

Research Paper



Towards inclusive education: a cross-national policy of educational provision for deafblind learners in Malaysia and developed countries

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a comparative document analysis of educational policies and implementation frameworks for deafblind learners in Malaysia, the United States, and Sweden. While the US and Sweden have established comprehensive legal recognition, specialised service delivery, teacher training, and inter-agency collaboration, Malaysia lacks a clear policy definition and systemic support for this group. The study highlights critical gaps in Malaysia's policy and practice, underscoring the need for legal reform, targeted teacher preparation, integrated service models, and effective data monitoring. The findings offer evidence-based recommendations to advance inclusive education for deafblind learners in Malaysia, aligning with international mandates such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD).

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1. INTRODUCTION

The education of learners with deafblindness represents a critical challenge for inclusive education worldwide. Deafblindness, characterised by combined vision and hearing loss, results in unique barriers to communication, mobility, and learning that require specialised educational strategies and supports [1], [2].

Internationally, inclusive education is enshrined as a human right under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [3], [4], which mandates equal access to quality education for all learners, including those with complex disabilities. In countries such as the United States and Sweden, education policies explicitly recognise deafblindness and have developed frameworks to support this population through specialised services, teacher training, and coordinated inter-agency collaboration [5], [6], [7]. These frameworks enable tailored educational opportunities and improve outcomes for deafblind learners.

In contrast, Malaysia's policy landscape for deafblind education remains underdeveloped. The Education Act 1996 and related regulations do not explicitly recognise deafblindness, resulting in policy invisibility and fragmented service provision [8]. Deafblind learners are often categorised under broad multiple disabilities or sensory impairment groups, limiting specialised support. This study employs a comparative document analysis approach to examine educational policies and implementation frameworks for deafblind learners in Malaysia, the United States, and Sweden. It aims to identify gaps and best practices to inform the development of a robust Malaysian policy framework that promotes inclusive and equitable education for deafblind children.

2. METHODOLOGY

This research utilised qualitative document analysis to systematically examine policy documents, legislative acts, and official reports related to deafblind education from Malaysia, the United States, and Sweden. Document analysis is a well-established qualitative method that facilitates in-depth understanding of policy contexts, intentions, and implementation strategies [9]. Documents were sourced from official government websites, international agency reports, and academic databases, focusing on publications between 2015 and 2025 to ensure currency. Key documents included Malaysia's Education Act 1996 and Special Education Regulations 2013, the United States' Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [10], and Sweden's Education Act [11], along with relevant national agency guidelines. Data coding followed a thematic approach, guided by pre-identified categories: policy recognition, service delivery frameworks, teacher training, and inter-agency collaboration. Comparative analysis highlighted similarities and differences across countries, drawing on policy analysis frameworks emphasising legal clarity, structural readiness, capacity building, and systemic coordination [12], [13], [14].

3. FINDINGS

The document analysis revealed four key themes: policy recognition and legal definition, institutional and service delivery frameworks, teacher training and professional support, and inter-agency collaboration and monitoring.

Thematic Analysis

Based on the comparative document analysis of educational policies related to deafblind learners in Malaysia, the United States, and Sweden, four main themes were identified. These themes reflect systemic strengths and gaps in policy recognition, service provision, teacher training, and inter-agency coordination:

Theme 1: Policy Recognition and Legal Definition

This theme refers to the official recognition of deafblindness as a distinct disability category in national education policy.

- In the United States and Sweden, deafblindness is clearly defined in education legislation [11], enabling targeted services and legal accountability.
- In Malaysia, education laws do not explicitly mention deafblindness, instead grouping such learners under general categories such as multiple disabilities or sensory impairments.

Thematic implication: The absence of legal recognition leads to policy invisibility, resulting in inadequate attention and lack of tailored educational responses for deafblind learners.

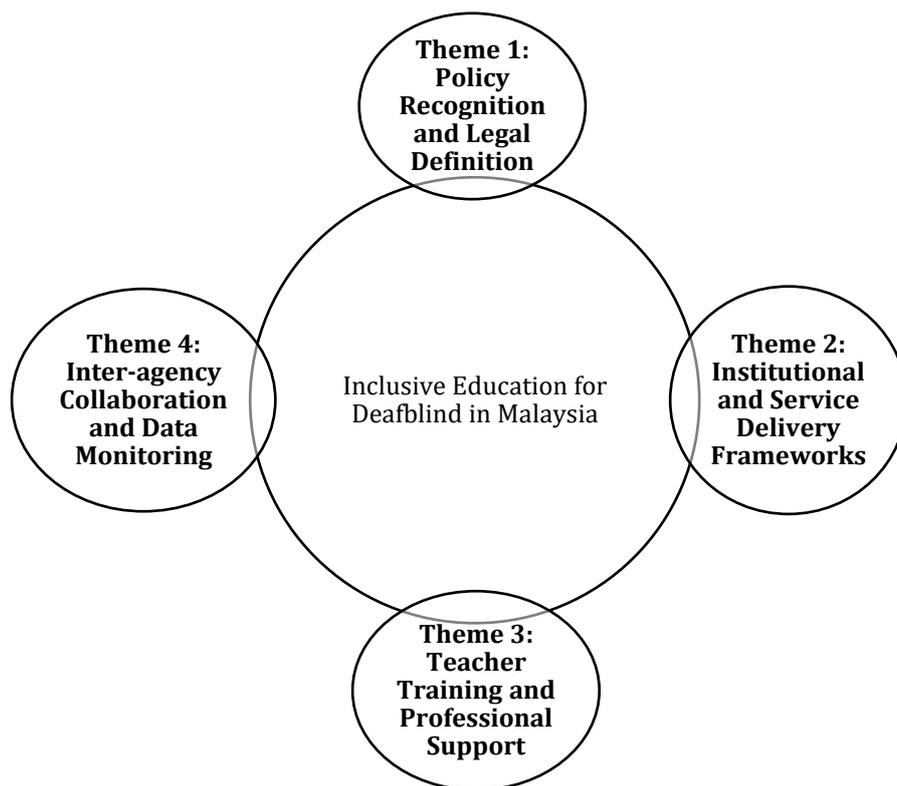


Figure 1. Thematic Analysis

Theme 2: Institutional and Service Delivery Frameworks

This theme concerns the structural systems and institutional arrangements for supporting deafblind education.

- The US and Sweden have state-funded programs, national resource centers, and formal service delivery structures that ensure equitable access to specialised education.
- In Malaysia, the lack of a national delivery framework results in fragmented services, relying heavily on individual school capacity or NGOs.

Thematic implication: The absence of centralised service systems causes inconsistent access and unequal educational experiences across regions.

Theme 3: Teacher Training and Professional Support

This theme addresses the level of teacher preparedness and the availability of specialised training.

- In developed countries, teacher certification includes competencies in tactile communication, assistive technologies, and multisensory instructional methods.
- In Malaysia, there are no specific training pathways for deafblind education, leaving many educators underprepared.

Thematic implication: Poor teacher preparation affects instructional quality and reinforces exclusionary practices due to a lack of professional capacity.

Theme 4: Inter-agency Collaboration and Data Monitoring

This theme examines how education systems coordinate across sectors and monitor learner data.

- The US and Sweden operate with strong inter-agency collaboration (education, health, and social services) and national-level data systems for planning and evaluation.
- Malaysia lacks structured collaboration and has no reliable database of deafblind learners.

Thematic implication: Without coordination and data, planning becomes reactive and fragmented, and the education system cannot track or improve outcomes effectively.

Conclusion of Thematic Analysis

These four themes highlight critical areas that Malaysia must address to enhance inclusive education for deafblind learners:

- Establishing legal recognition.
- Building structured service frameworks.
- Providing specialised teacher training.
- Developing inter-agency systems and national data monitoring.

Drawing from global models, these reforms are crucial to align Malaysia's policy landscape with international rights-based standards such as the UNCRPD.

Table 1. Thematic Analysis Educational Policy for Deafblind Learners

Theme	Description	Key Subthemes / Elements
Theme 1: Policy Recognition and Legal Definition	Explores whether deafblindness is formally recognised as a distinct disability category in national education legislation.	- Legal clarity and inclusion in national law - Distinct classification of deafblindness - Alignment with UNCRPD for rights-based access
Theme 2: Institutional Frameworks and Service Delivery	Examines structural readiness and formal service models that support educational access for deafblind learners.	- Establishment of national resource centres - State-funded programs and decentralised delivery - Equitable access across regions
Theme 3: Teacher Training and Professional Support	Assesses the presence of specialised training and support for teachers working with deafblind students.	- Training in tactile communication - Use of assistive technologies - Multisensory instructional strategies
Theme 4: Inter-agency Collaboration and Monitoring	Focuses on the coordination between sectors (education, health, social services) and the availability of monitoring systems.	- Integrated inter-agency mechanisms - National-level data collection - Monitoring of learner outcomes and policy impact

3.1 Policy Recognition and Legal Definition

The US and Sweden formally recognise deafblindness as a distinct disability category in education law [7], [11]. Malaysia's policies lack this clear recognition, subsuming deafblind learners under broader disability categories [8].

3.2 Institutional and Service Delivery Frameworks

Dedicated institutional frameworks in the US and Sweden provide specialised services through state-funded programs and resource centres [15], [16], [6], [7]. Malaysia lacks such frameworks, resulting in fragmented service delivery dependent on individual schools [8].

3.3 Teacher Training and Professional Support

Specialised teacher training programmes exist in the US and Sweden, including competencies in tactile communication and assistive technologies [5], [1], [2]. Malaysia does not have formal training pathways for deafblind education, limiting teacher preparedness [15], [16], [17], [18].

3.4 Inter-agency Collaboration and Monitoring

Mandated collaboration and monitoring systems support deafblind education in the US and Sweden [11], [19], [20], [21]. Malaysia lacks coordinated inter-agency mechanisms and reliable data on deafblind learners [15], [22], [23].

4. DISCUSSION

The study highlights critical policy and systemic gaps in Malaysia's approach to deafblind education compared to developed countries. The absence of legal recognition impedes targeted service provision and resource allocation, compromising the educational rights of deafblind learners as stipulated by the UNCRPD [2].

Structural readiness in the US and Sweden exemplifies how dedicated policies, specialised institutions, and trained professionals contribute to effective inclusive education. Malaysia's fragmented system fails to meet these benchmarks, reflecting a need for strategic reform [24], [18], [25], [26]. Teacher training deficits in Malaysia must be addressed through specialised curricula and certification aligned with international standards [1], [2]. Moreover, establishing inter-agency collaboration and data systems is essential for integrated support and policy evaluation [18], [27], [28]. The findings recommend that Malaysia develop a national policy framework incorporating legal reform, capacity building, service integration, and monitoring to advance equitable education for deafblind learners.

5. CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This comparative policy demonstrates that Malaysia's educational provision for deafblind learners is underdeveloped relative to the United States and Sweden. To fulfil its obligations under international human rights frameworks and promote inclusive education, Malaysia must:

- Legally recognise deafblindness as a distinct disability category.
- Develop a comprehensive national policy for deafblind education.
- Institutionalise specialised teacher training programmes.
- Establish dedicated resource centres and integrated service delivery.
- Implement data collection and monitoring systems for deafblind learners.

The findings from this comparative policy analysis clearly demonstrate that Malaysia's current educational framework for deafblind learners lacks the legal, structural, and programmatic robustness observed in countries such as the United States and Sweden. While both these developed nations explicitly recognise deafblindness as a distinct disability category, Malaysia still categorises such learners under general sensory impairments or multiple disabilities. This lack of formal recognition results in policy invisibility and undermines the development of targeted educational strategies, ultimately marginalising a group that requires highly specialised support [8], [19], [11], [20], [21]. Legal recognition is not merely symbolic—it serves as the foundation for rights-based service provision, resource allocation, and accountability within the education system [5].

To bridge this gap, Malaysia must first legislate the recognition of deafblindness as a specific disability under the Education Act and related policies. This legal acknowledgment would pave the way for the development of a national policy framework that focuses on the unique communication, learning, and mobility needs of deafblind learners. A comprehensive policy would define goals, strategies, and implementation mechanisms that ensure access to quality education in inclusive or specialised settings. Informed by evidence from countries like the US and Sweden, this policy should also be guided by international human rights frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [3], [4], which mandates inclusive, equitable, and lifelong learning opportunities for all [18], [25], [26].

Furthermore, teacher preparedness emerges as a significant issue. In the absence of structured training programmes in Malaysia, many educators remain ill-equipped to support deafblind learners. Unlike the US and Sweden, where teacher certification includes competencies in tactile communication, assistive technologies, and multisensory instructional approaches, Malaysia has yet to develop equivalent pathways [5], [1], [2], [15], [16], [17], [18]. Institutionalising teacher training through public universities and teacher training colleges is crucial to ensure a sustainable pipeline of educators who are knowledgeable, confident, and capable of meeting the complex needs of this learner population.

In addition, Malaysia must consider establishing dedicated resource centres and integrated service delivery models. The fragmented nature of current services—often depending on individual schools or NGOs—results in inequities and inconsistency across regions [22], [23]. Dedicated centres would not only provide direct support to learners but also act as hubs for professional development, curriculum adaptation, family engagement, and inter-agency collaboration [6], [7]. Integrating education, health, and social services can greatly enhance the efficiency and responsiveness of support systems, ensuring that no learner is left behind due to administrative or logistical barriers [18], [27], [28].

Lastly, the absence of reliable data on deafblind learners significantly hampers planning and policymaking. A national-level data collection and monitoring system must be established to capture accurate statistics, track educational outcomes, and evaluate policy effectiveness. Such systems are already operational in countries with advanced inclusive education models and have proven essential in guiding continuous improvement [13], [15], [16]. With these reforms—legal recognition, comprehensive policy development, teacher training, integrated service delivery, and data monitoring—Malaysia can move towards a more inclusive and equitable education system that truly upholds the rights of deafblind children, in line with global standards and the spirit of the UNCRPD.

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Author Contributions Statement

Mohd Norazmi Nordin conceptualised the study, led the policy document analysis, and drafted the manuscript. Yasmin Hussain contributed to the methodology design, literature synthesis, and final manuscript revision. Both authors have read and approved the final version of the article.

Name of Author	C	M	So	Va	Fo	I	R	D	O	E	Vi	Su	P	Fu
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C : Conceptualization

M : Methodology

So : Software

Va : Validation

Fo : Formal analysis

I : Investigation

R : Resources

D : Data Curation

O : Writing - Original Draft

E : Writing - Review & Editing

Vi : Visualization

Su : Supervision

P : Project administration

Fu : Funding acquisition

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Informed Consent

This study did not involve human participants. Therefore, informed consent was not required.

Ethical Approval

As this study was based solely on secondary data and document analysis, ethical approval was not required according to the institutional guidelines.

Data Availability

All policy documents and literature reviewed in this study are publicly available through official government websites and academic sources as referenced in the article. Additional data supporting the findings are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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