





Student well-being in inclusive education contexts: A systematic review of Hong Kong and Malaysia

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Abstract—Inclusive education policies in Hong Kong and Malaysia secondary schools inadequately address intersectional marginalization across public and international school contexts, disproportionately impacting psychosocial well-being for students with diverse learning needs. This systematic review critically examines inclusive education policies and practices in secondary schools in Hong Kong and Malaysia, evaluating their impacts on student well-being and identifying barriers to holistic inclusion for marginalized groups. Adhering to PRISMA guidelines, this cross-cultural analysis synthesizes six empirical studies (2018–2024) through a cross-cultural analysis and a critical equity lens, addressing definitions of inclusive education in policy and practice, the impacts on student psychosocial outcomes, and systemic barriers for marginalised students. Six studies revealed that Hong Kong’s centralized policies prioritise resource equity but lack teacher preparedness, while Malaysia’s hybrid model enables localised adaptations but exacerbates urban-rural disparities. International schools’ accreditation frameworks (e.g., International Baccalaureate) supplemented national policies but inconsistently addressed cultural responsiveness. Contrary to the assumption that structural compliance ensures well-being, marginalised students with intersecting learning needs reported heightened feelings of belonging only in contexts that prioritise relational practices (e.g., peer support, intentional seating). Persistent barriers include socioeconomic inequities, stigma, and gaps in policy and practice. Tokenistic inclusion frameworks prioritising compliance over equity perpetuate marginalisation. Integrating systemic equity mandates with culturally responsive pedagogies co-designed with marginalised communities challenges tokenistic inclusion models. Findings underscore the urgency of addressing intersectional marginalisation in Asia’s evolving education landscapes.

Keywords: Asia-Pacific education, Educational equity, Psychosocial outcomes, student well-being

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I. INTRODUCTION

STUDENT well-being, a multifaceted construct encompassing overall satisfaction with school, general happiness, and a sense of purpose (Goldan et al., 2022; Hossain et al., 2022). Inclusive education is at the heart of fostering student well-being through equitable educational systems. It emphasises the creation of learning environments where all students, regardless of background, ability, or identity, can access meaningful, high-quality educational opportunities within their communities (Linder et al., 2022). Such environments are characterised by equitable access, curriculum adaptation, and individualised support, fostering positive interpersonal relationships and establishing educational conditions conducive to student well-being (Linder et al., 2022). When effectively implemented, inclusive practices cultivate a sense of belonging, acceptance, and empowerment, enhancing emotional resilience, academic engagement, and relational happiness. Conversely, exclusionary practices can profoundly undermine well-being, leading to exacerbated stress, anxiety, and disengagement (Linder et al., 2022).

Historical policy evolution in Hong Kong and Malaysia

The evolution of inclusive education policies in Hong Kong and Malaysia reflects distinct historical trajectories and contemporary challenges shaped by colonial legacies, legislative frameworks, diverse populations, and socioeconomic contexts. Both regions initially adopted

segregated educational models for students with disabilities, influenced by British colonial practices.

In Hong Kong, the Disability Discrimination Ordinance 1995 legally enshrined protections against educational discrimination and marked a significant legislative effort toward educational equity for persons with disabilities (Chao et al., 2017; Teng et al., 2019). However, it remains the primary, and notably the only, legislative effort specifically addressing educational equity for persons with disabilities in Hong Kong since its enactment (Teng et al., 2019). Conversely, Malaysia’s post-independence focusses on national unity and identity led to the Education Act 1996 and the Persons with Disabilities Act 2008, emphasising equitable access but lacking enforceable penalties for non-compliance (Singh, 2020) with a series of Education Acts and policies aimed at unifying its multi-ethnic society (Arias et al., 2023). Similarly, Hong Kong and Malaysia’s initial approach to inclusion involved segregated provisions, gradually shifting towards more inclusive practices (Hosshan, 2020). These foundational policies underscore divergent approaches: Hong Kong’s rights-based model contrasts with Malaysia’s aspirational guidelines.

This study examines inclusive education policies in both Hong Kong and Malaysia secondary public and international schools. It examines formally established laws and regulations alongside flexible, school-based approaches to provide a comprehensive analysis and overview of the policy landscape in both regions, highlighting evolution and challenges. This section also examines some of the varied frameworks

that guide inclusion, popularly used by international schools in both regions and worldwide, highlighting that international schools' approaches to inclusion are often driven by accreditation standards rather than mandated government policy, presenting unique challenges and variations. This section analyses implementation mechanisms, such as teacher training initiatives and resource allocation strategies, to clarify their impact on students' educational experiences and well-being within these diverse contexts.

Early recognition of inclusion

Hong Kong's trajectory toward inclusive education can be traced back to the 1970s and 1980s, when compulsory education was established for students with intersecting learning needs (SILN) (Greenberg & Greenberg, 2013). During this period, services for SILN were primarily delivered through segregated special schools and resource classes. Teacher training within these segregated settings often involved specialised programs tailored to the specific needs. Resource allocation was typically centralised, with funding directed toward special education units within these schools. Community engagement was also present, with community organisations and parent groups offering support and resources. (Kikkawa et al., 2019).

Malaysia followed a similar trajectory, establishing the first Deaf Children's Federation of schools in 1954. Efforts to incorporate disability education into the public education system began in the 1960s with the integration of children with hearing and visual impairments. The Mahathir Cabinet Committee report (1979) marked a gradual expansion of special education services to address a wider range of needs (Chua & Low, 2024).

Beyond the Salamanca statement

Following the Salamanca Statement, both regions formally committed to inclusive education through policy and legislation. In Hong Kong, enacting the Disability Discrimination Ordinance in 1995 marked a significant legislative effort toward educational equity, providing legal protection against discrimination and encouraging mainstream schools to admit SILN voluntarily (Chao et al., 2017; Teng et al., 2019). This was further supported by the Code of Practice on education under the Disability Discrimination Ordinance in 2001. These initiatives facilitated a shift from integration to inclusion by 2003, emphasising parental choice, participation of all schools, and the adoption of inclusion indicators (Teng et al., 2019). The introduction of the Whole School Approach to Integrated Education in 2004, followed by some support and teacher training initiatives, aimed to strengthen team spirit, provide a framework for teacher education programs, and provide more comprehensive guiding documents to cater to SILN (Kikkawa et al., 2019). Before ratifying the UNCRPD, Hong Kong initiated the Whole School Approach (WSA) and Integrated Education Policy (IEP) in response to the challenges faced by mainstream schools. Conversely, Malaysia introduced its Education Act in 1996 and the Inclusive Education Programme in 1999 (Ministry of Education Malaysia [MOE], 1996). The Persons with Disabilities Act 2008 was enacted prior to the ratification of the UNCRPD in 2010, providing the right to basic education and intended to safeguard the rights of individuals with disabilities, ensuring equitable access to education with legal repercussions for non-compliance (Amar-Singh, 2020). Subsequently, the Special Education Regulation of 2013 mandated schools to provide appropriate accommodations for persons with disabilities, provide appropriate accommodations for SILN, and furnish compliance reports to the Ministry of Education (MOE) (Amar-Singh, 2022). That same year saw the introduction of both the Guidelines for the Implementation of Inclusive Education Programme and the Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013-2025), which integrated inclusive education guidelines, tiered support frameworks, individual education programming (IEP) mandates, and collaborative initiatives between public and private sectors (Amar-Singh, 2020; Omar & Sulaiman, 2018). Following the Incheon Declaration in 2015, Malaysia further integrated special education into mainstream classrooms via the Special Education Integrated Programme. This was succeeded by the Zero-Reject Policy in

2018 and the Inclusive Education Programme in 2019, which compelled all schools to admit SILN and fostered partnerships with the Ministry of Health for early diagnosis and accreditation of special educators (Hosshan, 2020).

Present-day policy

Hong Kong maintains its rights-based framework with legal backing by the Disability Discrimination Ordinance (1995). It frames inclusion as a legal entitlement requiring structural adaptations, such as assistive technologies and SENCO roles, and is backed by strong urban resource allocation (EDB, 2017; Westwood, 2021). Decentralised funding allocates grants to urban schools and supports public-private partnerships. In contrast, Malaysia's centralised approach prioritises social cohesion through aspirational guidelines such as the Zero-Reject Policy (2018) and initiatives like the Special Education Integrated Programme (Amar-Singh, 2020), which centralises resources in special education units within public schools, but lacks benchmarks for mainstream institutions (Amar-Singh, 2020; Hosshan et al., 2019).

Inclusive education in international schools

International schools in Hong Kong and Malaysia operate within distinct regulatory frameworks, with current practices often reflecting the individual school's approach rather than mandated government policy. International accreditation bodies complicate implementation in both regions with many schools encountering systemic barriers such as resource constraints and a lack of specialised training, leading to inconsistent support for SILN (Beamish et al., 2024; Underwood, 2022). These schools often adhere to international accreditation standards, which can conflate aspirational guidelines with compliance, where generic frameworks mask inadequate teacher training (Stroud, 2024). For example, though legally bound by the DDO, Hong Kong's international schools possess autonomy and are encouraged to align with inclusive practices, but are not legally obliged to do so. They frequently lack full-time special education needs (SEN) coordinators, revealing gaps between policy and practice (Southern China Morning Post, 2023). These challenges are exacerbated by the reliance on self-evaluation processes led by administrators with limited expertise in inclusive education (Underwood, 2022). In Malaysia, the Private Educational Institutions Act 1991 requires international schools to register with the Ministry of Education; however, it lacks specific, inclusive guidelines. Consequently, Malaysian international schools face similar challenges, further exacerbated by weaker enforcement mechanisms. Malaysia lacks equivalent oversight, relying on voluntary school self-assessments and non-punitive MOE guidelines (Singh, 2020; UNESCO et al., 2020). These disparities underscore the tension between policy intent and implementation fidelity.

II. RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

This scoping review addresses critical gaps in understanding how inclusive education policies in Hong Kong and Malaysia perpetuate or mitigate inequities for students with intersectional learning needs (SILN). While both jurisdictions have made structural efforts such as resource allocation and anti-discrimination laws, marginalised students continue to face exclusion in secondary schools (Kielblock & Ho, 2022). Hong Kong's centralised governance and Malaysia's hybrid federal-local model exemplify divergent policy landscapes (Teng et al., 2019; Yuen et al., 2022). However, existing studies focus narrowly on policy compliance or classroom practices, neglecting systemic barriers in public versus international school systems. For example, international schools in both regions adopt accreditation frameworks (e.g., International Baccalaureate, Council of International Schools) that conflate aspirational guidelines with compliance, often prioritising marketing over culturally responsive inclusion (Stroud, 2024; Underwood, 2022; Westwood, 2021). This review systematically maps policy-practice disconnects and identifies actionable strategies to advance well-being-centered inclusion across diverse educational settings.

III. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

This study identifies key policies and practices that promote inclusion in the public and international secondary schools of Hong Kong and Malaysia. It assesses the impact of these policies on student well-being, with a focus on engagement, psychosocial resilience, and institutional belonging. It analyses challenges and facilitators in operationalising structural inclusion to enhance holistic well-being for marginalised students in these contexts.

IV. METHODS

This systematic review adhered to PRISMA-ScR guidelines to map evidence on inclusive education policies and student well-being outcomes in public and international secondary schools (Grades 9-12) in Hong Kong and Malaysia. While no protocol was prospectively registered, the methodology was designed to ensure transparency and reproducibility.

Eligibility criteria

Studies were included if they met the following criteria: conducted in Hong Kong or Malaysia; focused on students aged 14-19 years (grades 9-12) in public or international secondary schools; measured well-being outcomes (e.g., sense of belonging, school engagement, psychosocial challenges) to inclusive education policies; and addressed specific or intersecting learning needs (SILN) (e.g., disabilities, giftedness, linguistic diversity, mental health). Exclusion criteria comprised studies targeting students under 14, non-empirical designs, and research lacking explicit operationalisation of well-being metrics. In contrast, no language restrictions were applied to Hong Kong studies, where English dominates academic instruction. While no language restrictions were applied to Hong Kong studies, as university classes are generally held in English, Malaysian studies in Malay were excluded due to translation constraints.

Information sources and search strategies

Five databases were systematically searched: ERIC, PsycINFO, EBSCOHost, Google Scholar, and ResearchRabbit (for citation chaining). The search strategy combined keywords such as “inclusive education” AND “student well-being” AND (“Hong Kong” OR “Malaysia”) AND (“international schools” OR “public schools”). Boolean operators (OR, AND) and truncation (educat\$) were applied to capture variants. Hand searches of bibliographies from retrieved articles supplemented database results.

Selection of sources of evidence

The screening process followed PRISMA guidelines (see Figure 1 for the flow diagram). Initial searches yielded 380 records, of which 185 were duplicates. One hundred sixty-eight (168) records were screened, and 162 were excluded due to mismatched demographics, non-empirical methodologies, or irrelevant outcomes. Sixteen full-text articles were accessed for eligibility, and 10 studies were excluded for insufficient focus on well-being linkages, leaving six empirical studies for analysis. Additional policy documents (e.g., Malaysia Education Blueprint, Hong Kong EDB guidelines) were retrieved to contextualise inclusion policies but were not synthesised as primary evidence due to their non-empirical nature. Temporal limitations emerged, as only studies from 2018 met the inclusion criteria, reflecting a lag in empirical evaluations of reforms that occurred just before 2015, such as Hong Kong’s Guidelines to the Whole School Approach in 2014 and Malaysia’s Education Blueprint (2013-2025) in 2013.

Data extraction and charting

Well-being outcomes were thematically analysed across four dimensions: social participation, academic engagement, psychosocial resilience, and institutional belonging. Contextual factors such as urban-rural divides, language of instruction, and accreditation standards (e.g., International Baccalaureate Access and Inclusion Guidelines) were coded to identify mediating variables.

This methodology prioritised transparency and reproducibility, with search strings, inclusion protocols, and bias assessment frameworks

detailed in supplementary materials.

Data collection and synthesis

Data were extracted using a standardised template, which included study characteristics such as design, location, and sample size; participant demographics, including age, gender, cultural background, socioeconomic status, learning needs/disabilities, and school type. Variables of interest included policy factors, contextual mediators, quantitative/qualitative outcome measures, and well-being outcomes.

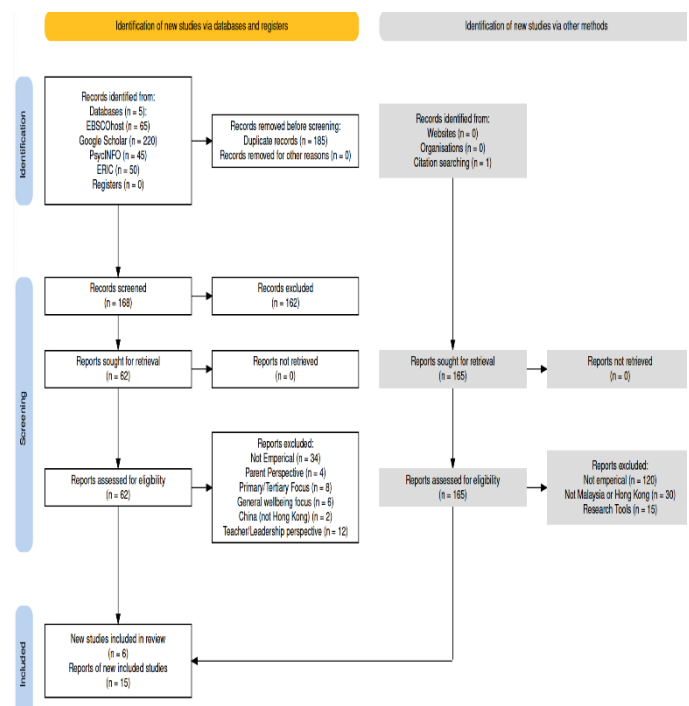
Critical appraisal

Methodological rigor was evaluated through transparency in study design and alignment with research questions. No formal appraisal tool was applied, as scoping reviews prioritise mapping evidence breadth over assessing methodological quality.

Synthesis approach

A narrative synthesis approach (Table 1) integrated the findings from heterogeneous studies (qualitative and quantitative designs), identifying recurring patterns such as teacher training efficacy, resource allocation, disparities, and cultural responsiveness. The analysis highlighted context-specific barriers, including persistent socio-cultural stigma that hinders inclusion in Malaysia, as well as enablers, such as Hong Kong’s collectivist cultural values, which reinforce support systems. Cross-context comparisons contrasted Hong Kong’s centralised governance with Malaysia’s fragmented implementation, alongside international schools’ reliance on accreditation standards.

Figure 1: PRISMA Flowchart for Study Selection Processes



V. RESULTS

Hong Kong context

Yang et al. (Yang et al., 2020) investigated the relationships between social support, self-determination, and school engagement among 118 secondary school SILN integrated into mainstream schools in Hong Kong. The study, grounded in the self-system processes model of motivation, revealed that school support has a significant indirect effect on school engagement, with self-determination acting as a mediator. While school support, self-determination, and school engagement showed positive correlations ($\beta = 0.32$, $p < 0.01$), peer support did not correlate with school engagement.

Li and Hall (2023) conducted a case study exploring the sense of belonging and identity among international school students in Hong

Kong. Through interviews with students from both Chinese-speaking and non-Chinese-speaking backgrounds, the study found that these students often conceptualize their belonging and identity beyond the physical borders of Hong Kong, due to perceived deficiencies in Cantonese, diverse backgrounds, and education in international schools. Despite feeling a sense of difference from Hong Kong society, many students still viewed Hong Kong as "home," where they had grown up, made memories, and established relationships (Li & Hall, 2023).

Chan et al. (2018) investigated the association between disabilities, school environments, and child victimisation in Hong Kong. Their findings indicated that children with ADHD, internalising disorders, autism spectrum disorder, and restrictions in body movement were at higher risk of victimisation. Children attending special schools were at less risk of victimisation, while children with disabilities in mainstream schools were at higher risk of most types of victimisation compared to their non-disabled peers (Chan et al., 2018).

Malaysia Context

Studies in Malaysia reveal mixed results regarding the impact of inclusive practices on academic achievement and social-emotional well-being. Hosshan (2020) investigates the social participation of 30 SILN with ADHD and ASD in Malaysian secondary schools. The study reveals that structural inclusion efforts, such as classroom accommodations, failed to mitigate social isolation and improve surface-level peer interactions. Students reported exclusion from informal peer networks, with students experiencing difficulties in peer acceptance.

In a later study, Hosshan et al. (2021) explore the impact of peer-seating groups on the social participation of SILN in two Malaysian inclusive secondary schools using a qualitative multiple case study design. Findings indicate that while peer-seating arrangements facilitated close contact, collaborative task completion, and shared free time, they did not guarantee meaningful social inclusion, with students still experiencing limited or absent friendship networks.

Lee et al. (Lee et al., 2024) further illustrated these challenges through a case study of a twice-exceptional student (ASD and cognitive giftedness). The case study highlighted significant challenges in social interaction and emotional regulation, compounded by experiences of bullying, all of which negatively impacted the student's overall well-being (Lee et al., 2024). These difficulties highlight the unique vulnerabilities of twice-exceptional children, who often face both academic and social-emotional challenges that necessitate tailored support. Furthermore, the study noted the increased likelihood of gifted children with ASD seeking mental health services, suggesting a heightened awareness or need for psychological support within this population (Lee et al., 2024).

Synthesis of results

Three themes emerged across contexts. First, structural barriers such as inconsistent teacher training and infrastructural deficits hindered policy implementation. While comparisons across studies reveal that inclusive policies yield the strongest well-being outcomes when paired with context-specific supports, such as teacher training and anti-stigma initiatives, structural barriers and infrastructural deficits hindered policy implementation. The reviewed studies reveal disparities in how Hong Kong and Malaysia translate inclusive education policy frameworks into holistic well-being outcomes for students, particularly those with intersecting learning needs or marginalised identities. Hosshan (2020) highlights how traditional didactic teaching methodologies prioritise exam performance over holistic inclusion, thereby minimising the impact of structural accommodations. For example, twice-exceptional students in Malaysia have faced systemic neglect, including misdiagnosis and social-emotional challenges, due to poorly defined curricula, which reveals a disconnect between policy intent and sociocultural realities (Lee et al., 2024). At the same time, SILN in Hong Kong's mainstream schools encountered elevated victimisation, indicating a potential gap in the protective effects of these

communal support systems (Chan et al., 2018). Yang et al. (2020) highlight the efficacy of self-determination interventions and adaptive curricula in fostering school engagement among students with special educational needs (SILN), particularly when delivered by educators trained in inclusive pedagogies.

Second, conceptualisations of well-being also diverged. Hedonic well-being, self-esteem, and life satisfaction were correlated with school climate factors, such as safety (Chan et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2020), whereas eudemonic well-being, purpose, and self-efficacy emerged in the context of prioritising mentorship (Hosshan et al., 2021; Li & Hall, 2023). In Malaysia, cultural stigma around disabilities and underdeveloped anti-bullying frameworks perpetuate exclusion (Lee & Low, 2024; Singh, 2020). For example, Hosshan (2020) shows how structural interventions, such as peer-seating groups, frequently backfire without trained guidance, leaving students vulnerable to bullying and isolation. This suggests that structured seating arrangements alone may not be sufficient to overcome social isolation for SILN (Hosshan et al., 2021).

Additionally, policies conflating physical integration with meaningful inclusion further marginalise SILN, as students are assessed primarily on academic adaptation to general curricula (Salleh & Woolard, 2019). While both Yang et al. (2020) and Li & Hall (2023) contribute to understanding student well-being in Hong Kong, they focus on distinct populations and aspects. Yang et al. (2020) highlight the importance of school support and self-determination in promoting school engagement among SILN in mainstream schools. The study emphasises the role of the school environment in fostering a sense of belonging and motivation for these students. Chan et al.'s (2018) study highlights the potential for increased risk of victimisation among SILN in mainstream schools (Chan et al., 2018), suggesting that focusing solely on integrating students into mainstream settings without addressing social and emotional needs may create new challenges. This underscores the importance of comprehensive support systems that go beyond teacher training and resource allocation to address issues of peer relationships, bullying, and social inclusion.

In contrast, Li & Hall (2023) explore the experiences of international school students, revealing that their sense of belonging and identity often extend beyond Hong Kong's borders due to their unique backgrounds and educational experiences. Adding another layer, Chan et al. (2018) examine the experiences of victimisation among SILN in both mainstream and special schools in Hong Kong, highlighting the increased risk of victimisation for SILN in mainstream settings. This suggests that different student populations may require different approaches to promoting well-being and inclusion. Further research could investigate how schools can better address the diverse needs of all students, including those with special needs and those from international backgrounds, to foster a more inclusive and supportive learning environment.

Studies by Hosshan (2020), Hosshan et al. (2021), and Lee et al. (2024) collectively highlight the complexities of promoting student well-being within inclusive education settings in Malaysia. Hosshan et al. (2021) and Hosshan (2020) underscore the challenges faced by SILN, such as ADHD and ASD, in achieving genuine social inclusion despite structural interventions like peer-seating groups. This aligns with Lee et al.'s (2024) case study, which illustrates the social-emotional difficulties and vulnerability to bullying experienced by a twice-exceptional student with ASD. A common theme across these studies is the recognition that physical inclusion does not automatically translate to social and emotional well-being. While Hosshan's work suggests that peer-seating can facilitate interaction, it falls short of fostering meaningful friendships and preventing social isolation. Lee et al.'s (2024) case further emphasises that SILN may require targeted interventions to address social skills deficits and emotional regulation challenges.

Finally, despite legal frameworks mandating inclusion, implementation remains fragmented, with special education programs

often siloed from mainstream curricula (Hosshan, 2020). Historical inertia in special education planning, rooted in medical and welfare models of disability, exacerbates these challenges (Lee et al., 2024). Urban-rural and governance disparities mediated outcomes. Socioeconomic disparities further mediate training outcomes. Hong Kong's urban schools deploy assistive technologies and tailored curricula, enabled by resource-rich environments (Chan & Yuen, 2015). Meanwhile, Malaysia's rural institutions struggle with technological deficits and rigid adherence to exam-centric teaching methodologies (Hosshan, 2020; Lee & Low, 2014). Cultural norms and socioeconomic disparities shape the implementation and outcomes of inclusive policies in Hong Kong and Malaysia. In Hong Kong's collectivist society, school support systems align with communal values, thereby enhancing engagement for SILN through relational practices such as peer mentoring and family-school partnerships (Chan & Yuen, 2015; Yang et al., 2020). International schools exemplify this ethos through identity-affirming curricula. Yet, students often report exclusion from the broader Hong Kong community, correlating with lower life satisfaction despite academic success, a trend reflecting societal tensions between local and expatriate populations (Dou & Shek, 2022; Li & Hall, 2020). In contrast, Malaysia faces systemic gaps in operationalising inclusive policies, particularly in rural contexts. Peer-mediated strategies, such as structured seating arrangements, improve surface-level peer interactions but fail to address systemic social-emotional isolation due to insufficient teacher guidance and technological disparities (Hosshan, 2020; Lee et al., 2024).

VI. DISCUSSION

The effectiveness of inclusive education policies is often limited by a complex interplay of systemic barriers that vary significantly across national and school contexts. Resource allocation and implementation fidelity are crucial determinants of policy success (Beamish et al., 2024). These challenges in Hong Kong and Malaysia manifest as insufficient funding, inadequate teacher training (particularly when contrasting Hong Kong's mentorship model with Malaysia's standardised approach), and a lack of supportive infrastructure (Beamish et al., 2024). Policies can have unintended negative consequences on student well-being, particularly when focusing on structural inclusion without addressing social-emotional needs or systemic barriers (Hollings, 2021; Walton, 2023; Westwood, 2021). The continued existence of special schools and segregation approaches alongside mainstream efforts in both regions underscores that practical implementation and inclusive opportunities are still in development (Beamish et al., 2024). Similarly, despite relational inclusivity strategies, Hong Kong's international schools face gaps in specialised support due to assumptions about curriculum adaptability and educator preparedness (Li & Hall, 2023). These schools often lack formalised teacher training frameworks, leading to inconsistent implementation of inclusive practices (Stroud, 2024). The commitment of individual teachers to implementing inclusive practices also varies because of a lack of training or public pressure, underscoring the need for consistent, school-wide implementation (Faragher et al., 2020; Hosshan, 2020).

While both Hong Kong and Malaysia emphasise structural inclusion, the interplay between policy design, implementation quality, and contextual factors - such as cultural norms, socioeconomic disparities, and governance structures creates divergent trajectories for student well-being. This suggests that schools must actively address safety and social inclusion issues, alongside teacher training and curriculum adaptation, to ensure the well-being of all students. This highlights the need for culturally sensitive bullying prevention and intervention programs tailored to the specific needs of SILN within Hong Kong's unique social context.

Despite advancements in structural inclusion in Hong Kong, assumptions about educator readiness to address intersectional needs, especially in English-dominant environments, warrant scrutiny, as generic guidelines fail to bridge implementation gaps (Chan & Yuen,

2015; Stroud, 2024). Mitigating these risks requires multifaceted strategies: robust anti-bullying frameworks, investments in teacher training, and systemic efforts to dismantle cultural stigma (Hosshan, 2020; Yuen et al., 2022).

Socioeconomic disparities also influence teacher attitudes: in Malaysia, negative perceptions of disability and ad hoc teacher upskilling approaches hinder progress (Ali et al., 2018; Beamish et al., 2024), whereas Hong Kong's structured yet incomplete training frameworks reflect a broader regional trend of uneven preparedness (Lee, 2016; Singh, 2022).

Hong Kong's centralised, data-driven governance model enables responsive policy adjustments, such as prioritized teacher training and anti-stigma programs, which correlate with improved self-esteem and social connectedness among SILN (Yuen et al., 2022; Crome, 2022). This system, grounded in principles of early identification, whole-school collaboration, and cross-sector partnerships, allows iterative policy evolution informed by reforms in general education (Yuen et al., 2022). Teng et al. (2019) further emphasize the importance of aligning education policies with broader social welfare and health initiatives to ensure holistic student support. By contrast, Malaysia's centralized governance model struggles with fragmented implementation. Despite inclusive education mandates, schools lack autonomy to tailor interventions, and resource constraints hinder the mainstream integration of SILN (Chua & Low, 2024). Rural schools face acute infrastructural deficits, including limited access to technology and peer-support networks, exacerbating inequities (Hosshan, 2020).

While Hong Kong prioritizes systemic monitoring to refine inclusive practices, Malaysia's reliance on generic guidelines often overlooks the intersectional needs of students, such as those of twice-exceptional learners or linguistically diverse populations.

International schools, operating outside government mandates, face distinct challenges. Driven by accreditation standards and leadership expertise, these institutions sometimes assume that international curricula inherently meet diverse needs, overlooking the necessity for specialized supports (Stroud, 2024; Underwood, 2022). Reliance on generic guidelines, untrained staff, and the absence of specialists often result in inconsistent support for SILN, particularly in fostering a sense of community belonging (Chan & Yuen, 2015; Stroud, 2024).

Implications for policy and practice

To advance equity, the research highlights the importance of understanding well-being outcomes for SILN in secondary school settings, thereby facilitating the implementation of effective inclusive policies. Studies highlight the importance of school support, including values, climate, interpersonal relationships, and self-determination interventions in enhancing SILN's school engagement in inclusive educational settings (Yang et al., 2020). Policymakers must integrate anti-bullying measures to foster positive relationships that enhance well-being, social adjustment, and a sense of belonging (Hosshan, 2020). In Hong Kong, expanding trauma-informed practices in mainstream schools and auditing international school compliance with disability laws could mitigate victimization risks (Chan et al., 2018; Stroud, 2024). Malaysia must pair peer-mediated strategies with teacher-guided social-emotional curricula to address isolation (Hosshan et al., 2021) and implement accountability frameworks and mechanisms to ensure equitable access to rural resources.

Methodological gaps persist, particularly in understanding how language proficiency, giftedness, and cultural identity intersect with policy design. Studies on rural students in Malaysia (Lee & Low, 2014) and international school cohorts in Hong Kong (Li & Hall, 2023) underscore the need for standardized metrics to assess social-emotional well-being across diverse contexts. Additionally, the rigor and specificity of accreditation frameworks for international schools, which often rely on aspirational guidelines and self-assessment, can impact schools' ability to support SILN. These frameworks often rely on aspirational international guidelines that are subject to biased self-reflection due to leaders' limited expertise in inclusive education

(Stroud, 2024). To address this, it is crucial to examine the specific challenges and limitations that hinder effective policy implementation in inclusive education in both public and international schools (Judijanto & Amin, 2024), and accrediting bodies should prioritize the diverse range of learners in international schools, especially SILN (Agustian, 2022).

Hong Kong's successes in leveraging teacher training and urban resources to operationalize self-determination interventions (Yang et al., 2020) contrast starkly with Malaysia's struggles to overcome cultural stigma and infrastructural barriers (Hosshan, 2020; Lee & Low, 2014). Context-specific supports, such as anti-stigma initiatives and culturally responsive practices, are pivotal for equitable outcomes, as evidenced by Hong Kong's relational inclusivity strategies in international schools (Li & Hall, 2023) and Malaysia's nascent efforts to address twice-exceptional learners (Hosshan et al., 2021). However, both regions must reconcile structural disparities in consistency by integrating protocols and student voice into policy design. They must approach inclusion with a focus on relational well-being by addressing cultural stigma, linguistic diversity, and twice-exceptionality, among other intersecting needs (Beamish et al., 2024).

Implications for research

Future research should prioritize longitudinal investigations into the policy impacts on intersectional populations, particularly in Malaysia's rural areas and Hong Kong's international school cohorts. Governance reforms must address accountability in low-resource settings and challenge assumptions about the inherent inclusivity of institutional frameworks (Kielblock & Woodcock, 2022). Reliable, intersectional data collection is crucial for advancing evidence-based policymaking and bridging disparities between international and public schools. Inclusive education can transcend structural compliance to foster genuine belonging and equity by centering the voices of marginalized students and educators. The study contributes to the limited literature on the impact of inclusion policies in secondary schools and their effect on student well-being. Future research should investigate how different factors and cultural values interact with policy design to shape student experiences and explore the relationship between peer support and engagement in diverse educational contexts (Hosshan, 2020). The authors also suggest focusing on longitudinal designs and self-determination interventions to gain a comprehensive understanding of the personal development of SILN in inclusive classrooms and special schools (Yang et al., 2020).

Strengths and limitations

A key strength of this review is its cross-context comparison, which reveals how colonial legacies and governance structures shape inclusion outcomes. However, the reliance on small-scale studies (e.g., $n = 15$ in Li & Hall, 2023) limits generalisability. Longitudinal data are essential for evaluating the causal relationships between policy changes and well-being. Temporal constraints further restricted the review to post-2018 studies, potentially omitting formative policy evaluations from earlier reform phases (Table 2).

VII. CONCLUSION

This systematic review synthesizes findings from six key studies (2018-2025) to analyse how inclusive education policies shape student well-being in secondary public and international schools in Hong Kong and Malaysia. The limited corpus of studies (2015-2025) and heterogeneity in well-being assessment methods constrain definitive conclusions, though critical patterns and divergences emerge. While both regions emphasize structural inclusion, divergent trajectories emerge due to contextual factors, including governance models, cultural norms, and resource allocation. Hong Kong's rights-based framework, supported by urban resources and teacher training, fosters self-determination and communal practices (Yang et al., 2020; Yuen et al., 2022), whereas Malaysia's aspirational policies struggle with cultural stigma, rural infrastructural deficits, and weak enforcement (Amar-Singh, 2020).

A critical insight is that structural inclusion can cause unintended harm. Peer-mediated interventions in Malaysia inadvertently reinforce social hierarchies (Hosshan et al., 2021), while Hong Kong's assumptions about curriculum adaptability in international schools overlook specialized supports (Li & Hall, 2023). Even in resource-rich contexts like Hong Kong, SILN in mainstream schools face elevated victimization risks (Chan et al., 2018), underscoring the need for comprehensive safeguards such as anti-bullying frameworks and trauma-informed practices.

A significant gap remains in holistic approaches to student well-being, particularly the interplay between social integration and academic access. By centering on student voices and dismantling systemic barriers, such as rigid curriculum and untrained educators, to align policy intent with lived student experiences. In doing so, inclusive education can transcend compliance to foster genuine belonging.

VIII. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

There are no conflicts of interest in this study.

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Table 1: General characteristics of the selected studies

Author and year	Country	Research design	School context	Population studied	Dimensions of well-being assessed
Hosshan (2020)	Malaysia	Qualitative case study	Public school inclusive education programme	Secondary school students with intersecting learning needs	Social participation
Hosshan et al. (2022).	Malaysia	Qualitative case study	Public school inclusive education program	Secondary school students with intersecting learning needs	Social participation
Lee et al. (2024).	Malaysia	Qualitative case study	Public school inclusive education program	Secondary school student with intersecting learning needs	Sense of belonging
Chan et al. (2018).	Hong Kong	Quantitative; cross-sectional survey	Public primary and secondary mainstream and special schools	4,114 students with and without special needs	Victimization (experiences of the 7 types of victimization)
Li & Hall (2023)	Hong Kong	Case study	International School	Chinese and non-Chinese speaking students in secondary school	Sense of belonging and Identity
Yang et al. (2020)	Hong Kong	Quantitative; mixed methods	Public school with an integrated setting	Secondary school students with intersecting learning needs	School engagement

Table 2: General characteristics of the selected studies

Author and year	Country	Dimension of well-being assessed	Instrument used	Main results
Hosshan (2020)	Malaysia	Social participation	Observations, document reviews, and interviews to understand the social participation of students with learning disabilities	SILN experience varying degrees of social participation in inclusive settings, influenced by peer interactions, social inclusion practices, and available support services
Hosshan et al., (2021)	Malaysia	Social participation	Social Participation Questionnaire (SPQ); observational checklists; semi-structured interviews	Structured peer seating groups improved social interactions but not academic engagement; teachers need more training, and cultural stigma hinders inclusion
Lee et al., (2024)	Malaysia	Sense of belonging	Comprehensive review and analysis of clinical healthcare records, psychological assessments, and unstructured clinical interviews with parents and the child in the case study	Twice-exceptional children face misdiagnosis, underachievement, and social-emotional difficulties due to discrepancies between cognitive abilities and developmental skills; early identification and tailored support are crucial
Chan et al. (2018)	Hong Kong	Victimization	The Multidimensional Peer Victimization Scale and self-report questionnaires	Children with ADHD, internalizing disorders, autism spectrum disorder, and restrictions in body movement were at higher risk of victimization (Chan et al., 2018). Children attending special schools were at <i>less</i> risk of victimization, while children with disabilities in mainstream schools were at <i>higher</i> risk of most types of victimization compared to their non-disabled peers.
Li & Hall, (2023)	Hong Kong	Sense of Belonging and Identity	Semi-structured interviews	Student sense of belonging extends beyond physical borders in relation to inclusion in the larger Hong Kong society
Yang et al., (2020)	Hong Kong	School engagement	Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support subscales; Delaware School Climate Survey (adapted); American Institutes for Research Self-Determination Scale (autonomy subscale); School Engagement Scale (Chinese version)	School support significantly impacts self-determination, which, in turn, mediates school engagement among SILN in Hong Kong; peer support was not correlated with school engagement

Table B1: Formalised inclusive education policies in Hong Kong and Malaysia

Policy name	Year	Country	Impact area	Well-being dimensions addressed
Education for All Declaration	1990	Global	Access and equity	Basic education access; reduced disparities; promoted inclusion
Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action	1994	Global	Inclusive education systems	Access to regular schools; anti-discrimination
Convention Against Discrimination in Education	1960, 2003 (ratification)	Global	Non-discrimination in education	Access to education; equal opportunities; cultural inclusion; human rights
Convention on Cultural Diversity	2007	Global	Cultural diversity in education and media	Cultural identity and expression
Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	2008	UN Convention	Inclusive education and social inclusion	Social inclusion and participation, non-discrimination
Education 2030 Framework	2015	Global	Holistic well-being	Psychological, physical, emotional, and material dimensions; equity
ASEAN Enabling Masterplan 2025	2018	ASEAN	Disability-inclusive development	Human rights; education access; gender equality
ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint	2009, 2025	ASEAN	Inclusive education and equity	Promotes inclusive education as part of socio-cultural integration goals
Hanoi Declaration on the Enhancement of the Welfare and Development of ASEAN Women and Children	2010	ASEAN	Welfare and development of women and children	Gender equity in education: school enrolment of children with disabilities and with special needs
Kuala Lumpur Declaration on Inclusive Education	2019	Southeast Asia	Inclusive education systems	Regional collaboration on inclusive education
Asia-Pacific Regional Convention on Education	2021	Asia-Pacific	Equity and lifelong learning through holistic approaches	Inclusive education for vulnerable children
UNICEF East Asia-Pacific Inclusion Agenda	2020	East Asia-Pacific	Marginalized groups (e.g., ethnic minorities, children with disabilities)	Guides for national policies; equity; access to education
Segregated Special Schools; resource classes	1980s	Hong Kong	Special education for children with disabilities	Access to education; specialized support
Disability Discrimination Ordinance	1995	Hong Kong	Anti-discrimination for people with disabilities	Legal protection; equal opportunity
Integrated Education Pilot	1997	Hong Kong	Mainstream integration for students with mild disabilities	Family support; learning resources
Whole School Approach & Integrated Education Policy	2000	Hong Kong	School-wide inclusion responsibility	Social inclusion; supportive relationships
Code of Practice on Education under the DDO	2001	Hong Kong	Compliance with Disability Discrimination Ordinance	Equal opportunity, dignity, respect
Learning Support Grant	2003	Hong Kong	Tiered funding for special education needs	Resource equity, learning environment
Whole School Approach to Integrated Education	2004	Hong Kong	Systemic inclusion via school support	Social inclusion, supportive relationships, learning environment
Convention on the Protection of Cultural Diversity	2007	Hong Kong	Cultural diversity protection in education	Cultural identity, sense of belonging, social inclusion

Framework for Teachers' Professional Development on IE	2007	Hong Kong	Enhanced teacher capacity for special education needs support	Professional development; school environment
Three-Tier Intervention Model	2008	Hong Kong	Tiered support for diverse learning needs	Learning support; inclusive environment
Special Education Needs Support Grant	2009	Hong Kong	Direct funding for special education needs resources in schools	Resource equity; learning support
Catering for Student Differences Policy	2014	Hong Kong	Differentiated instruction and flexible curriculum	Personalized learning; academic achievement
Five-year Teacher Training Cycle	2015	Hong Kong	Inclusion and mental health training for teachers	Teacher development; inclusive environment; mental health
Operational Guide on the Whole School Approach	2015	Hong Kong	Standardized inclusion practices in schools	Inclusive environment; equity; clear guidelines
School-based Educational Psychology Service	2016	Hong Kong	Psychological support for SILN	Mental Health, special education needs support
Mandatory Special Education Needs Teacher Training	2017	Hong Kong	Teacher competency in special education needs	Teacher development; inclusive environment; special education needs support
Professional Development Programme for Mental Health	2017	Hong Kong	Teacher capacity to support student mental health	Teacher development; mental health; inclusive environments
Special Education Needs Coordinator	2017	Hong Kong	Standardized special education needs support	Special education needs support, resource coordination, and inclusive environments
Learning Support Grant	2018	Hong Kong	Funding for special education needs and vulnerable students	Equity; resource allocation; special education needs support
Circular No. 4/2019	2019	Hong Kong	Formalizing compliance with special education needs support procedures	Special education needs support; inclusive environments
Special Arrangements for Internal Examinations with SEN	2019	Hong Kong	Equitable examination conditions for students with special education needs	Academic equity: academic outcomes and achievement
Grant for Supporting Non-Chinese Speaking Students with Special Education Needs	2019	Hong Kong	Targeted support for ethnic minorities with special education needs	Social integration; academic achievement
Enhanced School-based Speech Therapy Service	2019	Hong Kong	Supporting students with speech and language needs	Academic achievement, social inclusion, and communication
Persons with Disabilities and Rehabilitation Programme Plan	2020	Hong Kong	Broad social services policy; not strictly education-focused	Academic achievement, social inclusion, and physical
Policy on Catering for Students with Special Education Needs	2020	Hong Kong	Expanding resource allocation for students with special education needs	General resource allocation; equity
Policy on Mental Health in Schools	2020	Hong Kong	Integrating mental health support into inclusive education	General mental health; inclusive environments; special education needs support

Guiding Framework for Teacher Education Programmes	2023	Hong Kong	Equipping teachers to support students with special education needs	Teacher development: inclusive pedagogy
Special Education Schools	1960	Malaysia	Provide specialized education for students with high support needs	Specialized academic support for access
Pre-service teacher training (formalised in 2005)	1980s;	Malaysia	Integrate inclusive education pedagogy into teacher certification programs	Teacher preparedness for academic and social inclusion
National Education Philosophy	1989	Malaysia	Building the potential of individuals in a holistic manner	Social belonging and the development of ethnic unity
Education Act 1996 (Amended in 2002)	1996	Malaysia	Legal basis for inclusive education	Equal access to education; integration
Education Regulations	1997	Malaysia	Formalise special education in either special school, integration programming, or inclusive program	Social participation; academic access
Education Development Policy (2001-2010)	2001	Malaysia	Focus on improving the efficiency and effectiveness of educational management	Educational equity and overall access
Persons with Disabilities Act	2002	Malaysia	Provides the right to basic education	Educational access; community involvement
Education Development Master Plan	2006	Malaysia	Focus on improving the efficiency and effectiveness of educational management	Educational equity and overall access
Persons with Disabilities Act	2008	Malaysia	Protect the rights of persons with disabilities, including education	Equal access; anti-discrimination
Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013-2025)	2013	Malaysia	Broad equity goals and systemic reforms	Systemic equity; access to quality education
Special Education Regulations & Guidelines for Inclusive Education	2013	Malaysia	Replaced controversial 1997 regulations to define inclusive education, provide legal requirements, and parental rights	Equity; legal protection; parental involvement; academic access
Individual Education Plan	2013	Malaysia	Tailoring learning goals for students with special education needs	Personalized learning for academic access; social support
Buddy Club Initiative	2013	Malaysia	Promote exchange and integration through extracurricular activities	Peer inclusion; social inclusion; belonging
Special Education Integration Programme (PPKI)	2015	Malaysia	Physical integration (e.g., braille, ramps, tools) and classroom co-location	Physical access; social inclusion/belonging
Inclusive Pedagogy Implementation Guide	2016	Malaysia	Assist teachers in including students with special education needs	Social inclusion and academic access in mainstream settings

Garis Panduan Program Pendidikan Inklusif Edisi	2018	Malaysia	Updated 2013 guidelines – provides guidance for implementing inclusive programs	Academic access, social inclusion, and belonging through the student readiness checklist
Inclusive Education Programme & Zero Reject Policy	2019	Malaysia	Builds on 2018 guidelines; ensure no child is denied enrollment	Access to education; equal opportunities
Holistic Inclusive Education Programme	2020	Malaysia	Provides early diagnosis and collaboration with the Ministry of Health	Physical and psychological support for all students for holistic access
Master Trainer Course	2020	Malaysia	Equipping teachers with skills for inclusive education practices	Academic access through teacher development for inclusive pedagogy
Inclusive Open Educational Resources National Policy	2024	Malaysia	Focuses on developing inclusive and equitable OER to support all learners	Educational access; academic access

Table B2: Non-formalised inclusive education policies and guidelines in Hong Kong and Malaysia

Policy name	Year	Country	Impact area	Well-being dimension addressed	Notes
Pathfinders Peer Mentoring	2000s	Hong Kong	Social inclusion	Social inclusion; peer belonging	Grassroots/NGO led initiative
Ethnic Minority Saturday Schools	~2008	Hong Kong	Support non-Chinese speaking (NCS) students	Language acquisition; cultural integration	NGO-driven for NCS students
Project STEP	2010s	Hong Kong	Academic access	Academic access; cultural sensitivity	NGO-academic partnership for ethnic minorities
Grassroots special education needs parent networks	~2015	Hong Kong	Family empowerment	Family empowerment; advocacy	Community-led support for excluded special education needs families
Parent Advocacy for IEP Enforcement	2016	Hong Kong	Accountability	Accountability; academic/social-emotional support	NGO-driven oversight of IEP implementation
University-Led Inclusion Labs	2017	Hong Kong	Pilot inclusive pedagogy	Academic access: special education needs support	Academic pilot programs
Cross-Border School Partnerships	2019	Hong Kong	Migrant integration	Social inclusion; cultural inclusion	Government-NGO collaboration for mainland Chinese immigrants
Hong Kong Rehabilitation Programme Plan	2020	Hong Kong	Disability alignment rights	Equity; cultural inclusion; rights	Umbrella policy linking education to broader disability/sustainability goals
Policy on Catering for Students with Special Education Needs – (Joyful Online Learning at Home)	2020	Hong Kong	Holistic support systems	Curriculum access; home learning	Government policy with NGO/school partnerships
Smart School Initiative	2021	Hong Kong	Technology equity	Technology access; special education needs support	Subsidiary initiative under the 2020 Special Education Needs Policy
SENSE Information Website	2021	Hong Kong	Resource centralization	Parent/teacher support; information access	Government digital platform for special education needs resources
One-off Purchase of Electronic Assessment Tools Grant	2024	Hong Kong	Early identification	Early intervention; tailored support	Funding under the 2020 Special Education Needs Policy

Smart Parent Net	2024	Hong Kong	Parent empowerment	Accessible resources; guidance	Digital extension of 2020 Special Education Needs Policy
NGO Partnerships for marginalized groups	1990s; 2006	Malaysia	Access for excluded groups	Equitable education access	Formalized in 2006 (e.g., UNICEF collaborations)
Inclusive Education Programme Pilot	1994	Malaysia	Mainstream special education needs pilot	Equal access; social belonging	Early pilot under the Education Act 1996
Surat Siaran (BS-PK) Circular	1995	Malaysia	Early special education needs guidance	Academic access; social participation	Precursor to formal special education needs policy
Smart School Project	1997	Malaysia	Digital modernization	Tech access; digital literacy	Part of the National IT agenda
Rumah Belajar	~2010	Malaysia	Stateless children’s education	Academic access; social; psychological	NGO-led community learning centers
Teach for Malaysia	2010	Malaysia	Teacher equity	Academic access; teacher quality	Addresses rural/urban teacher gaps
Refugee Education Hubs	~2015	Malaysia	Refugee education	Academic; social-emotional; cultural	UNHCR/NGO partnerships (non-governmental)
Corporate Digital Inclusion Pilots	~2016	Malaysia	Tech access (rural/indigenous)	Academic, social economic	CSR initiatives (e.g., Maxis eKelas)
Pre-Vocational Programme	2016	Malaysia	Special education needs workforce readiness	Social inclusion; workforce skills	Aligns with Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013-2025)
JPNIN Teacher Training Modules	2018	Malaysia	Inclusive pedagogy	Holistic teacher collaboration	Under Blueprint (2013-2025)
PIBG-Led Inclusion Projects	~2018	Malaysia	Local special education needs infrastructure	Social-emotional; physical access	Parent-teacher association initiatives
Pilot Programs in Rural Areas	2021	Malaysia	Rural equity	Contextualized support; access	Part of Post-COVID Learning Recovery Framework
K9@Pintar Program	2022	Malaysia	Non-formal education	Academic; social-emotional	NGO-MoE partnership for out-of-school youth
Post-COVID Learning Recovery Framework	2022	Malaysia	Marginalized student recovery	Academic access; gap mitigation	Government policy with NGO support

Table B3: International school accreditation standards for inclusion

Accreditation body	Year established	Region/scope	Inclusion focus area	Key well-being dimensions	Framework overview
International Baccalaureate (IBO)	1968	Global	Universal Design for Learning: language accessibility	Academic; cultural; psychological	Self-study leading to external evaluation of program standards
Council of British International Schools (COBIS)	1989	UK-aligned global schools	Safeguarding; English as an additional language support	Social; psychological	Self-study leading to compliance audits + Patron’s Accreditation
Council of International Schools (CIS)	1965	Global	Diversity; equity & inclusion (DEI) standards; anti-bias training; multilingual learner support	Cultural; social-emotional; psychological	Self-assessment leading to peer review + mandatory DEI audits

New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC)	1885	Global	Trauma-informed practices; anti-bullying policies	Psychological; social	Self-study + peer review
Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC)	1962	Asia-Pacific, Americas	Equity audits, culturally responsive teaching	Social, emotional, and cultural	Self-study leading to 5-year accreditation cycle + site visits

