

ADDRESSING THE NEEDS FOR TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AMIDST THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

Learners with disabilities are among the most impacted group of children if not the most vulnerable compared to their peers of the same age. They are exposed to the risk of being left behind in society, employment as well as their participation in education. Shortages of trained teachers and school personnel in implementing the concept of Inclusive Education in many countries have led to the increase challenges and delay especially in preparing learners with disabilities to be accepted and participate in the real world. Envisioning and responding towards achieving United Nation Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) specifically SDG No.4 “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”, SEAMEO 7 Priority Areas No. 2 “Addressing Barriers to Inclusion” and the previous statements and declaration regarding Inclusive Education, SEAMEO SEN has always aligned its roles to be at the forefront of Disability-Inclusive education advocacies, teachers’ competencies development, quality content creations and community awareness. Responding to these commitments, targeted researches were carried out to understand, learn and provide recommendations addressing to the needs of learners with disabilities. Training needs analysis and impactful training courses, workshops, seminars and conferences were also held in directing and harnessing teachers’ potential. This paper explicates SEAMEO SEN responses in promoting and enhancing the quality of special educational needs practices among its member countries including its responses during the COVID-19 pandemic situation. This paper further explores the programmes and activities conducted by SEAMEO SEN and how the centre adapts to respond to the current challenges.

Keywords: teacher training, COVID-19, SEAMEO SEN, quality education

1. Introduction

Learners with disabilities generally refer to individuals who have difficulties acquiring skills which may lead them to challenges and hinder participation in the real world after school. Even without any crisis, learners with disabilities were considered a marginalized and stigmatized group, among the most challenging group of learners across the educational settings (UNICEF, 2020). In most traditional learning settings, learners with disabilities will be supported by a group of certified and trained teachers together with the support of teaching materials and learning aids. These learners being in the category of learners which required among the highest learning support from teachers, they are facing the risk of being left out in education. Learners with disability is a recognized individual under the United Nation Convention on the Right of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) which was entered into force in 2008. This agreement sets that each participating countries need to make sure that every disabled persons have the same rights as any other citizen including in education (United Nation, 2021).

Teaching is a physically and mentally challenging occupation, as teachers need to balance their work in school and commitment. Being a teacher for learners with disabilities, teachers always face a great challenge to find ways to deliver educational support to their learners, each with a particular set of disabilities and needs. Many if not all learners with disabilities, needed hands-on materials and in-person interaction to get them engaged in any learning process. Additionally, education for learners with disabilities tends to be sensory and hands-on which requires teachers to be competent.

United Nation in its agenda for the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) has outlined a global blueprint encompasses 17 action agendas targeted for the people of the world and the planet. Among the 17 action agendas is SDG No. 4 focuses to Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. A sub-category of the agenda is SDG No. 4.5 also highlighted that by 2030, equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations must be addressed by its member countries (United Nation, 2021).

The Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) in aligning all its regional centres and networks has put forward the SEAMEO 7 Priority Areas with seven specific actions on education, science and culture. On a specific note, SEAMEO has stated in its Priority Areas No. 2 “Addressing Barriers to Inclusion” on the importance of closing the educational gaps for learners with disabilities.

1.1 SEAMEO SEN As A Regional Organization

Under the umbrella and the administration of The Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO), SEAMEO Regional Centre for Special Educational Needs (SEAMEO SEN) is a centre that has been established to be a regional centre of excellence in the area of the education for learners with disabilities. Understanding more about SEAMEO:

SEAMEO is a regional intergovernmental organization established in 1965 among governments of Southeast Asian countries to promote regional cooperation in education, science and culture in the region. As an organization that has continued to nurture human capacities and explored the peoples’ fullest potential, the SEAMEO maintains its work and aspirations for development with peoples of the region to make lives better in quality and equity in education, preventive health education, culture and tradition, information and communication technology, languages, poverty alleviation and agriculture and natural resources. The organisation's highest policy-making body is the SEAMEO Council, which comprises the 11 Southeast Asian education ministers. The SEAMEO Secretariat is located in Bangkok, Thailand (SEAMEO Secretariat, 2020).

SEAMEO SEN is a centre that expressed its commitment to improve the lives of learners with disabilities by increasing the quality teaching and learning for Special Education in the Southeast Asia region. The centre main role is to enhance the quality of special educational needs practices within the SEAMEO Member Countries through targeted training courses, seminars, workshop and conferences to special education and inclusive teachers. The centre also conducted research in the areas of learning and supporting learners with visual disability, hearing disability, speech disability, physical disability, learning difficulties and multiple disabilities (SEAMEO SEN, 2021).

The training concept applied by SEAMEO SEN is based on best practices theme. Given the focus area of special educational needs and a broad range of expertise, skills, experience, exposure and nature of the teachers and students, best practice concept fits the current scenario and educational agenda. The participants of these best practice courses will act as multipliers which will share and disseminate the course content among their peer

teachers of learners with disabilities at a school, district or national level. SEAMEO SEN's Training and Consultation Division and Research and Innovation Division consists of a head of division and Programme Associates who design and coordinate training programmes and researches based on the centre's Strategic Plan with a thematic content of the courses conducted.

1.2 Best Practices Theme

Best practice theme is seen to be one of the effective ways in implementing teaching and learning especially for children. The same may also applies to learners with disabilities where in most learning situation, they needed extra attention from a teacher. In the case of a teacher, applying a specific best practice in classes can in a way motivate them as well as ensure maximum engagement with their learners.

A best practice may assist teachers in developing strategies and resources especially for learners with disabilities, enhance teachers' competency in catering for learners' diversity, presenting teachers the effective measures and strategies to accommodate learners with disabilities and optimizing the pedagogical support system approach for learners with disabilities (Public Schools of North Carolina, Department of Public Instruction: Elementary Division: 2006).

1.3 Implementation of Inclusive and Special Education

In the context of Malaysian education system, there are three types of Special Education programmes conducted by the Ministry of Education (MOE) Malaysia. Learners with disabilities with of high functionality will be placed in an inclusive program together with their typical mainstream learners and will learn the Primary School Standard Curriculum (KSSR) and the Secondary School Standard Curriculum (KSSM) (Surat Pekeliling Ikhtisas, 2016). The Special Education Integration Program (PPKI) is provided by MOE Malaysia in helping learners with disabilities who face cognitive and behavioural challenges in learning. PPKI adopts a learning integration model where learning take place within the same school compound of a mainstream school. Although learners with disabilities are placed in specific classes, this model allows a semi -inclusive system to be implemented i.e. sharing of common areas such as canteens and fields, which allows interaction between typical mainstream students and learners with disabilities to take place. Apart from the inclusive and PPKI programme, Primary Special Education School, Secondary Special Education School and Vocational Special Education School are also provided for specific learning programmes and to cater to learners with disabilities specific needs including learners with hearing and visual impairment.

As for the remaining 10 SEAMEO Member Countries, special education programmes are implemented in either fully inclusive; a mix of inclusive and integration model; or a combination of inclusive, integration model and special education schools. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) also contributed in some countries in supporting programmes especially in catering to children with low functioning abilities and early childhood care education services.

2. SEAMEO SEN Programme and Activities

Since its operation in May 2013, SEAMEO SEN has conducted training programmes and researches based on its 1st Five-Year Development Plan starting from Fiscal Year (FY) 2013/2014 to Fiscal Year (FY) 2017/2018 and 2nd Five-Year Development Plan from Fiscal Year (FY) 2018/2019 to Fiscal Year (FY) 2022/2023. A fiscal year runs from July to Jun completing 12 months period. Each development plan is proposed for the period of five years with yearly review and approved amendments during its Governing Board Meeting. These programmes and activities were planned and proposed through a series of discussion and workshop between SEAMEO SEN personnel, representative of education officer from Ministries of Education and universities lecturers with the anticipation of issues and scenario in special education for the next five years. The programmes and activities that were conducted for the period of five years (FY 2016/2017 to FY 2020/21) together with number of participants are extracted from the Working Papers of SEAMEO SEN Governing Board Meeting as well as documents from the Training and Consultation Division and Research and Innovation Division and further listed in table 1.

2.1 Collaborative Efforts

In keeping the programmes and activities up-to-date, most of the activities will focus on best practices and involve subject matter experts. SEAMEO SEN also works collaboratively with local and international agencies and the Ministries of Education of the 11 SEAMEO Member Countries to conduct programmes and activities relating to the enhancing the capacities of special education teachers in delivering educational services and optimizing the potential of their learners with disabilities. Researches were conducted in collaboration with partners i.e. universities, international organization in ensuring that the research includes elements of innovation, current issues as well as presenting high impact. Emstad, A. B and Sandvik L. V. (2020) highlighted that collaborative partnerships sometimes may have an individual purpose but usually consist of common goals that cannot be reached by either party independently, therefore a collaborative effort is made.

Table 1: SEAMEO SEN programmes and activities (FY 2016/2017 to FY 2020/2021)

Fiscal Year	Training Programmes	Research Programmes
FY 2016/2017	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Best Practices in Teaching and Learning: Research in Special Education Needs 2. Unified English Braille (UEB) Untuk Guru-Guru Sabah Parent Support Training Net: Pilot Project-Planning Phase (PST Net) 3. Professional Development for SEN Education Managers on Current Trends in Special Education 4. Non-Visual Dekstop Access (NVDA Workshop) Group 1 5. Non-Visual Dekstop Access (NVDA Workshop) Group 2 6. Unified English Braille (UEB) for Malaysian Teachers (Sabah) 7. Hala Tuju Pintar Cerdas Dan Berbakat di Malaysia 8. Unified English Braille (UEB) for Malaysian Teachers (Sarawak) 9. 'Sign to Speak' Workshop 10. Amendments Workshop on Bahasa Malaysia Braille 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The Effect of Kod Tangan Bahasa Malaysia and Bahasa Isyarat Malaysia on Student Achievement Among Deaf Children 2. The Implementation of Bahasa Isyarat Malaysia and Kod Tangan Bahasa Malaysia Teaching Tool into Android and iPad/iPhone Application 3. Parental Mediation on Children's Television Viewing in the Homes of Blind or Low Vision Children in Malaysia
FY 2017/2018	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Introduction to Special Education for Pupils Management Assistant in Malaysia (PPM) 2. Best Practices in Teaching and Learning: Storytelling for Special Needs Children 3. Technical and Vocational Education Training for SEN Teachers: Urban Agriculture for SEN Children 4. Identification and Accommodating Children with Gifted and Talented course for BRAC teachers of Bangladesh 5. Best Practices in Teaching and Learning: Social And Motor Skills for Special Education Needs 6. Job Coach for Students with Special Education Needs 7. Leadership and Professionalism Course for Senior Special Education Teachers 8. Art Therapy for Special Education: Cohort 1 9. Workshop on Malaysia Braille Code Amendments 10. Special Education Courses for Indonesian Special Education Teachers 11. Art Therapy for Special Education: Cohort 2 12. Holistic Training Workshop on Inclusive & Train of Trainer Course 13. Art Therapy for Special Education: Cohort 3 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 2nd International Conference On Special Education (ICSE) 2017, Sarawak, Malaysia 2. 1st International Seminar Workshop in Special Education "The Changing of Landscape of Special Education" 3. The 2018 Chang Pha and 8th ICSAR Joint International Conference UKM-SEAMEO SEN-DAEGU University 4. The Use of BrailleTax to Increase the Mastery of Braille Code Writing Concept using Slate and Stylus 5. The Effect of Kod Tangan Bahasa Malaysia and Bahasa Isyarat Malaysia on Student Achievement Among Deaf Children (continuation) 6. The Implementation of Bahasa Isyarat Malaysia and Kod Tangan Bahasa Malaysia Teaching Tool into Android and iPad/iPhone Application (continue) 7. Seminar on Best Practices in Special Education 8. Parental Mediation on Children's Television Viewing in the Homes of Blind or Low Vision Children in Malaysia (continuation)

FY 2018/2019	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Special Education Training for Myanmar Teachers: Visual Impairment and Hearing Impairment 2. Best Practices in Teaching and Learning in Special Education: Post-School Career Transition Programme for Individual with Special Needs 3. Technical and Vocational Education Training for SEN Teachers: Urban Agriculture for SEN Children (Vietnam Teachers) 4. Therapy for Special Education Needs: Cohort 1 5. Best Practices in Teaching and Learning: Inclusive Education 6. Best Practices in Teaching and Learning: Sexuality Education for Children with Special Needs 7. In-Service Training for Teachers and Parents of Children with Autism 8. Training of Teacher Trainer: Short Course Programme for 20 Special Needs Educators 9. Occupational Therapy Training for Trainer 10. Emergency Response Plan and First Aid Training for Children with Special Needs 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The Use of BrailleTax to Increase the Mastery of Braille Code Writing Concept using Slate and Stylus. (continuation) 2. The Effect of Kod Tangan Bahasa Malaysia and Bahasa Isyarat Malaysia on Student Achievement Among Deaf Children (continuation) 3. The Implementation of Bahasa Isyarat Malaysia and Kod Tangan Bahasa Malaysia Teaching Tool into Android and iPad/iPhone Application (continuation) 4. Design, Development and Testing of Vi-Per Games for Autism Diagnostic Tools 5. Teacher Awareness Level On The Diversity Of Learners In The Classroom 6. Career Transition Programme and the Readiness of Special Education Teachers on its Implementation 7. International Conference on Special Education in Southeast Asia Region 2019 (ICSAR) UKM-SEAMEO SEN
FY 2019/2020	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Best Practices in Teaching and Learning: Teaching Children with Down Syndrome 2. Special Education Training (Visual Impairment, Hearing Impairment, Autism): Lao PDR 3. Best Practices in Teaching and Learning: Occupational Therapy for Special Educational Needs 4. Best Practices in Teaching and Learning: Inclusive Education for Teachers 5. Best Practices in Teaching and Learning: Inclusive Education for Teachers (Malaysia) 6. Best Practices in Teaching and Learning: Deafblind Education for Special Teachers 7. Best Practices in Teaching and Learning: Human Sexuality Education for Students with Special Educational Needs 8. [Online] Kesedaran Epilepsi Dalam Kalangan Guru 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Advocating Proper Nutrition in Special Education Schools for Children with ADHD and Down Syndrome in Southeast Asia 2. Teacher Awareness Level On The Diversity Of Learners In The Classroom (continuation) 3. The Implementation of Zero Reject Policy and its Implications Towards Special Needs Children 4. 3rd International Conference on Special Education (2019) Surabaya, Indonesia 5. Seminar on Special Education 6. Seminar Pendidikan Khas: Ke Arah Melestarikan Pendidikan Bagi MBK Deafblind”
FY 2020/2021	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. [Online Webinar] Kelangsungan Pendidikan Khas dalam Norma Baharu 2. [Online Webinar] New Normal for Special Education 3. [Online Webinar] Closing the Educational Gaps for Persons with Disabilities 4. Behavior Modification for Children with SEN 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. [Online Data Collection] Advocating Proper Nutrition in Special Education Schools for Children with ADHD and Down Syndrome in Southeast Asia (continuation) 2. [Online Data Collection] The Implementation of Zero Reject Policy and its Implications Towards

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. [Online Webinar] Pendekatan Pengajaran dan Pembelajaran bagi Murid Berkeperluan Khas (MBK) Dalam Norma Baharu 6. Emergency Response Plan and First Aid Training for Children with Special Educational Needs 7. Inclusive Education for Administrators 8. [Online] Behavior Modification for Children with Special Educational Needs 9. [Online] Screening and Early Intervention for Children with Special Needs 10. [Online] Stress Management for SEN Educators 11. [Online] Best Practices Teaching and Learning: Speech Therapy for Special Educational Needs 12. [Online] Best Practices Teaching and Learning: Inclusive Education for Teachers 13. [Online] Speech Therapy for Special Educational Needs Children 14. [Online] Best Practices Teaching and Learning: Sign Language for Inclusive Teachers 15. [Online] Best Practices Teaching and Learning: Epilepsy Awareness Among School Teachers 16. [Online] Best Practices Teaching and Learning: Sexuality Education for Children with Special Educational Needs 17. [Online] Regional In-Service Training "Curricula Adaptation for Disadvantaged Individuals" (TVET Trainers) 18. Special Project: UNESCO GPE SEAMEO "SPED Online Teacher Training Module Development 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. [Online Data Collection] Healthy School Canteen Best Practices Reference Book 4. [Online Data Collection] Learning Mathematics for Students with Special Needs 5. [Online Workshop] Regional Workshop on "Enhancing Inclusive and Equitable Quality Education in Southeast Asia through Innovative Educational Leadership and Management 6. [Online] Academic Writing for Research (Special Education and Inclusive)
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Source: SEAMEO SEN Governing Board Meeting Working Papers, SEAMEO SEN Training and Consultation Division, SEAMEO SEN Research and Innovation Division

Table 2: SEAMEO SEN Participants (2016 to 2021)

Year	No. of Participants
2016	224
2017	741
2018	420
2019	353
2020	302
2021 (up to May)	240

No. of activities using online approach in FY 2020/2021: **14 training courses, 6 research projects**

Yearly average participants trained (2016 to 2020): **408 participants**

Source: SEAMEO SEN Training and Consultation Division, SEAMEO SEN Research and Innovation Division

2.2 Teaching and Learning Challenges During Covid-19 Pandemic

It is estimated 2.6 billion people around the world are in some kind of lockdown (E. V. Hoof, 2020) placing 1.6 billion learners in 190 countries or 94% of the world's student population affected by the closure of schools and educational institutions during the peak of the pandemic outbreak. As of August 2020, it is estimated at least a remaining of 1 billion learners are still confined at home as more than 100 countries still enforcing school closures (R. Amelan, 2020).

The present outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, impacting most countries throughout the world has left these learners with disabilities severely affected if not vulnerable, compared to their typical peers of the same age. Learners with disabilities are among those most dependent heavily on face-to-face services including health, education and protection, which in most affected countries, these services may have been suspended as part of physical distancing and lockdown measures.

In most traditional learning settings, learners with disabilities will be supported by a group of certified and trained teachers together with the support of teaching materials and learning aids. Modernization of education has opened up a new paradigm in the delivery of education to learners remotely, anywhere and anytime from in-person learning to online learning, using information and communication technology (Evans et. Al., 2020). Starting from 2020 onwards, SEAMEO SEN has ventured into 22 online courses, programmes and projects to respond to the pandemic.

Teacher education has also impacted significantly due to the pandemic. Traditional face-to-face session has either been prohibited or impose a significant risk of spreading the coronavirus. The call for shift from traditional face-to-face learning towards online course delivery in teacher education has gained increased momentum in recent years (Karchmer-Klein & Pytash, 2020). Despite the significant success, teachers learning condition factors such as poor connectivity, rural location and availability of devices need to be taken into considerations (Garbe A., et. al., 2020). In these scenarios, teachers may not be able to participate effectively in distance online learning.

In most face-to-face programmes, numbers of participation may be limited to its locality or even to the extent of funding provided taking into considerations of attendee's meals, travelling and accommodation (Baczek, M. et.al., 2021). Whereas in online learning model, greater number of participations is possible including extensive reach beyond physical borders. In the first 5 months of 2021 alone, SEAMEO SEN has recorded attendance of 240 (59%) participant compared to the average of 408 participants recorded yearly. If connectivity is available, the online course shall benefit its targeted audience.

3. Conclusion

In responding to the United Nation SDG No.4 "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all", SEAMEO 7 Priority Areas No. 2 "Addressing Barriers to Inclusion" and other statements and declaration promoting the education for individual with disabilities, SEAMEO SEN has always strategize its programmes and activities to address to teachers skills improvements as well as equipping them with best practices in promoting quality education for learners with disabilities.

As impact due to COVID-19 pandemic outbreaks and control measures, schools, colleges, universities and training centres around the globe are struggling to plan for blended and online courses for teachers' professional development. SEAMEO SEN has taken a big leap in converting most of its traditional courses as well as moving all its training and

research programmes activities to be available online starting 2020 onwards. As presented in Table 1, 14 training programmes and 6 research projects has implemented via online approach. In providing these services, there are significant challenges that need to be addressed especially in ensuring stable connectivity, availability of hardware, maintaining active participation and delivering hands-on skills. Despite these challenges, through this new move from face-to-face to online learning, the centres manage to cover a bigger reach and participation of teachers in its courses. As improvement to the existing online model, the centre may need to experiment and source for supporting methods to allow more flexibility in delivering its courses to ensure teacher's greater understanding.

A further study is recommended to be carried out to analyze the factors that hinders teacher's active participation and understanding in an online course. Having a learning target is one of the important factors that ensured learners remained motivated (Schunk, 2012). Goal setting means establishing an objective to serve as an individual's aim of action The study could also provide suggestion in introducing supporting learning methods in addressing the matters.

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