

Teaching practices of excellent Special Education teachers in Malaysia: A Conceptual review

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Abstract

The third wave of the Malaysian Education Blueprint (2021–2025) reinforces the imperative of equitable, high-quality educational access for students with disabilities across urban and rural contexts, directly aligning with Malaysia's national commitment to Sustainable Development Goal 4. Despite progressive policy ambitions, special education teaching in Malaysia remains constrained by outdated pedagogical practices and insufficient adaptation to heterogeneous learner needs. Recent government statistics indicate a significant increase in the number of students with special educational needs—from 88,118 in 2022 to 97,494 in 2023—underscoring the urgency for enhanced teacher competencies and innovative classroom approaches. This study uses a conceptual review approach to policy, theory and empirical studies. This conceptual review synthesises Malaysian policy frameworks, theoretical models, and educational scholarship, with particular reference to the role of Excellent Teachers (Guru Cemerlang Pendidikan Khas) and Slavin's (1994) Model of Effective Teaching. The paper explores the dimensions of pedagogical mastery, differentiated instruction, and stakeholder engagement, establishing a conceptual foundation to guide future empirical research and reform. In doing so, it positions effective teaching practices as pivotal for realising inclusive education and advancing Malaysia's SDG 4 agenda. This study contributes to the development of a conceptual model of effective teaching practices in special education as well as serving as a basis for future empirical research.

Keywords: Excellent Teacher, Teaching Practices, Inclusive Education, SDG 4, Special Education, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Special education students in Malaysia consist of various categories of disabilities such as hearing, vision, speech, physical and intellectual (Fariza Ezlin Zamri & Aliza Alias, 2022; Hifzan Mat Hussin, 2022). Since 1 July 2014, the Department of Social Welfare (JKM) has outlined seven eligible categories for disability registration: hearing impairment, visual impairment, speech impairment, physical disability, learning difficulties, mental disabilities, and multiple disabilities (Mohd Razimi Husin et al., 2020).

The Ministry of Education Malaysia (KPM) has shown persistent commitment to the educational rights of these pupils. Major institutional responses include the establishment of Special Education National Schools (SKPK), the Integrated Special Education Programme (PPKI), and the Inclusive Education Programme (PPI). Effective realisation of these inclusive educational initiatives depends critically on the expertise of teachers, who serve not only as instructional leaders but also as change agents that promote student achievement and the success of special education programmes (Seriayuna Sa'don Zubir, 2019).

Excellent Teachers have been appointed by the Ministry of Education based on evaluations by the School Inspectorate, and are recognised for their pedagogical strength. Profound pedagogical knowledge is essential to the effectiveness of teaching and learning (Mohd Rohiman Subri & Rohizani Yaakub, 2021). When teachers lack this foundational understanding, both the choice of teaching strategies and the selection of appropriate learning aids are compromised, ultimately undermining successful classroom practices.

This paper seeks to deeply analyse the teaching practices of Excellent Teachers in the special education domain, aiming to establish a guide and reference for all special education teachers in Malaysia. By addressing this critical area, the study seeks to enhance the life chances and achievements of special education students. The Outstanding Special Education Teacher serves as a pedagogical model that connects inclusive education policies with high-impact classroom practices. This paper aims to examine the teaching practices of Excellent Special Education Teachers in Malaysia using Slavin's (1994) theoretical framework as a conceptual basis.

Research GAP

Although Malaysia's policy frameworks such as the Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013–2025) and the recent third wave (2021–2025) prioritise teacher quality and inclusive access, current scholarship has predominantly concentrated on general pedagogical improvement without adequately addressing the distinctive challenges faced by special education teachers (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2013; Josephine Ambon et al., 2024). The rapid growth in the population of students with special educational needs—rising from 88,118 in 2022 to 97,494 in 2023—demands not only expansion in infrastructure but also a reconceptualisation of teaching competencies and adaptive practices suited to this heterogeneous learner group (Viknesvari Letchumanan et al., 2024). National and global aspirations, including SDG 4, can only be realised if teaching excellence in special education is robustly conceptualised and supported.

A critical gap persists in the literature regarding the day-to-day teaching practices of Excellent Teachers (Guru Cemerlang) within special education settings. Previous research has tended to focus on mainstream teaching or broad teacher effectiveness (Ahmad Affiq Mohd Yusoff et al., 2023; Rosli Yacob et al., 2023), leaving insufficient examination of how pedagogical mastery, differentiated instruction, and motivational strategies are actually deployed when working with students who experience complex disabilities and learning barriers (Fariza Ezlin Zamri & Aliza Alias, 2022; Siti Patonah et al., 2014; Sharifah Nurashikin Saiyed Abdullah, 2023). The absence of nuanced, context-specific analysis of excellent teaching in special education means that educators and policymakers lack empirically informed models and frameworks to drive professional learning and classroom innovation.

The absence of a clear and integrated conceptual model depicting the actual practices of Guru Cemerlang within the special education context reveals a significant empirical gap in existing research. Without a framework that captures the realities and challenges faced by these teachers, their professional development tends to rely on generic approaches or external literature, which may lack relevance to the local context. The scarcity of detailed and systematic empirical data limits the formulation of targeted and effective development strategies, thereby weakening support for enhancing instructional quality and intervention effectiveness in special education. Hence, there is a critical need to develop an empirically grounded conceptual model that can strengthen the holistic and contextual professional development of special education teachers.

Furthermore, while some studies have highlighted gaps in professional knowledge, lack of appropriate teaching aids, and ineffective adaptation of teaching methods among special education teachers (Mohd Rohiman Subri & Rohizani Yaakub, 2021; Kama Shaffeei et al., 2020), there is still limited theoretical development and synthesis regarding how these factors interact with teacher identity, motivation, and institutional support (Kamarul Azmi Jasmi, 2010; Seriyuna Sa'don Zubir, 2019). No existing research has systematically articulated the strategies or classroom behaviours of Excellent Teachers that contribute to both academic success and holistic development for students with special needs. Most previous studies have focused on mainstream teachers and ignored the adaptive pedagogical dimension in special education. Addressing these gaps is vital for Malaysia to fulfil both policy ambitions and its SDG 4 commitments for truly inclusive, equitable, and high-impact education.

This study fills this gap by proposing an effective teaching model based on Slavin's (1994) theory and adapted to the Malaysian context.

Excellent Teachers' Teaching Practices in Special Education

The Malaysian Education Blueprint (PPPM) 2013–2025 positions teacher quality as a strategic lever for holistic educational transformation within the nation, highlighting the crucial role of teachers in developing high-quality human capital and meeting national aspirations amid the challenges of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and globalisation (Rosli Yacob et al., 2023). As key actors within the education system, teachers are directly responsible for producing capable, future-ready generations (Ahmad Affiq Mohd Yusoff et al., 2023).

Despite these policy priorities, the teaching practices of many educators—including those in special education—remain traditional and do not fully embrace inclusive or innovative methodologies. Numerous teachers continue to rely on conventional techniques, with limited utilisation of teaching aids and resources (Rosli Yacob et al., 2023). This is particularly problematic in special education, where students benefit greatly from multisensory aids and adaptable strategies that accommodate physical, cognitive, and social diversity. Indeed, as Siti Patonah et al. (2014) articulate, special education students require teaching methods and materials that are explicitly tailored to their abilities and challenges; it falls to teachers to make lessons both accessible and meaningful. Recent findings further demonstrate that specialised pedagogical modules, such as the AquaExplorers Module, significantly enhance teachers' knowledge and competence in managing adaptive and skill-based activities for students with special needs (Samsudin, 2025).

The Blueprint's third wave (2021–2025) sets the explicit objective of providing high-quality, individually tailored educational access for all students with special educational needs, whether in urban or rural settings. Integral to this ambition is strengthening teachers' foundational knowledge of special education by 2025 (Josephine Ambon et al., 2024; Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2013). The need for expert, adaptable instruction grows ever more pressing as the number of such students surges—from 88,118 in 2022 to 97,494 in 2023—amplifying the imperative for well-prepared, dynamic educators (Viknesvari Letchumanan et al., 2024).

Effective teaching in special education fundamentally depends on deep content mastery and refined pedagogical skill (Sharifah Nurashikin Saiyed Abdullah, 2023). Amalan Pengajaran Guru Cemerlang—excellent teachers' practices—are pivotal: not only do these teachers help students reach learning goals, but they also nurture important social and life skills. The positive impact of excellent special education teachers is evidenced in the achievements of outstanding students, and the reputations gained by pioneering educators such as Cikgu Hazeem Azemi (Temerloh), Cikgu Kumar (Merbok), and Cikgu Stafenus Lucas (Sarawak).

Central to the professional standard for excellent teaching is robust pedagogical knowledge and its effective classroom application (Mohd Rohiman Subri & Rohizani Yaakub, 2021). The Ministry of Education's School Inspectorate evaluates teachers for the "Excellent Teacher" designation based on a common set of pedagogical criteria, applicable to all candidates regardless of specialisation (Kamarul Azmi Jasmi, 2010). Research demonstrates that excellent teachers in special education not only improve students' academic achievement but also support personal development, fostering resilience, independence, and competitive capacity among special needs students (Kama Shaffeei et al., 2020).

However, achieving these outcomes requires more than personal talent or experience—it necessitates systematic adaptation of teaching strategies and robust support structures. The lack of widespread adoption of differentiated instruction and adaptive practice among special educators points to ongoing gaps in professional development, resourcing, and institutional culture (Rosli Yacob et al., 2023; Siti Patonah et al., 2014).

The Role of Excellent Teachers as Pedagogical Leaders

The role of excellent teachers as pedagogical leaders is pivotal in shaping the quality of education and fostering professional growth among educators. These teachers not only demonstrate superior instructional skills but also serve as mentors and catalysts for educational innovation within their institutions. By modeling effective teaching practices, guiding curriculum implementation, and

facilitating collaborative learning communities, they contribute significantly to the enhancement of teaching standards and student outcomes. Furthermore, their leadership extends beyond the classroom, influencing policy development and promoting a culture of continuous improvement. Recognizing and supporting the role of excellent teachers as pedagogical leaders is therefore essential for advancing educational excellence and sustaining reform efforts in diverse learning environments.

Innovation in Special Education Teaching Strategies

Innovation in special education teaching strategies is fundamental to addressing the diverse and complex needs of students with disabilities. It involves the development and application of novel instructional methods, technologies, and adaptive approaches that enhance learning accessibility and efficacy. By integrating evidence-based practices with creative pedagogical solutions, educators can better tailor interventions to individual learner profiles, thereby promoting inclusion and maximizing student potential. Continuous innovation also encourages flexibility and responsiveness in teaching, enabling educators to overcome barriers related to cognitive, sensory, and physical challenges. Emphasizing innovation within special education is essential for advancing educational equity and improving long-term outcomes for learners with special needs.

Use of Adaptive Technology and Teaching Aids

The use of adaptive technology and teaching aids in special education plays a crucial role in enhancing instructional effectiveness and promoting learner engagement. These tools are designed to accommodate diverse learning needs and overcome barriers related to physical, sensory, or cognitive impairments. By integrating adaptive devices and tailored teaching aids, educators can provide personalized learning experiences that support independence and improve access to the curriculum. Furthermore, the strategic application of such technologies facilitates differentiated instruction and enables ongoing assessment of student progress, fostering inclusive educational environments. The continuous advancement and incorporation of adaptive technologies are essential for optimizing learning outcomes and ensuring equity for students with special needs.

The teaching practices of guru cemerlang are characterized by a holistic approach that goes beyond academic achievement to include the development of self-reliance, resilience, and social competence among students with special needs. This comprehensive focus emphasizes essential life skills such as self-management and problem-solving, which are critical for the long-term well-being of these learners. Strengthening resilience enables students to face daily challenges with greater confidence, while fostering social competence enhances their ability to interact effectively and adapt within their communities. Such an approach reflects a deep understanding of the multifaceted needs of students and supports an inclusive educational philosophy that promotes balanced and continuous individual development.

Task analysis is an evidence-based teaching method widely used in educating students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). This approach involves breaking down complex skills or activities into smaller, manageable, and sequential steps to facilitate easier learning and skill acquisition. For example, a multi-step task such as brushing teeth can be divided into individual actions like locating materials, applying toothpaste, brushing specific mouth quadrants, and rinsing. The steps are taught in a specific order, either starting from the first step (forward chaining) or the last step (backward chaining), or by teaching all steps together with focus on problematic parts (total task teaching). This systematic decomposition reduces anxiety and frustration in learners by providing clear, measurable instructions and promotes independence by allowing students to master each component before progressing. Task analysis supports personalized teaching strategies and progress monitoring, making it highly effective for developing daily living skills and enhancing overall functional abilities in learners with autism.

Theoretical Framework: Adaptation of Slavin's (1994) Model of Effective Teaching

To conceptualise and structure excellent teaching practice in special education, this paper adopts and adapts Slavin's (1994) Model of Effective Teaching (see Figure 1). The model emphasises the interplay of several core elements:

- Teaching Quality: Incorporating varied teaching methods, a range of teaching aids, current curricular content, and diverse assessment systems, all underpinned by thoughtful planning.
- Teaching Level Suitability: Aligning instruction with the different ability levels of students to ensure access and engagement for all.
- Incentive and Motivation: Integrating motivational strategies, including reward and penalty systems, to sustain student engagement and encourage perseverance.
- Teaching Time: Effective management of instructional time, allowing for both breadth and depth of learning.

Together, these dimensions inform teachers' classroom practices and facilitate effective, inclusive learning environments for learners with diverse needs. This theoretical lens, supported by the policy context and empirical observations, provides a scaffold for understanding and further enhancing teaching excellence in Malaysian special education classrooms.

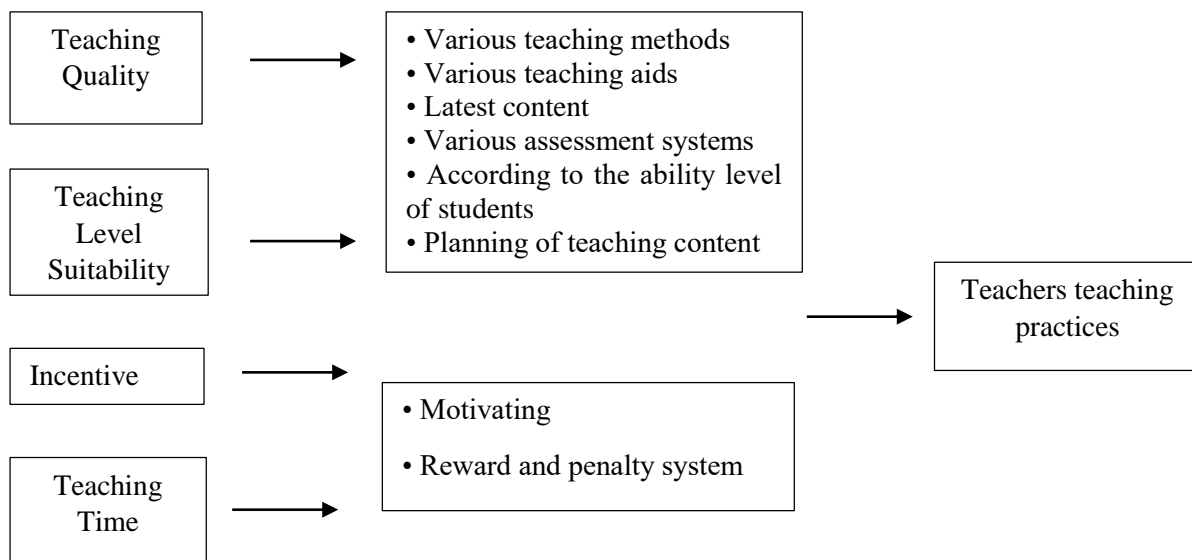


Figure 1: Adaptation of Slavin's (1994) Model of Effective Teaching

Teaching Quality

In the Malaysian context, teaching quality for excellent special education teachers requires moving beyond conventional, one-size-fits-all pedagogy. Teachers must design and implement lessons that utilise a rich variety of teaching methods—such as differentiated instruction, multisensory strategies, and hands-on, experiential learning—and select teaching aids tailored to their students' specific needs (Siti Patonah et al., 2014; Rosli Yacob et al., 2023). The use of up-to-date curricular content and differentiated assessment systems ensures that every student, regardless of their ability or disability, receives instruction that is both relevant and challenging. Excellent Teachers (Guru Cemerlang) demonstrate mastery by intentionally planning and adapting instructional activities that foster both academic and personal development among students with disabilities (Sharifah Nurashikin Saiyed Abdullah, 2023; Mohd Rohiman Subri & Rohizani Yaakub, 2021).

Teaching Level Suitability

This dimension involves closely monitoring each student's progress and thoughtfully aligning instruction with their cognitive, communicative, and physical abilities. In Malaysia's special education classrooms, the diversity of needs is particularly pronounced—ranging from students with mild learning

difficulties to those with more profound disabilities (Fariza Ezlin Zamri & Aliza Alias, 2022; Viknesvari Letchumanan et al., 2024). The adapted model encourages teachers to set individualised learning targets, modify content and instructional pace, and employ continuous formative assessments. Through these practices, excellent teachers ensure that students experience success at their own level, promoting retention, confidence, and engagement (Seriayuna Sa'don Zubir, 2019; Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2013).

Incentive and Motivation

Motivation is central to sustained learning for all learners, but especially for those with special educational needs, who may face persistent challenges and frustration. In line with Slavin's model, the Malaysian adaptation highlights the need for motivational strategies—such as personalised praise, tangible rewards, and even structured penalty systems, where appropriate—to encourage effort and build resilience (Mohd Rohiman Subri & Rohizani Yaakub, 2021; Kama Shaffeei et al., 2020). Excellent teachers maintain a positive, affirming classroom climate where every student's progress is celebrated, and setbacks are treated as opportunities for growth.

Teaching Time

Finally, effective management of teaching time is crucial within the Malaysian education system, which is characterised by diverse class compositions and often limited instructional durations. Excellent special education teachers prioritise instructional time for core subjects and meaningful learning experiences, while also incorporating breaks and flexible routines to suit students' stamina and attention spans. Carefully structured lesson plans with clear transitions and routines help maximise productive learning time, supporting depth of understanding rather than superficial coverage (Rosli Yacob et al., 2023; Josephine Ambon et al., 2024).

Slavin's Model (1994) is highly suitable for application in special education contexts because it integrates four key dimensions directly aligned with the needs of special education students. Firstly, the model emphasizes the quality of instruction, ensuring that teaching is not only clear and effective but also designed to engage students meaningfully. Secondly, it incorporates the appropriateness of instructional level, which allows educators to tailor the content to match the individual abilities of learners, making the material accessible and comprehensible. Thirdly, the inclusion of motivation as a core component addresses the crucial role of encouraging student engagement and persistence—an essential factor for learners who may experience unique challenges. Lastly, the model highlights the importance of instructional time, recognizing that sufficient and well-structured teaching time is necessary for mastery of concepts. Together, these interconnected elements provide a comprehensive framework that supports effective teaching practices in special education, particularly within the Malaysian context where adaptation and contextualization are necessary to meet diverse learner needs. Thus, Slavin's Model offers a strong foundation for enhancing pedagogical effectiveness and student outcomes in special education settings.

Slavin's Model is well aligned with national education policies such as the Standard Guru Malaysia (SGM 2.0) and the Pelan Pembangunan Pendidikan Malaysia (PPP KPM 2021–2025). SGM 2.0 outlines essential teacher competencies and professional ethics aimed at nurturing educators who are knowledgeable, skilled, and morally grounded. The model's emphasis on quality of instruction, appropriateness of instructional level, motivation, and teaching time corresponds closely with the four main competency domains of SGM 2.0: *Orientasi Ilmu* (Knowledge Orientation), *Instruksional* (Instructional), *Pelibatan Komuniti* (Community Engagement), and *Kualiti Peribadi* (Personal Quality). Moreover, the model supports continuous professional development as advocated by PPP by encouraging teachers to adapt teaching strategies to meet diverse learner needs effectively. Integrating Slavin's Model within the Malaysian context not only ensures pedagogical effectiveness but also fosters compliance with national standards, thereby contributing to the broader agenda of elevating the quality of education through well-prepared and competent educators.

SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

This research explores the teaching practices of Excellent Teachers in the field of special education, addressing critical gaps that persist despite clear policy mandates under the third wave of the Malaysian Education Blueprint (2021–2025), which prioritises high-quality, tailored access for all students with special needs and mandates that teachers be equipped with foundational special education knowledge by 2025 (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2013). This study not only documents excellent practices, but also builds a conceptual foundation for the development of future special education teacher training modules.

Academic Significance

The study's foremost contribution lies in filling a notable gap in Malaysian educational scholarship: while research on excellent teaching practices flourishes within mainstream education, focused investigation in special education settings remains conspicuously lacking. By systematically documenting and analysing the practices of Excellent Teachers in special education, this study will enrich the existing literature and provide an essential reference for future researchers and practitioners, supporting the national goal of nurturing successful special education students (Nik Hassan Seman et al., 2016; Kama Shaffeei et al., 2020).

Practical Significance

This research holds practical value for a variety of stakeholders. For the Ministry of Education (KPM), findings will inform ongoing efforts to respond to the rapidly increasing population of special needs students—an issue that directly affects the development, well-being, and life outcomes of these children at both primary and secondary school levels. By supporting the aspiration to see students with disabilities competing on equal footing with their typically developing peers, this research aligns with the ministry's inclusive policy direction. It also echoes the National Education Philosophy's holistic approach to student development—emphasising physical, emotional, spiritual, intellectual, and social growth for all, including those with special needs (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2013; Viknesvari Letchumanan et al., 2024; Mohd Razimi Husin et al., 2020).

For State and District Education Offices (JPN & PPD), the study promises to offer actionable insights that can be implemented to raise the standard of teaching practices among special education teachers, thus enhancing the support structure for schools such as JPN Kelantan and PPD Kota Bharu (Kama Shaffeei et al., 2020).

Specifically, the research findings could be integrated into professional training programs for educational officers, teachers in training at Teacher Education Institutes (IPG), and university education departments. These training modules can emphasize practical pedagogy adjustments, evidence-based teaching strategies for diverse learners, and collaborative approaches to meet individual needs effectively. Embedding the research outputs into teacher preparation and in-service training will strengthen educators' competencies, increase the efficacy of special education delivery, and ultimately contribute to improved student outcomes and inclusion rates consistent with Malaysia's Education Blueprint 2013–2025 inclusive targets.

Therefore, the study not only supports policy implementation at the governmental level but also enriches teacher education and continuous professional development, ensuring that findings are operationalized into tangible benefits for special education teachers and their students.

The integration of research findings into training programs such as the Special Learning Difficulties Training (SLDN) and short certification courses for special education teachers is crucial. By incorporating these findings into SLDN workshops conducted by District Education Offices and into certification modules at Teacher Education Institutes (IPG) and universities, educators' knowledge and teaching strategies can be enhanced with evidence-based methods tailored to local contexts. This approach not only strengthens the vocational skills of teachers but also supports ongoing professional development. Aligning formal training and certification with research outcomes ensures that educators are well-prepared, competent, and confident to implement inclusive and impactful teaching practices in special education.

Teacher and Student Outcomes

At the school and classroom level, the study's findings will benefit special education teachers by motivating them to improve and innovate classroom practice. Enhanced awareness of effective teaching strategies will foster greater enthusiasm and efficacy among teachers (Mohd Rohiman Subri & Rohizani Yaakub, 2021; Seriyuna Sa'don Zubir, 2019). Ultimately, the greatest beneficiaries are the special education students themselves. Engaging and effective instructional strategies can increase joy in learning, reduce chronic absenteeism—a persistent challenge in special education settings—and improve overall educational achievement and well-being (Siti Muhibah Hj Nor & Zetty Nurzuliana Rashed, 2018).

Moreover, recent empirical evidence from the Journal of Special Education Technology (2022) highlights that the integration of technology and collaborative teaching practices enhances teacher motivation and instructional effectiveness in special education settings. This is supported by contemporary studies demonstrating that personalized interventions and supportive technological tools increase student engagement and academic success in special education classrooms (Journal of Special Education Technology, 2022).

Overall, the insights generated by this study are essential for policy, leadership, and classroom practice—helping to shape an education system where students with special needs realize their potential alongside their peers, in line with both the spirit of national policy and evolving international standards.

CONCLUSION

This conceptual analysis highlights three main conclusions which are indicative of the current and future status of Malaysian special education. Firstly, the review reiterates that the practices of Excellent Teachers (Guru Cemerlang Pendidikan Khas) continue to play an influential role in enhancing effective teaching and learning. Despite the policy ambition expressed in the third wave of the Malaysian Education Blueprint (2021–2025) and consonant with SDG 4, lacunae remain on differentiated instruction and utilisation of innovative pedagogical approaches (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2013; Viknesvari Letchumanan et al., 2024). Increasing evidence support that adaptive strategy, structured instructional design and utilisation of specific aids are central to enhanced learning results among students with special needs (Rosli Yacob et al., 2023; Siti Patonah et al., 2014). In such a setting, the role of Excellent Teachers, dovetailed with models like Slavin's (1994) Model of Effective Teaching, is considered crucial for students learning holistically as well as academically (Mohd Rohiman Subri and Rohizani Yaakub., 2021; Sharifah Nurashikin Saiyed Abdullah, 2023).

Second, by bringing together the body of existing research into a synthesis, important communication in policy and practice is established. Closing the readiness gaps must be done in an environment of contextually appropriate policy development, and enhanced structures for professional learning, availability of resources. These are necessary for the realization of inclusive policy objectives into practical classroom settings and to prepare the system to accommodate increasing numbers of special needs children (Fariza Ezlin Zamri & Aliza Alias, 2022; Mohd Razimi Husin et al., 2020). Strengthening systemic support systems in place will also allow Malaysian teachers to establish more inclusive and quality teaching (Kama Shaffeei et al., 2020; Josephine Ambon, et al., 2024).

Third, the review highlights the necessity of efforts that extend beyond conceptual analysis to empirical research. There will be a need for empirical classroom studies, for validation of the preliminary model submitted in this proposal and also future longitudinal studies on teacher effectiveness. This type of Work will generate more robust evidence for policy changes and promote the systemic change in special education teaching practices. This is not to say that the secret sauce of special education is simply inclusive policy, but rather that it's largely about teachers who have mastered both the art of pedagogy and the science of intervention.

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