THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE BUDDY SUPPORT SYSTEM IN SPECIAL EDUCATION IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract

Sports in its full potential as a powerful, low-cost means to foster greater inclusion and well-being for students with special needs is only beginning to be realized. Research has shown that students with special needs with the best social and emotional development are those who take part in sports. There is, however, relatively little systemic ‘hard’ research into the efficacy of teaching approaches in this strand. A new initiative, the buddy support system was launched in Malaysia aimed at helping students with special needs to better interact with their peers through fitness and sports sessions. Through sport, students with special needs can learn vital social interaction skills, develop independence, and become empowered to lead and make change happen. This research, a first of its kind in Malaysia, examined the effectiveness of the buddy support system in 10 special education integrated program schools in Malaysia. The study explored teachers’ and parents’ perception on to what extent and in what ways is the buddy support system effective in their understanding of the co-curriculum, its influence and the benefits towards students with special needs. This study adopted a sequential mixed method design, where data were collected from teachers and parents that comprised of questionnaires, semi structured interviews and informal observation. Results showed that teachers rated the influence and benefit of the buddy support system the highest while parents rated the influence of the buddy support system the highest. Emerging themes from the qualitative data supports the quantitative data findings. This study will contribute to policy formation and decision making about enhancing inclusion in Malaysian
schools. Training and support could be further provided by MOE to aid the goal towards 75% of students with special needs enrolled in inclusive programs by 2025.

**Keywords:** buddy support system, inclusion, special education, sports

**Introduction**

Developed and developing nations are progressing at different rates in their implementation of inclusive education (Toran et al. 2016; Schwab et al. 2015; Schwab et al. 2013; Helldin et al. 2011; Lee, 2010). Inclusion for students with special needs into the mainstream classroom setting has become an international agenda since the 1990s (Adams et al. 2016; Takala et. al., 2012; UNESCO, 1999; 1994) and have been regularly monitored, regulated, evaluated, and critiqued by public officials, parents, and researchers interested in educational policy (Fitzgerald, 2012; Vickerman, 2012; Tiegerman-Farber & Radziewicz, 1998). The growing inclusion agenda in many educational systems (Vayrynen et. al., 2016) has seen Malaysia advocate provisions for students with special educational needs (SEN) based on international best practices (Ministry of Education, 2013).

Malaysia’s active planning in special education began with its signing of the Salamanca Statement (UNESCOSS, 1994) which advocated inclusive education for all students. This then became evident in policy documents such as the Malaysian Education Act 1996 (1998) in which the needs of students with SEN for an inclusive model was highlighted for equal education opportunity without discrimination. The Ministry of Education of Malaysia (MOE) decided to integrate students with SEN into the national schools as part of a reform initiative¹ to educate the community and increase awareness on the educational rights of children with SEN (Jelas, & Ali, 2012; Ali et al. 2006). Schools now are responsible to accept students with SEN, provide

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¹ The “Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025” is committed to an inclusive education model and moving more students with SEN toward inclusion and that by 2021 to 2025, 75% of students with SEN will be enrolled in inclusive programs.
appropriate facilities and support to meet the needs of these students (Adams et al. 2016; Lee, 2010).

In 2013, the MOE, PEMANDU\(^2\) and Challenges Magazine piloted a program called the Buddy Support System, better known as the ‘Buddy Club’ in schools to support the initiative of social inclusion between students with SEN with their able peers through fitness and sports sessions (Kulasagaran, 2013). Sports in its full potential as a powerful, low-cost means to foster greater inclusion and well-being for students with special needs is only beginning to be realized (Fitzgerald, 2012; Parnes & Hashemi, 2007). However, despite the growing policy, academic and political interest that has accompanied the gradual trend towards inclusion of students with SEN into the mainstream national schools (Alexiadou & Essex, 2015), there currently exists very little research that has examined the ways and extent to which teachers have endeavored to incorporate these students into sports (Fitzgerald, 2012; Coates & Vickerman, 2008; Fitzgerald, 2006; Smith, 2004).

As a contribution to building a more substantial knowledge base on sports significant role in the Buddy Support system in helping student with SEN, as perceived by teachers and parents in Malaysia, this article, a first of its kind in Malaysia, reports the findings from a small-scale empirical inquiry in Malaysia. The goals of this research study were to:

1. Illuminate the extent and in what ways is the buddy support system effective, as perceived by teachers.
2. Explore the extent and in what ways is the buddy support system effective, as perceived by parents.
3. Explore the extent to which the content, organisation and delivery of the buddy support system impacts the involvement and experiences of students with SEN.

\(^2\) Performance Management and Delivery Unit of the Prime Minister’s Department (PEMANDU)
The article will be structured as follows. Initially, key findings from the research literature on sports significant role in the social inclusion of SEN and mainstream students through the buddy support system will be outlined, the research methods will then be explained, and subsequently the findings from the data analysis will be presented and discussed. The findings from this research highlights with the buddy support system, through sports, students with SEN can learn vital social interaction skills, develop independence, and become empowered to lead and make change happen.

**Teaching Sports through the Buddy Support System**

Sports has shown to benefit students with SEN socially, emotionally and psychologically (Vickerman, 2012; Coates, 2011; Kristen, Patriksson & Fridlund, 2002). However, from the limited number of empirically based studies that do exist it seems that when compared to their able peers, students with SEN, regardless of gender, tend to participate less than their mainstream, do fewer and spend less time undertaking particular kinds of sports (Fitzgerald, 2012; Atkinson & Black, 2006; Fitzgerald, 2005; Smith, 2004). Sport provides opportunities for students with SEN to develop their social-emotional development, physical development (Vickerman, 2012; Kasser & Lytle 2005), social skills, forge friendships, exercise responsibility, and take on leadership roles. Through sport, students with SEN can learn vital social interaction skills (Coates, 2011), develop independence, and become empowered to lead and make change happen.

Until recently, there has been growing interest on the positive influence a peer intervention program can have on social inclusion (Sapon-Shevin, Ayres, & Duncan, 2002; Cross & Walker-Knight, 1997). The pilot Buddy Support System (BSS) is an initiative to build positive peer relationships through sports and play between students with SEN and their able counterparts in a socially-inclusive environment. The objective of the BSS is to involve mainstream peers in helping students with SEN develop friendship, social interaction, and acceptance so these students are able
to fit into mainstream classrooms where social interaction with their able peers is vital. The BSS will be implemented as a co-curricular programme to help shape and enhance the overall educational experience for students with SEN via extra-curricular football sessions with their able peers to encourage the integration of special needs students within the mainstream schooling system (Star Online, 2013).

The BSS in this study is designed as a peer intervention program where teachers select the most able or appropriate students in the mainstream class to assist students with SEN, their buddy, whom the teacher has identified that needs extra help with specific skills. These students act as ‘coaches’ and rotate roles as activities change and are required to work on a variety of sports activities such as football. Clear co-curriculum instructional activities are required to be planned in advance by the teacher and parents based on a syllabus. The procedures and routines for working in pairs are taught and monitored by the teachers. This will also allow the student with SEN to spend more time in a least restrictive environment and accelerate their achievement. The support of appropriate coaching for students with SEN will influence these students to become active members in the educational process rather than passive recipients of a set message.

Students with SEN are often faced with the challenge to develop positive social interactions with their typically developing peers (Vayrynen et. al., 2016; Louis & Isaac, 2016; Wendelborg & Tøssebro, 2011). Much of the interaction among mainstream education students and students with SEN occurs in an academic setting, which doesn’t lend itself to establishing the social relationships necessary to function in a larger social context. In classrooms, attention is directed in developing interventions for academic skill acquisition but one of the most important aspects of the school experience, the social and emotional life of the child may be neglected. The BSS benefits students with SEN to enrich their experience and achieve their full potential in sports while at the same time boosting their physical well-being (Balqis, 2013). This is also an important initiative to encourage mainstream students to have more empathy for those with disabilities.
There is, however, relatively little systemic ‘hard’ research into the efficacy of teaching approaches in this strand. This study aims to explore sports significant role in the life of students with SEN, through the BSS in particular, to provide an important link for Malaysia’s effort towards an inclusive education system. The research findings provide contemporary information of the trend towards including students with SEN in sports through the BSS as perceived by teachers and parent and explores the BSS impact on the involvement and experiences of students with SEN.

Method

Study Design

This study employed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods research design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) where quantitative approach was the core method supported by a qualitative approach to support the data of the core method (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007, p.11). A mixed-methods research may enrich the research data by the interpretation of participant’s experiences. The data collection process was done in two major phases. In the first phase, questionnaires were distributed to teachers and parents followed by the next phase where interviews with teachers and parents were conducted to gather their experiences.

Population and Sample

Ten Malaysian, government funded primary and secondary schools located in the Klang Valley, Malaysia were selected for this study. The criteria for selection was based on the active running and implementation of integrated education practices that includes special educational provisions to students in the Learning Disabilities category (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Minimal Retardation, Dyslexia, Down’s Syndrome and Autism).
A survey instrument was administered to 95 teachers and 104 parents. Only 68 parents’ responses were selected for further data analysis based on their frequency of attending the Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings with the teachers.

**Instrumentation**

An instrument was used for this study, which consists of three major constructs concerning the extent and in what ways is the buddy support system effective, as perceived by teachers and parents in (i) their understanding of the co-curriculum; (ii) its influence on students with SEN and; (ii) its benefits on students with SEN. The instrument consists of 13 items using a five Point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Based on the teachers’ and parents’ responses, semi-structured interviews sessions were carried out on a later date with a sub sample of 6 teachers and 5 parents to explore further their experiences concerning the effectiveness of the buddy support system in their schools.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

The questionnaires were distributed to all selected teachers and parents. The questionnaires consist of a series of Likert-type questions that when combined measures a particular trait, thus creating a Likert scale (Boone & Boone, 2012). Descriptive statistics consisting of mean scores were used to analyse data relating to the constructs concerning the extent and ways is the buddy support system effective, as perceived by teachers and parents in (i) their understanding of the co-curriculum; (ii) its influence on students with SEN and; (ii) its benefits on students with SEN. The interpretation of the level of effectiveness was based on the following set of descriptors: 1.00–2.40 (low level of interaction); 2.41–3.80 (moderate); and 3.81–5.00 (high level of interaction). Data were analysed descriptively (i.e. they were ranked from the highest level to the lowest level) before proceeding with the interview data.
Semi-structured interviews sessions were carried out with a sub sample of 6 teachers and 5 parents to explore further their experiences concerning the effectiveness of the buddy support system in their schools. Teachers’ and parents’ response were coded Teacher 1 (T1) to Teacher 6 (T6) and Parent 1 (P1) to Parent 5 (P5) to address the issue of respondent confidentiality. Research data from both the quantitative and qualitative methods were integrated (Creswell, 2003). Specific quotes from the interview were highlighted to support the questionnaire data, adding more depth and richness to the study. The combination of two types of data provides a robust analysis required for a mixed methods design (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

Results

This section of the article outlines the extent and in what ways is the buddy support system effective, as perceived by teachers and parents in (i) their understanding of the co-curriculum; (ii) its influence on students with SEN and; (ii) its benefits on students with SEN. The descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1 depicting 95 teachers who completed the questionnaire. As shown in Table 1, it is interesting to note from this table that just over half of the teachers were age 30 to 39 years old, majority had a Bachelor Degree academic qualification, and teachers in this study were largely very experience with 30.5% had 6 to 8 years of experience working in the special education field.

Table 2 shows the breakdown of parents’ demographic information, in percentage. It is interesting to note from this table that the percentage of mothers (52.9%) and fathers (47.1%) that responded to the study were almost equal, parents who have no qualification ranked 2nd highest at 33.8% and parents were generally active attending their child’s IEP meeting / discussion in the school.
Table 1

*Teachers’ demographic information*

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<tr>
<th>Demographic Variables</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Total Respondents</th>
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<td>40 – 49 years old</td>
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Table 2

*Parents’ demographic information*

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<tr>
<td>Age</td>
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<td>50 years and older</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest academic qualification</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>33.8</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diploma</td>
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The effectiveness of the buddy support system as perceived by teachers

Table 3 below indicates which of the three effectiveness of the buddy support system constructs was the most prevalent among teachers. Based on the overall mean, it can be observed that teachers (n=95) rated themselves highest equally on the buddy support system’s ‘influence on students with SEN’ (M= 3.70, SD= 0.54) and its ‘benefits on students with SEN’ (M= 3.70, SD= 0.54) followed by ‘teachers’ understanding of the co-curriculum’ (M= 3.56, SD= 0.51), respectively.

The mean score for ‘influence on students with SEN’ was the highest rated by teachers. These findings are supported in item 5 (The Buddy Support System enables students with SEN and their peers to play together) and item 6 (The Buddy Support System has a positive effect on the student’s interaction with others) of the questionnaire with a high mean of 3.78 each.
Six teachers were further interviewed in order to determine whether teachers perceived ‘influence on students with SEN’ as the most vital element in the effectiveness of the buddy support system. Excerpts from the interview with five teachers; Teacher 1 (T1), Teacher 3 (T3), Teacher 4 (T4), Teacher 5 (T5) and Teacher 6 (T6) supports the quantitative data findings.

“It encourages the SEN students to enter into co-curriculum activities and to play with other normal students of similar age. They will gain more confidence. When there is a buddy club program, they (students with SEN) are motivated by watching others play, they will also want to join in the activity even though they can’t kick the ball during football.” (T1)

“They’re comfortable in a group. The students with SEN students can interact with the normal kids. They can follow together in a play. They have confidence and their self-esteem has increased. They feel easy to communicate now.” (T3)

“I see these students (students with SEN) give a good response. There is some who don’t talk much before, now talks a lot. For those who always sits alone, when there’s play, they will participate. So this buddy club is good actually. It also instills good cooperation between these students and improve their psychomotor skills. The SEN students that were previously weak in walking, now they can walk slowly. When the training is repeated many times, it will strengthen their legs more.” (T4)
“Since the buddy club was established, I can see improvement in students’ interaction. The mainstream students come here to play together. They don’t see the kids here (students with SEN) is different now. If they can play together, they can grow together so they can be accepted by the society later.” (T5)

“When they join the buddy club, they will play football together at the field, after that they will also play indoor games together in the recreation room, so it really helps in building friendship and their interactions.” (T6)

To summarize, teachers mentioned the buddy support system is effective in its influence on students with SEN as it encourages play between SEN students and their peers. SEN students, they said, were now more confident and are able to interact. Their confidence and their self-esteem had also increased and it has improved their psychomotor skills.

Interestingly, the interview revealed three teachers (T2) and (T3) expressed their desire for the buddy support system to be recommended to others as they were very pleased with its progress. This is supported in item 13 (The Buddy Support System can be recommended to others so they get support for their SEN students from such a program) of the questionnaire with a moderate mean of 3.63. Teachers said that the BSS helps in the inclusion and acceptance process between the mainstream students and their SEN peers. They noted that students with SEN who are now placed in mainstream classes doesn’t feel secluded or excluded anymore:

“The buddy club should be expended throughout Malaysia, not only here (Klang Valley) because it’s here the mainstream students can accept the SEN students, and the SEN students can accept the mainstream students.” (T2)
“Most schools don’t have a program that involves both these groups (mainstream students and students with SEN) together. Every school needs to run this program. Buddy club also encourages inclusion and we can achieve 23-25% (inclusion) this year at this school. Because one of the ways the buddy club can help us achieve this target is that the students here mostly know the mainstream students over there. So when we place them there (in mainstream classes), they won’t feel secluded or excluded.” (T3)

Teachers (n=95) also rated the BSS ‘benefits on students with SEN’ the highest at the mean score of 3.70. The mean score was rated at a high effectiveness level. These findings are supported in item 4 (The Buddy Support System builds positive social interaction among students with SEN and their peers) in the questionnaire with a high mean of 3.87. Item 8 (The Buddy Support System helps students with SEN develop friendships with their peers) also rates a high mean of 3.73. The interview with five teachers; Teacher 1 (T1), Teacher 2 (T2), Teacher 3 (T3), Teacher 5 (T5) and Teacher 6 (T6) supports the quantitative data findings. It showed that the buddy club creates a healthy environment where the interaction is not blocked and there are no barriers:

“It’s successful in creating social interaction between mainstream students and the SEN students. They can walk together and chit-chat.” (T1)

“They know each other. Not only they recognise each other’s appearance, they remember their names too. Students with SEN and mainstream need to communicate and work together. Mostly through play because it’s the children’s instinct. They really love play. So in there, we get strengthen the relationship between themselves.” (T2)

“After its inception, we have interaction with students from the mainstream education. Buddy club is like an ice-breaking for inclusive education. They can help the children as when they
enter the mainstream class they already recognise the buddy club member. We created a healthy environment where the interaction is not blocked, there are no barriers there.” (T3)

“When the buddy is there, they play and grow together. Its integration, we are together. It’s not limited to studies only, but from the aspect of inclusive co-curriculum, it will be a start for inclusive academic.” (T5)

“Children really love sports and games. It helps create cooperation between mainstream and SEN students. These games and sports enables them to interact with each other. Through the games they are able to interact with each other exchanging ideas. They are able to interact between themselves and we can see the self-confidence especially at the field when they are playing football together.” (T6)

In summary, teachers shared on the benefits of the buddy support system through sports in creating social interaction between mainstream students and the students with SEN. They noted that students now know each other better not only in appearance, but in remembering each other’s names too. Teachers also mentioned in the interview that the buddy club creates a space for students with SEN to mingle with the mainstream students compared to their previous situation where they were in their respective classrooms and follows their respective syllabus.

The effectiveness of the buddy support system as perceived by parents

Table 4 below indicates which of the three effectiveness of the buddy support system constructs was the most prevalent among parents. Parents (n=68) rated themselves highest on the Buddy support system’s ‘influence on their child with SEN’ (M= 4.03, SD= 0.63), followed by its
‘benefits on their child with SEN’ (M= 3.91, SD= 0.59) and ‘parents’ understanding of the co-
curriculum’ at (M= 3.84, SD= 0.70), respectively.

Table 4

Effectiveness of the buddy support system as perceived by parents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
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<td>0.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefits on their child with SEN</td>
<td>3.91</td>
<td>0.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding of the co-curriculum</td>
<td>3.84</td>
<td>0.70</td>
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</table>

The mean score for ‘influence on their child with SEN’ was the highest rated by parents. The mean score was rated at a high effectiveness level. These findings are supported in item 3 (The Buddy Support System enables my child and fellow peers to play together) and item 4 (The Buddy Support System has a positive effect on the child’s interaction with others) with a high mean of 3.99 and 4.13.

Five parents were further interviewed in order to determine whether parents perceived ‘influence on their child with SEN’ as the most vital element in the effectiveness of the buddy support system. Excerpts from the interview with parent 1 (P1), and parent 2 (P2) supports the quantitative data findings:

“My child has improved. She’s very active and healthy. My daughter has got used to a lot of people. She found confidence, when she see people she say “Hello”, “Hi”. (P1)

This finding matches Bunch and Valeo (2004) study where they found students in inclusive schools developed friendships with peers with disabilities. In the interview session, one parent also revealed the buddy club has enabled her to communicate better with the teachers on SEN matters.
“Before she joins the buddy club, she was weak, she gets tired very fast. Now she’s improved a lot in her development. She's become so active. The buddy club has also helped her hand eye coordination One thing good is that the football activity also includes the normal kids. Buddy club is actually a topic for me to start-up a conversation with the teachers, then they talk to me on SEN matters.” (P2)

This could indicate this parent has possibly improved knowledge on SEN matters with the increased communication with teachers. This was supported in (Table 4.25, page 168), item 5 (The Buddy Support System has improved my knowledge of available resources to support my child) with a high mean of 3.99.

To conclude, parents expressed positive views on the influence of the buddy support system. Parents mentioned the buddy support system has a positive effect on their child’s physical and interactions with their peers. The child now has more confidence and skills. The BSS also enabled parents to improve their knowledge on SEN matters.

Discussion

This study has explored the extent and in what ways is the buddy support system effective, as perceived by teachers and parents in Malaysia in three major themes – 1) Understanding of the Co-curriculum, 2) Influence and 3) Benefits. The study further highlights what is required for this goal to be practically achieved.

The data from the empirical analysis showed that teachers believed is effective in encouraging play between SEN students and their peers. They could see student with SEN has improved their psychomotor skills, physically and have gained in confidence and self-esteem. Teachers also shared through sports, BSS was successful in creating social interaction between mainstream students and the students with SEN. These findings are similar to Goodwin &
Watkinson, 2000) study. These included seeing friends, getting exercise, having fun and teamwork. Lopes (2015) similarly revealed sports can promote physical wellbeing, combat discrimination, build confidence and a sense of security, as well as play an important role in the healing and rehabilitation process for students with SEN.

Parents in this study expressed positive views on the influence of the buddy support system on their child’s social interactions with their peers. Their children now have more confidence and skills. Pijl et al. (2008) emphasise the positive sign about peer acceptance is the student’s growing confidence, acceptance and interaction among themselves and their mainstream peers. In addition to this, Coates & Vickerman (2010) findings indicated that student with SEN in mainstream schools enjoy sports, gaining social benefits from their participation.

Conclusion

Given that students with SEN may be less involved in extracurricular activities than their typically developing peers (Solish, Perry, & Minnes, 2010), school settings may play a crucial role for these students’ social development and friendship formation. The goal of the buddy support system is to provide a pathway for students with SEN to enter into and become accepted into the school’s social networks (Miller, Cooke, Test, & White, 2003, Schlein, Green, & Stone, 1999). Sport provides a forum to enable students with SEN to build the skills they need to advocate for and influence change. The awareness and confidence these students gain through sport are often the impetus for engaging in advocacy work, as the communication, leadership and teamwork skills they develop are easily transferred into this new arena. These students’ able peers can play a bridging role towards the community.

This study therefore highlights what is required for this goal to be practically achieved and points towards the importance of sports between students with SEN and their able peers. As efforts towards school improvement continue in Malaysia over the next decade (Jones et. al., 2015),
training and support could be further provided by MOE to teachers and stakeholders to aid the goal towards 75% of students with special needs enrolled in inclusive programs by 2025. An inclusive classroom cannot be successfully created without positive social inclusion outcome. The establishment of peer relationships between students with special needs and their able peers is viewed as an important outcome of school integration efforts (Frostad & Pijl, 2007). The main aim now is to make this happen through sporting experiences (Fitzgerald, 2012).

**References**


