

Teaching Students with Extensive Support Needs in Malaysian Special Education: Teachers' Challenges, Current Practices, and Priorities for Instructional Support

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ABSTRACT:

Malaysia's expanding special education enrolment increases the need for instructional approaches that can respond to students who require frequent, intensive, and systematic support. This study examined special education teachers' challenges, current practices, available supports, implementation constraints, and priorities for developing practical instructional support. A cross-sectional quantitative survey was conducted between July and August 2026 involving 100 teachers who taught students with special educational needs requiring high levels of support. A needs-analysis instrument assessed eight domains. Descriptive statistics and internal consistency diagnostics were used. Teachers reported relatively high instructional challenges ($M = 3.69$, $SD = 0.42$) and implementation constraints ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 0.47$), while current practices were less consistently enacted ($M = 3.50$, $SD = 0.39$) and available resources and supports were rated near the scale midpoint ($M = 2.91$, $SD = 0.54$). The highest-rated challenges involved determining appropriate levels of assistance and when to fade support ($M = 3.93$), managing behaviour or emotional regulation while teaching others ($M = 3.90$), and teaching students with heterogeneous support needs simultaneously ($M = 3.88$). Priority instructional supports included systematic prompting ($M = 4.39$), fading with feedback ($M = 4.28$), and translating individualized plan objectives into daily instruction ($M = 4.24$). Findings support a cross-category, support-needs-oriented approach to teacher development that combines flexible access with systematic intensification and practical decision tools.

Keywords: high support needs, special education teachers, systematic instruction, teacher support, Malaysia

Introduction

Students who require high levels of educational support present a distinctive instructional challenge because access, participation, and response may depend on frequent and systematic assistance across learning, communication, engagement, self-management, regulation, mobility, or safety. In Malaysia, the number of students with special educational needs registered in Ministry of Education institutions reached 161,891 by 31 May 2026, including 141,545 students classified under learning disabilities, across 7,406 schools providing special education services (Parliament of Malaysia, 2026). Increasing enrolment does not imply that all students require intensive support, but it strengthens the need to understand how teachers respond when several learners require individualized support within the same instructional context.

Teacher capacity is central to the quality of special and inclusive education. A scoping review by Chow et al. (2024) found that teachers repeatedly identified professional learning, teaching assistant availability, adequate resources, curriculum adaptation, collaboration, planning time, and manageable class size as important conditions for implementing inclusive education. In Malaysia, Cheng and Toran (2022) reported that special education teachers described limited knowledge and time-related challenges when managing behaviour among students with learning disabilities. These findings indicate that the difficulty is not simply whether resources exist, but whether teachers have sufficiently practical guidance for making instructional decisions under heterogeneous classroom conditions.

For students with extensive or high support needs, evidence-based instruction commonly relies on explicit and systematic teaching, task

analysis, response prompting, reinforcement, error correction, and planned fading of assistance. Walker et al. (2024) found that special education teachers regarded modelling and performance feedback as important for developing systematic instruction skills. A recent systematic review by Jung and Lansey (2026) likewise found that explicitly and systematically delivered academic interventions produced consistently positive effects for students with extensive support needs in inclusive settings. At the same time, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) emphasizes reducing barriers through multiple means of engagement, representation, and action/expression (CAST, 2024). These approaches are complementary: flexible access can reduce unnecessary barriers, while systematic instruction can intensify support when flexible access alone is insufficient.

The study therefore examined two questions: (a) What challenges, current practices, resources and supports, and implementation constraints are reported by teachers who teach students with high support needs? and (b) What content, pedagogical strategies, and design features do teachers prioritize for a practical instructional-support module? The study formed the needs-analysis phase of a broader design-and-development project, but the present article reports only the empirical findings from this first phase.

2. Methodology

2.1 Design and Participants

A cross-sectional quantitative needs-analysis design was employed to examine the instructional experiences and support needs of special education teachers in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia. Participants were recruited from special education settings at both primary and secondary school levels

using purposive sampling, as eligibility depended on their direct involvement in teaching students with special educational needs who required high levels of educational support. Data were collected between July and August 2026.

To be eligible for participation, teachers were required to (a) be directly involved in teaching students with special educational needs and (b) currently teach at least one student who met the study's operational definition of high support needs. In this study, students with high support needs were defined as those requiring frequent, intensive, and systematic educational support to access, participate in, or respond to instruction. Teachers who did not meet either screening criterion or who did not provide usable questionnaire data were excluded from the analysis.

A total of 100 teachers completed the survey, and all met both eligibility criteria; therefore, all responses were retained for the final analysis. The sample comprised 56 women (56%) and 44 men (44%). Most participants had a specialization in special education (80%), while 57% had at least six years of teaching experience. Participants were evenly distributed between primary and secondary schools, with 50% from each level, and the majority (86%) were teaching in Special Education Integration Programmes (Program Pendidikan Khas Integrasi [PPKI]). The total number of teachers initially invited to participate was not recorded; consequently, a formal survey response rate could not be calculated.

2.2 Instrument

Data were collected using a needs-analysis instrument developed for the study. The instrument covered eight domains: instructional challenges (9 items), current

instructional practices (10 items), available resources/supports (5 items), implementation constraints (5 items), needed module content (7 items), needed pedagogical strategies (7 items), module design/delivery preferences (5 items), and overall need for module development (5 items). Items were developed through construct mapping, literature-informed item generation, and internal screening for redundancy and clarity. The operational definition of high support needs was presented before the eligibility items to avoid classifying students solely by diagnosis.

The initial item pool was reviewed by three experts with relevant expertise in special education and instrument development. The experts evaluated the items for relevance, clarity, representativeness, and appropriateness for the Malaysian special education context. Their feedback informed minor revisions to item wording and contextual appropriateness. Following the expert-review process, 53 core items were retained across eight domains for the final needs-analysis instrument.

Five-point response scales were used. Challenge items ranged from 1 (not challenging) to 5 (very challenging); current-practice items from 1 (never) to 5 (very often); resource/support items from 1 (very inadequate) to 5 (very adequate); constraint items from 1 (not a constraint) to 5 (very large constraint); and needs items ranged from lower to higher levels of need or agreement. Internal consistency estimates for the four condition/practice domains were $\alpha = .715$ for instructional challenges, $\alpha = .715$ for current instructional practices, $\alpha = .691$ for available resources/supports, and $\alpha = .724$ for implementation constraints. The needs domains were interpreted primarily at the item level because the items represented

distinct development priorities rather than interchangeable indicators of a single latent trait.

2.3 Procedure, Ethics, and Data Analysis

Participants completed the questionnaire after receiving study information and confirming eligibility. Participation was voluntary, responses were coded, and identifying information was separated from analytic data. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies,

percentages, means, and standard deviations. Item-level distributions were used to identify specific priorities rather than relying only on domain means. Corrected item-total correlations and internal consistency coefficients were examined diagnostically for reflective domains. Open-ended responses were categorized descriptively to supplement the structured needs data. No causal or population-wide inference was made from the cross-sectional self-report data.

3. Results

3.1 Participants and Teaching Context

Table 1 Participant and Teaching Context Profile (N = 100)

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Gender	Female	56	56.0
	Male	44	44.0
Specialization	Special education	80	80.0
	Other education/fields	20	20.0
Teaching experience	≥ 6 years	57	57.0
	< 6 years	43	43.0
School level	Primary	50	50.0
	Secondary	50	50.0
Programme	PPKI	86	86.0
	Other special/inclusive provision	14	14.0
Students needing intensive support	≥ 2 students	85	85.0
	≥ 4 students	47	47.0
Individual attention	Often/very often	72	72.0
PPM availability	Occasional/none	40	40.0

The teaching context was characterized by multiple simultaneous support demands. Eighty-five percent of respondents taught at least two students requiring intensive support, 47% taught at least four, and 72%

reported that individual attention was needed often or very often. Forty percent reported that a pupil management assistant (Pembantu Pengurusan Murid [PPM]) was available only occasionally or not at all.

3.2 Challenges, Practices, Resources, and Constraints

Table 2 Summary of Condition and Practice Domains

Domain	Items	M	SD
Instructional challenges	9	3.69	0.42
Current instructional practices	10	3.50	0.39
Available resources or supports	5	2.91	0.54
Implementation constraints	5	3.76	0.47

Implementation constraints had the highest domain mean ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 0.47$), followed by instructional challenges ($M = 3.69$, $SD = 0.42$). Current practices were reported between occasional and frequent use ($M = 3.50$, $SD = 0.39$), while available resources/supports were rated around the midpoint ($M = 2.91$, $SD = 0.54$). The three highest-rated challenges were determining the appropriate type/level of assistance and when it should be faded ($M = 3.93$, $SD = 0.74$; 71% challenging/very challenging), managing behavior or emotional regulation without disrupting instruction for other students ($M = 3.90$, $SD = 0.75$; 71%), and teaching several students with different levels of ability and support needs in the same class ($M = 3.88$, $SD = 0.71$; 70%).

Among current practices, examining students' present performance and needs (M

$= 3.65$), setting specific measurable objectives ($M = 3.65$), planned prompting ($M = 3.63$), and breaking complex tasks into smaller steps ($M = 3.60$) were reported most frequently. Lower-rated practices included systematic feedback/reinforcement/error correction ($M = 3.24$), using performance records to adjust subsequent instruction ($M = 3.38$), and planned fading of support ($M = 3.41$). The lowest resource/support rating concerned appropriate teaching materials, visual supports, or equipment ($M = 2.71$), followed by PPM support ($M = 2.79$) and training/professional development ($M = 2.85$). The largest constraints were the number of students to be managed in one instructional session ($M = 3.87$), consistency of strategy implementation across adults ($M = 3.86$), and time needed to prepare individualized materials ($M = 3.78$).

3.3 Priorities for Instructional Support Development

Table 3 Highest-Priority Development Needs

Area	Priority item	M	Positive response (%)
Content	Translate individualized plan objectives into daily instruction	4.24	90
Content	Manage individual, small-group, and whole-class instruction	4.20	88
Content	Support communication, comprehension, and engagement	4.20	91
Pedagogy	Systematic prompting	4.39	95
Pedagogy	Fading, feedback, reinforcement, and error correction	4.28	96
Design	Realistic classroom cases/examples	4.19	91
Design	Ready-to-use checklists, templates, and visual materials	4.11	90
Overall	Willingness to use contextually appropriate module	4.46	98
Overall	Value of clarifying teacher–PPM roles	4.37	99

All development dimensions had means above 4.00: needed content ($M = 4.13$, $SD = 0.32$), pedagogical strategies ($M = 4.19$, $SD = 0.32$), design/delivery features ($M = 4.09$, $SD = 0.32$), and overall need for development ($M = 4.31$, $SD = 0.31$). Across the 24 structured need items, 90.1% of responses fell in the two highest response categories. The strongest pedagogical priorities were systematic prompting ($M = 4.39$) and fading combined with feedback, reinforcement, and

error correction ($M = 4.28$). The most strongly endorsed content priority was translating individualized-plan objectives into daily instruction ($M = 4.24$). For product design, realistic classroom cases ($M = 4.19$) and ready-to-use materials ($M = 4.11$) were preferred. 98% indicated willingness to use a module if it was contextually appropriate, while 99% agreed that guidance clarifying teacher–PPM roles would be useful.

Open-ended responses were consistent with the structured results. Teachers most frequently identified attention/behaviour management (19%), time required to prepare individualized materials (15%), adaptation for highly varied ability levels (14%), and prompting/fading, communication, simultaneous intensive support, and progress monitoring (13% each) as major challenges. Requested supports included video demonstrations and decision flowcharts (23%), behaviour/engagement guidance (18%), examples differentiated by support level and PPM guidance (18%), step-by-step guidance with realistic cases and ready-to-use visual materials (17%), and monitoring templates/checklists (14%).

4. Discussion

The findings indicate that teachers' needs are best understood as a problem of instructional decision-making under heterogeneous and resource-constrained conditions rather than as a simple absence of knowledge. Teachers reported that several foundational practices were already present, particularly assessment of current performance, measurable objectives, prompting, and task analysis. Nevertheless, the most difficult and least consistently enacted practices clustered around deciding how much support to provide, when to fade it, how to use performance data, and how to maintain systematic feedback and error correction. This pattern is important because it identifies a translation gap between knowing that support is required and executing a coherent decision cycle in daily teaching.

The Malaysian findings align with broader evidence on teacher support needs. Chow et al. (2024) found that teachers implementing inclusive education commonly request professional learning, teaching-assistant support, adequate resources, time for

planning, and support for curriculum adaptation. The present respondents similarly rated materials, PPM support, and professional learning as only moderately adequate while reporting large constraints related to class size, simultaneous intensive needs, and preparation time. Cheng and Toran (2022) likewise identified behavioural management and time constraints among Malaysian special education teachers. The current study extends that local evidence by showing that regulation/behaviour is only one part of a wider instructional problem involving support intensity, heterogeneous grouping, communication, and data-based adjustment.

The high priority given to prompting, fading, task analysis, reinforcement, error correction, and progress monitoring is consistent with systematic instruction literature for students with extensive support needs. Walker et al. (2024) emphasized the importance of modelling and performance feedback in building teachers' systematic-instruction competence, while Jung and Lansey (2026) reported consistently positive academic effects for explicit and systematically delivered strategies. These findings support professional learning that does more than define techniques: teachers need worked examples, modelling, opportunities to apply procedures, and feedback about implementation. This is also consistent with broader professional-development evidence showing that active practice and mechanisms for embedding techniques into classroom routines are more important than exposure to information alone (Donath et al., 2023; Sims et al., 2025).

At the same time, the data do not support a one-size-fits-all intensive-intervention model. Teachers requested support for communication, multiple forms of

representation and response, adaptation to differing levels of need, and integration of academic, functional, and adaptive priorities. These priorities are compatible with UDL's emphasis on proactively reducing barriers through multiple means of engagement, representation, and action/expression (CAST, 2024). A practical implication is a two-layer instructional logic: first reduce avoidable access barriers and provide flexible participation options; then intensify support systematically when individual learners require additional prompting, task analysis, reinforcement, or other individualized procedures.

The preferred product characteristics reinforce this interpretation. Teachers did not primarily ask for a long theoretical manual. They prioritized realistic cases, step-by-step guidance, ready-to-use checklists and templates, decision flowcharts, visual supports, and flexible print/digital access. Because preparation time was already a major constraint, a support product that increases documentation or requires extensive preparation could undermine its own usability. Development should therefore emphasize minimum sufficient information, visible decision rules, examples across different support profiles, and clear distinctions between core instructional functions and adaptations that can vary by learner or context.

The study also has implications for how 'high support needs' are conceptualized. The strongest needs cut across diagnoses: communication, engagement, regulation, task performance, support fading, and monitoring. A cross-category support-needs orientation may therefore be more useful for instructional planning than assuming that a diagnostic label directly specifies the intensity or form of classroom support. The

operational definition used here should not be treated as an official Malaysian classification, but it offers a pragmatic way to focus professional development on the frequency, intensity, domain, and context of educational support actually required.

4.1 Limitations

The study has several limitations. The sample was limited to 100 teachers and was not intended to represent all special education teachers in Malaysia. Measures relied primarily on self-report and therefore captured reported rather than directly observed practice. Cross-sectional data cannot establish whether constraints caused lower implementation of particular practices. The operational construct of high support needs was designed for this study and is not a formal Ministry of Education category. Finally, the needs instrument contained several diagnostic item sets that intentionally represented distinct development priorities; consequently, item-level interpretation was more appropriate than treating all needs items as a single latent scale. Future work should replicate the findings across districts, include observation or implementation evidence, and evaluate whether support products developed from these priorities change teacher practice over time.

5. Conclusion

Special education teachers in this study reported substantial challenges and implementation constraints when teaching students who require frequent, intensive, and systematic support. The most prominent difficulties involved deciding the level and reduction of assistance, managing regulation while teaching other students, and responding to heterogeneous support needs within the same class. Teachers already reported using several important

instructional practices, but fading, data-based adjustment, and systematic feedback/error correction were less consistently implemented. Teachers rated resources and supports as moderate, particularly for materials, PPM support, and professional learning.

The needs analysis identified a clear development agenda: practical guidance for translating individualized goals into daily

instruction, systematic prompting and fading, data-based decisions, realistic classroom cases, ready-to-use tools, and flexible delivery. These findings support a cross-category approach that combines proactive barrier reduction with systematic intensification according to learner response. Such an approach may provide a more actionable basis for teacher development than diagnosis-based assumptions about support intensity.

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8. Author Declaration

This is original work; it has not been published and is not under consideration elsewhere.