quality education, regardless of their disabilities (Othman & Matore, 2020). The policy was officially launched in January 2019 following a letter from MOE announcing its implementation to all schools.

1.9.3 Special Education Need Children

In line with the terms and ruling outlined by other developed countries internationally, SEN are those pupils required SEN and certified by a medical practitioner, an optometrist, an audiologist or psychologist, as the case may be, whether in service of the government or not, as pupil having a visual disability, hearing disability, speech disability, physical disability, learning difficulties or any combination of the disabilities and/or difficulties mentioned in Education (Special Education) Regulations (Attorney General Chambers of Malaysia, 2013).

1.9.4 Special Education Integration Program

Students with SEN are placed in special classed in mainstream schools. These classes were set under the program called SEIP. This setting is introduced to provide more access to SEN to get their education which relevant to their disabilities and their aims is to integrate or include SEN children into mainstream education (Mottan, 2015). SEIP allows SEN to develop social and communication skills (Fikri & Othman, 2020) as well as their cognitive skills (Maciver et al., 2019). SEIP has the highest number of SEN enrol in Malaysia as compared to the other two special education settings sets by the MOE and it's covered from pre-school, primary and secondary education (Special Education Division, 2018)

1.9.5 Headmasters Readiness

According to Ward et al. (2004), readiness can be defined as the presence within either the client or the therapeutic circumstance of characteristics that are likely to facilitate therapy participation and thus are likely to increase therapeutic change. Similarly, Armenakis et al. (1993) stated that readiness is the psychological response either to support or change the behaviours. The headmaster involves with this research has to

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experience the implementation of ZRP in order to explore their readiness and responses. Ward et al. (2004) also highlighted that readiness required an adjustment in existing behaviour which will involves internal and external factors within a particular context. In the context of this research, readiness is the internal factor which will impact on the implementation of the policy where other external factors such as school and teacher readiness, awareness and acceptance are the supplement to the readiness of a headmasters. The adjustment here means that the headmaster is motivated, able to respond appropriately, finds it relevant and meaningful and has the capacities to successfully change.

1.10   Chapter Summary

This chapter presents the key concepts and framework of the research. It introduces ZRP and the readiness of headmasters in implementing the policy and reviews related literature on access to education and the role of school leaders in educating students with SEN. The problem statement highlights the need for further information from headmasters who experienced the implementation of ZRP in January 2019. It also addresses the need to investigate the leaders' preparedness to handle the impact of the implementation, taking into account internal and external factors. The chapter briefly discusses the two research objectives, two research questions, and emphasizes the significance of the study, its scope, limitations, and definitions of terms used throughout the research.

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