



## **Peer Acceptance among Learning Disabilities (LD) and Mainstream Students in Inclusive Classroom in a Primary School**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The need to include students with learning disabilities (LD) together with mainstream students in general education is vital in providing equal opportunity for all students regardless of their disabilities in obtaining the same education. Therefore, the present study aims in investigating peer acceptance from the perspectives of LD students and mainstream students, together with gender difference between these two group of learners in an inclusive classroom in a primary school in Sungai Petani, Kedah, Malaysia. The sample of this study consisted of 30 primary students involved in the inclusive programme within an age range of 8-11 years old. Data were collected using Acceptance Scale for Kindergarten-Revised. The findings revealed that there was no significant difference between LD and mainstream students on peer acceptance. Meanwhile, the analysis on gender differences revealed that there was a significant difference between male and female mainstream students on peer acceptance of their LD peers, in which male students reported higher peer acceptance than female students. While no gender differences were found among LD students on peer acceptance of their mainstream peers. The findings demonstrated that LD students are accepted in an inclusive classroom, indicating that mainstream students are willing to learn and experience education process together with LD students.

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### **KEYWORDS**

Peer acceptance, learning disabilities, inclusive classroom

## **INTRODUCTION**

Inclusive education has been discussed for many years and studies have been done in order to understand why inclusive education should be implemented, what is the best way to administer, and how to make it better. In inclusive classroom, students with LD will be included in a regular school and in the same classroom where they are given the opportunity to learn together with other normal developing students to foster social participation, despite having certain weaknesses in terms of their self and/or social development. This is to ensure that LD students will get the same education opportunities, grow academically and socially together with other same age mainstream peers (Henke et al., 2017).

However, the aim will not necessarily be achieved solely by placing both type of students together, unless these group of learners are able to accept one another before social participation and friendship could occur. Without peer acceptance, disruptive behaviour might occur and inclusive education won't be able to reach its full potential. Thus, mainstream students should be introduced to LD students by stressing on similarity instead of differences, so that they will naturally accept them into their circle. In the meantime, LD students' obvious behaviour, special equipment or any other issue that may arise, should be mentioned and clarified to minimise the curiosity and confusion of the mainstream students as these students are also experiencing a novel learning situation (Bouto & Bryant, 2005).

Inclusive education has been introduced since decades, yet full-on implementation on the programme is still unable to be met due to many factors such as teachers' lack of training (Otukile-Mongwaketse, Mangope, & Kuyini, 2016), teachers' beliefs and experience dealing with LD students (Jordan, Schwartz, & McGhie-Richmond, 2009), teacher's attitude (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002), creation of lesson plan (Otukile-Mongwaketse et al., 2016) and inflexible curriculum as well as lack of resources and facilities (Mukhopadhyay et al., 2018).

Meanwhile, in Malaysia education climate, the Ministry of Education Malaysia has introduced inclusive education since the middle of 1990s, and the aim is to ensure that special education needs students will be enrolled in high quality inclusive education by 2021-2025. Apart from that, teachers also will be prepared with adequate knowledge and understanding of inclusive education needs (Adams, Harris, Jones, 2017). Currently, decision on participation in inclusive education will be decided at the school's level considering several factors such as expertise, teachers' readiness, and facilities, with guidelines and requirements provided by the ministry need to be obeyed.

Many studies have discussed about school and teachers' issues and challenges, but students' factor is also equally important as they are the one who is going to be the most affected of such implementation. In this study, the concept of allowing, welcoming, and participating between mainstream students and LD

students towards each other in a regular classroom is referred to as 'peer acceptance'. It is crucial for peers to accept and understand LD students in the same classrooms to avoid them from being alienated as they are normally different in terms of social behaviour and will behave inappropriately due to less social skills and struggle to process social information (Pijl, Frostad, & Mjaavatn, 2011).

Most studies reported that LD students were less accepted (Petry, 2018; Boer & Pijl, 2016) including a study in Greece which found evidences that they had fewer friends and fewer interactions with their classmates, yet indicated a positive friendship quality among them (Avramidis, Avgeri, & Strogilos, 2018). This situation happened because LD students focuses on the positive side of friendship that they have and not the other way around. Thus, they are still able to blend themselves in an inclusive classroom without being affected of low acceptance from others. However, other studies indicated that mainstream students will normally accept LD students but might stay away from them, worrying that they might be in the same group and not be able to demonstrate the same competency level as the mainstream peers (Dare, Nowicki, & Felimban, 2017). Not only that, mainstream students might also not be interested to interact or socialize with LD students because of other factors such as attitude (Petry, 2018), unacquainted of LD students, degree of LD severity (Schwab, Huber, & Gebhardt, 2015) and also gender preferences (Sterrett, Shire & Kasari, 2017). Interestingly, past researchers have discovered that higher acceptance can be found among primary school students compared to secondary school students due to level of challenges they face during their learning process (Pijl et al., 2011).

Currently, there are still very little studies on inclusive learning in Malaysia especially considering students' view on this matter. Not only that, there are lack of studies which incorporates the view of LD students on their acceptance of their mainstream peers as most studies focuses the other way around. Thus, this study is important as it addresses peer acceptance from the perspectives of both LD students and mainstream students, and also it assesses gender differences between these two groups of learners in an inclusive primary school classroom, in Malaysia. Obviously, peer acceptance is important for both groups of learners because it will ensure level of respect, attitude and participation among themselves, which will eventually lead to a quality education experience inside and outside the classroom. Furthermore, teachers can also accommodate every students' needs more effectively when they are able to work hand in hand in understanding and accepting the similarities and differences among their students.

Therefore, this study was conducted to determine peer acceptance between LD and mainstream students in an inclusive classroom in a primary school and also to assess gender differences among both LD and mainstream students on peer acceptance. There were three main research questions that were formulated in order to assist in achieving the aim of the current study. The questions that were put forward

in this study included:

RQ 1 : Is there a significant difference between LD and mainstream students on peer acceptance in an inclusive classroom?

RQ 2 : Is there any significant difference between male and female mainstream students on peer acceptance of their LD peers?

RQ 3 : Is there any significant difference between male and female LD students on peer acceptance of their mainstream peers?

Based on previous research we expected to discover that there will be a significant difference on peer acceptance among LD and mainstream students in which LD students will be less accepted compared to mainstream students in an inclusive classroom (H1). Moreover, within the mainstream group students, we presumed that male students will demonstrate greater peer acceptance than female students (H2). Meanwhile, for the LD group students we anticipated that there will be insignificant difference between male and female students on peer acceptance regarding their mainstream peers (H3).

## **METHOD**

This study adopted a quantitative research design. The type of quantitative research design that was implemented in this study was survey design. The purpose of using survey design was to get direct response from the participants. According to Piaw (2006), the survey research design can be used to specify various types of questions, collection of data is done in a short period of time, obtain direct information from the participants and the results of the study can be generalized to the population accurately. Therefore, survey design was seem suitable to be implemented in the present study as it help the researchers to obtain data in a short period of time.

### ***Participants***

This study was conducted among 30 primary school students in Sungai Petani, Kedah. Participants were selected by using convenience sampling method to participate in this study. In order to examine the difference on peer acceptance between LD and mainstream students, researchers selected 15 LD student and 15 students' mainstream students from 3 classes. Participants in this study were currently attending the inclusive programme in the school and have experienced the teaching and learning process in the inclusive classrooms. There was a total of 17 male students and 13 female students who were in the age range of 8 to 11 years old.

### ***Instrument***

Acceptance Scale For Kindergarten-Revised (ASK-R) which was developed by Favazza and Odom (1999) was used to measure the perception of peer acceptance among LD and mainstream students. The

instrument contained 23 items in which 18 items were from the original scale while five items were added by the present researchers. There were 19 positive items and four negative items (17, 18, 19 and 20) respectively. This instrument was translated to Bahasa Melayu to accommodate the participants understanding. Basically, this instrument was designed such that mainstream students were required to evaluate LD students and LD students were required to evaluate mainstream students. This instrument was self-administered among both group of learners with the assistance of teachers. The example of positive item included “Would you like to play with a handicapped kid?” while example for negative item comprised “Are you sometimes mean to other kids?”

All 23 items in the scale were assessed on a three-point Likert scale ranging from 2 = yes, 1 = sometimes and 0 = no. Responses were summed to provide an overall composite score for peer acceptance. The total scores of the items in this scale ranged from 0 to 46 with higher scores indicating greater peer acceptance level and lower scores indicating lower peer acceptance level. Favazza and Odom (1999) reported the Cronbach alpha coefficient for the original ASK-R was .87 and Spearman-Brown split half was reported as .91. There was no pilot study conducted to assess the reliability and validity of the translated version of this instrument for the present study. Acceptance Scale For Kindergarten- Revised questionnaire was attached in Appendix A and Appendix B

### ***Procedure***

Data were collected within one week period. Prior to distributing the questionnaire, the researcher asked the teachers in each class to read out the instructions to the participants and provide help if necessary. Participants provided their verbal informed consent before participating in the study. Those who consent to it were those who took part in the study while those who wanted to withdraw during the completion of the questionnaires were allowed to leave the participation at any time throughout the study without any penalty. The participants were assured of the confidentiality of their responses, implying that whatever information that were given will solely be used for academic research. The time estimated to complete the questionnaires were around 15 to 20 minutes. The rate of return of questionnaires was estimated to be 100%. In other words, all the questionnaires were completed and returned to the researcher. The data collected were then analyzed.

### ***Data Analysis***

Quantitative data analysis in this study utilized the Statistical Packages for Social Science (SPSS) version 22 application to examine the differences on peer acceptance between LD and mainstream students and also to examine the gender differences. The data obtained from the measure were analyzed using both the descriptive and inferential statistical analyses. For the demographic information, the researchers analyzed

the data using descriptive statistics. Meanwhile, researchers conducted inferential analysis particularly independent sample t-test for assessing peer acceptance between LD and mainstream students and also to analyze gender differences within these two group of learners.

## RESULTS

Table 1.0: Peer acceptance of mainstream students and LD students

	Mainstream Students ( $n = 15$ )		Students with LD ( $n = 15$ )		t-test
	$M$	SD	$M$	SD	
Peer acceptance	30.40	10.34	28.47	12.52	0.461

Based on the t-test analysis in table 1.0 above, the findings indicated that there was no significant mean difference in peer acceptance between mainstream students ( $M = 30.40$ ,  $SD = 10.34$ ) and LD students ( $M = 28.47$ ,  $SD = 12.52$ ). Conferring to the finding, it can be inferred that both mainstream students and LD students demonstrated equal peer acceptance in the inclusive classroom. Thus, it can be concluded that the null hypothesis 1 is accepted.

Table 1.1: Gender differences on peer acceptance between mainstream and LD students

	Sex						t-test
	Male			Female			
	$M$	SD	n	$M$	SD	n	t-test
Mainstream students	37.29	8.20	7	24.38	8.19	8	3.04*
LD students	29.10	13.76	10	27.20	10.94	5	0.27

Referring to table 1.1 above, the results revealed that there was a significant difference between male ( $M = 37.29$ ,  $SD = 8.20$ ) and female ( $M = 24.38$ ,  $SD = 8.19$ ) mainstream students on peer acceptance of their LD classmates. The findings reported that male students showed higher peer acceptance compared to female students. Therefore, it can deduce that the null hypothesis 2 was rejected. Meanwhile, there was no significant difference found between male ( $M = 29.10$ ,  $SD = 13.76$ ) and female ( $M = 27.20$ ,  $SD = 10.94$ ) LD students on peer acceptance of their mainstream peers. The results indicated that both male and female LD students demonstrated an equal peer acceptance of their mainstream classmates. Thus, it can be inferred that the null hypothesis 3 was accepted.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings for the first hypothesis revealed that there was no significant difference between mainstream and learning disability students on peer acceptance. These findings indicated that both mainstream and LD students regarded each other as their friends. There was no dissimilarity found when it comes to playing together, making friends, going for recess together or even studying together between these two groups of learners. Though the findings of the present study were in line with some past researches who reported similar results (Adam, Jones & Harris, 2017; Mukhopadhyay, Mangope & Moorad, 2018), but as a wholesome the findings were actually contrary to past research where results consistently showed that students with LD were actually less accepted compared to the mainstream students (Nepi, Fioravanti, J., Nannini & Peru, 2015; Petry, 2018; Boer & Pijl, 2016; Schwab, 2015; Henke et al, 2017).

Moreover, the findings of the second hypothesis discovered that there was a significant difference between male and female mainstream students on peer acceptance of their LD peers. The findings demonstrated that male students showed higher peer acceptance than their female classmates. These findings were in line with the study conducted by Dare, Nowicki and Felimban (2017) in which they reported that boys valued greater friendship than girls which was assumed as one of the major contributors in peer acceptance. They further explained that boys viewed friendship and learning difficulties as two separate continuums, which certainly clarifies that learning difficulties does not influence the bond of friendship they share among themselves.

Meanwhile, the findings of the third hypothesis disclosed that there was no significant difference among male and female LD students on peer acceptance regarding their mainstream peers. The results stipulated that both boys and girls treated their mainstream peers equally. In other words, these group of learners were willingly accepting the presence of the mainstream students in the inclusive classroom. This also showed that LD students did not alienate their mainstream peers and they were open to idea of mingling with their mainstream peers either when it comes to playing or learning together.

## **LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS**

There were several limitations that were found throughout this study. Some of the limitation included small sampling size, exclusive reliance on self-report measures and also the variables chosen for the present study. Firstly, the sample utilized in this study was small and insufficient to obtain an accurate analysis for this study. This is because the sample in this study were only obtained from one primary school which implemented inclusive education. Thus, the results of the present study could not be generalized to all other inclusive education context since the selected school was only from the state of

Kedah. In short, this limitation restricts the extent to which these finding might be applied to students from other inclusive education programme across Malaysia.

The next limitation was in terms of the self-reporting nature of the questionnaires used in this study. The questionnaires that was used in the study which consisted of Acceptance Scale for Kindergarten (ASK) was a self-report measure. There might be inaccuracy in the responses as this measure relies merely on the honesty and openness of the participants. Not only that, social desirability might also have influenced the response of the participants as well. Participants may have rated themselves higher or lower on the variables than they were actually experiencing it.

Besides, this study merely assessed on one dimension of social acceptance in an inclusive classroom which was peer acceptance of mainstream and LD students. Accordingly, there might be imprecision in the study findings as the presence of other factors related to the study variable might influence the findings. For instance, there are many other constructs that could be utilized in assessing social acceptance comprehensively in an inclusive classroom such as by including friendship quality, peer interaction and also social integration (Schwab, 2015).

There was some recommendation that were suggested in this study that will hopefully help in yielding better result for future research. Some of the recommendation included usage of larger sample size, execution of triangulation techniques and inclusion of more study variables. Firstly, the recommendation for future research was to include larger sample size. This could be done by incorporating students from other inclusive education school around Malaysia, for instance including students from both public and private inclusive institution as well. By increasing the sample size, it may help in expanding the ability to generalize the findings to more diverse populations in the future.

Next, rather than depending solely on self-report measures, future studies may take into consideration by integrating multiple assessment methods to further strengthen the validity of the finding such as by obtaining the teachers' review and also by implementing observation method. This would contribute additional data to compliment information obtained on the self-report measure. Besides, future research could also incorporate more study variables in assessing social acceptance of inclusive students. For instance, rather than just focusing on one dimension, researcher could incorporate two or more social acceptance dimension. Not only that, researcher could also examine on the factors which influence peer acceptance in inclusive classroom such as the impact of teacher's attitude on peer acceptance.



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