INCLUSIVE LITERACY: A REVIEW OF LIBRARY ROLES IN SUPPORTING INFORMATION LITERACY DEVELOPMENT FOR STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

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Abstract:

This article discusses the issue of how libraries can assist students with disabilities in developing their information literacy skills effectively and efficiently. This review aims to examine and combine studies on library methods, approaches, and materials designed to promote information literacy in this overlooked demographic. A comprehensive examination of research underscores the role that libraries play in improving literacy capabilities and ensuring fair access to information; nonetheless, there are notable deficiencies in tailored approaches and the effectiveness of these programs in supporting students with unique requirements. Results from studies show that although numerous libraries embrace methods, there's a noticeable lack of thorough frameworks and cooperative strategies that blend technology with teaching

methods. The research highlights the significance of teamwork involving librarians, educators and tech experts to devise resources and initiatives. Furthermore, the study stresses the need for establishing guidelines that support inclusion in library services. The findings of this study have ranging effects. Indicate that libraries need to broaden their grasp of accessibility and take proactive steps to build welcoming environments that cater to everyone's needs effectively through collaborations and creative approaches. By doing libraries can improve their support, for students with requirements which can boost their ability to na. PG: 558_570vigate information and contribute to academic achievements overall. This research also highlights the need for more studies in this area, calling for a framework that enables all students to develop information literacy skills.

Keywords:

Accessibility, Assistive Technology, Inclusive Education, Information Literacy, Libraries, Special Needs

Introduction

Information literacy is a crucial skill that enables individuals to locate, evaluate, and use information effectively (Shashikala, 2024). This is particularly important for students with special needs, who often face additional challenges in accessing and utilizing information resources (Hidayah, Najihah & Ahsani, 2022). However, despite libraries' role in providing access to information, gaps persist in how effectively these institutions cater to special needs students.

Globally, statistics highlight significant disparities in education for students with disabilities. According to UNESCO (2023), approximately 32% of children with disabilities are out of school, compared to 6% of their non-disabled peers. In Malaysia, a similar gap exists, with many special needs students experiencing difficulties in acquiring literacy skills due to inadequate support systems (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2022). These challenges necessitate a comprehensive examination of how libraries can bridge the accessibility gap and support students with special needs in developing their information literacy skills.
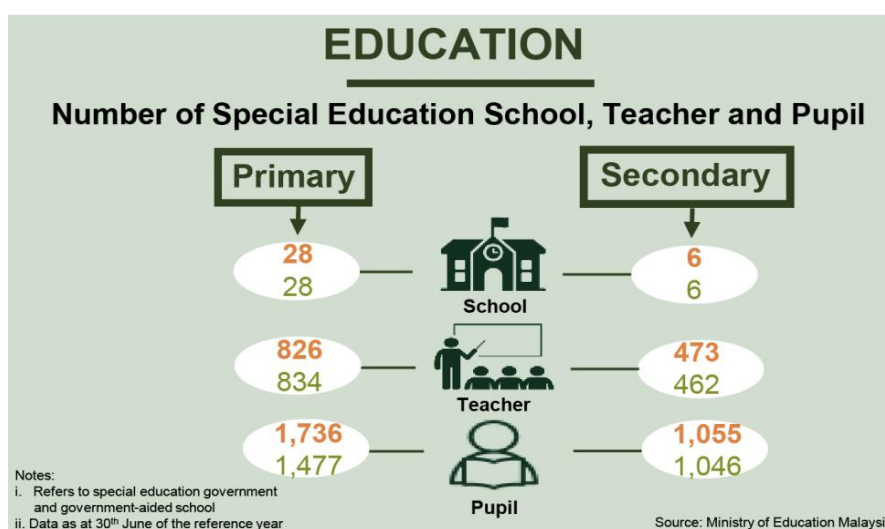

Figure 1: Statistic of Special Education in Malaysia by 2023
Source: Person with Disability Statistics, Malaysia, 2023, Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM)

Despite the growing recognition of inclusive education, several issues hinder the development of information literacy among special needs students. First, many schools and libraries lack adequate assistive technologies, such as screen readers and adaptive software, making it difficult for students with visual or cognitive impairments to access learning materials (Purnomo, Wikandani & Suprapto, 2024). Second, there is a shortage of trained library professionals who can provide specialized support tailored to the needs of students with disabilities (Ronning, 2024). Third, students with special needs often experience social and institutional barriers, including stigmatization and exclusion from mainstream academic resources, further limiting their ability to develop critical literacy skills (Abu Qaadan, Hamad, & Fakhouri, 2024).

To enhance inclusivity, many libraries have adopted digital tools such as screen readers and audiobooks to support visually impaired students (Jayamma, Mahesh & Kotur, 2023). However, challenges such as the lack of trained personnel and insufficient digital resources hinder effective implementation (Purnomo et al., 2024). Given these issues, this study aims to explore the role of libraries in promoting information literacy among special needs students, identify challenges, and propose strategies for improvement.

Despite numerous global initiatives promoting inclusive education, research focusing on the role of libraries in supporting information literacy among Malaysian special needs students remains limited. While studies have examined digital literacy programs (Maslina, 2024) and assistive technologies in libraries (Purnomo et al., 2024), few have explored how library services directly impact the information literacy development of students with disabilities in Malaysia. This study aims to bridge this gap by investigating the accessibility, effectiveness, and challenges of library services for special needs students in Malaysian educational institutions.

While some literature covers the integration of information literacy in academic contexts (Audrin & Audrin, 2022), the unique challenges special needs students face remains underexplored. Specifically, there is a need for targeted strategies and instructional models tailored to these learners in both public and vocational school libraries, addressing not only access but also adaptive teaching methods (Jayamma et al., 2023). This study aims to fill this gap by investigating libraries' roles in developing information literacy programs specifically designed for students with special needs.

The research objectives of this study are threefold: (1) to explore the current practices of libraries in supporting information literacy for special needs students, (2) to identify the specific challenges that hinder the participation and success of these students, and (3) to recommend strategies that libraries can adopt to create more inclusive and accessible learning environments.

The article is structured as follows: the introduction presents the research context, objectives, and the topic's significance. The literature review provides an in-depth discussion of existing research on library and supported literacy programs, also inclusion strategies. The methodology section outlines briefly on this review study. Lastly, the article concludes with recommendations for library practitioners and suggestions for future research directions.

Literature Review
There are three main points will be discussed in the literature review. These includes the definitions and frameworks relevant about information literacy, roles of libraries in supporting students with special needs, and challenges faced by libraries nowadays.

Information Literacy
Information literacy (IL) encompasses a set of competencies that enable individuals to recognize when information is needed and to locate, evaluate, and use that information effectively. Information literacy (IL) is crucial in formal and informal learning environments, as it empowers learners to effectively locate, evaluate, and use information. In formal settings, such as schools and universities, integrating IL into the curriculum enhances students' academic success by fostering critical thinking and research skills (Van Noy, James & Bedley, 2021).

Educators and librarians collaborate to create learning experiences that promote IL, which is linked to better educational outcomes (Kammer, King, Donahay & Koeberl, 2021). In informal contexts, such as community groups and online platforms, IL helps individuals navigate the vast amounts of information available, enabling them to make informed decisions and engage in lifelong learning. Critically assessing information sources becomes increasingly important in today's digital age, where misinformation can quickly proliferate. Fostering information literacy equips learners with essential skills for academic achievement and informed citizenship, making it a vital component of modern education (Kong, 2008).

Common barriers to education for children with disabilities often include physical inaccessibility and a lack of tailored resources. Physical barriers, such as the absence of ramps or elevators, can significantly hinder students' access to educational facilities (Ontario Human Rights Commission, n.d.). Additionally, many schools lack the necessary adaptations to accommodate diverse learning needs, which can lead to a disconnect between students and the curriculum (Mpungose, 2023).

Tailored resources, such as specialized teaching materials and trained personnel, are critical for effectively supporting students with disabilities. However, many educational institutions do not provide these essential resources, resulting in further marginalization and exclusion (Khalid & Pederson, 2016). The cumulative effect of these barriers impacts academic achievement and diminishes students' overall educational experiences and social integration (Berkowitz, Moore, Astor & Benbenishty, 2016). Addressing these challenges is vital for creating inclusive learning environments that enable all students to thrive.

Information Literacy Framework
This study is grounded in several theoretical perspectives that provide insights into the role of libraries in fostering inclusive literacy development. The Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework (CAST, 2022) emphasizes the need for flexible learning environments that accommodate diverse learners. UDL promotes multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression, ensuring that students with special needs can access and process information effectively. Libraries adopting UDL principles can create inclusive learning spaces with adaptive technologies and tailored resources to support students with disabilities.

Another relevant theory is the Sociotechnical Systems Theory (Baxter & Sommerville, 2011), which examines the interaction between technology, people, and institutions. This theory is useful in analysing how library services integrate assistive technologies and digital tools to enhance accessibility for students with disabilities. It underscores the importance of aligning technological advancements with human-cantered approaches to ensure effective information literacy support.

Furthermore, the Information Behaviour Theory (Wilson, 1999) explores how individuals seek, evaluate, and use information. This theory is particularly relevant to understanding the challenges that special needs students face in acquiring information literacy. Libraries can apply insights from this theory to develop targeted strategies that address the specific information-seeking behaviours and barriers experienced by students with disabilities. By integrating these theoretical perspectives, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how libraries can enhance information literacy development for students with special needs through inclusive practices and adaptive technologies.

Role of Libraries in Supporting Special Needs Students
School libraries play a crucial role in integrating assistive technologies to enhance learning for students with disabilities. By providing access to specialized resources and tools, such as text-to-speech software and adaptive devices, libraries can create an inclusive environment that supports diverse learning needs (Viner, Singh & Shaughnessy, 2022). Teacher-librarians are essential in this process, as they not only help students navigate these technologies but also collaborate with educators to ensure that the library's resources align with the curriculum (Giles, Baker & Willis, 2024). Furthermore, the implementation of digital technologies in school libraries facilitates access to a wide range of media-rich resources, allowing students to engage with content in various formats (HIVO, n.d.). This integration not only enhances the learning experience but also fosters independence and confidence among students with disabilities, empowering them to become active participants in their education (Anderson & Putman, 2019).

University libraries play a vital role in supporting students with disabilities by providing specialized services and fostering collaborations with educators. These libraries are increasingly recognized as essential partners in enhancing accessibility and inclusion within higher education. They offer tailored resources such as assistive technologies, adaptive learning materials, and personalized guidance to ensure that students with disabilities can effectively access and utilize library resources (Chopra, Patel, Rajput & Bansal, 2024). Furthermore, collaboration between library staff and educators is crucial for developing comprehensive strategies that address the unique needs of these students. This partnership allows libraries to understand and implement best practices in document accessibility and resource provision, ensuring that all materials meet the diverse requirements of learners with disabilities (Purnomo et al., 2024). By creating an inclusive environment, university libraries not only facilitate academic success for students with disabilities but also promote a culture of equity and respect within the academic community.

Meanwhile, public libraries play a crucial role in promoting social inclusion and literacy through various community programs that address diverse educational and social needs. These libraries act as inclusive spaces where individuals from different backgrounds can access free resources, educational materials, and skill-building opportunities, fostering equality and

participation within communities (Igarashi, Koizumi & Johnston, 2023). They also contribute to reducing social inequality by organizing programs that enhance digital literacy, promote cultural outreach, and encourage lifelong learning (Thompson, Jaegar, Taylor, Subramaniam & Bertot, 2014). Furthermore, libraries create spaces for collaborative learning and social engagement, which help marginalized groups, such as immigrants and low-income individuals, integrate into society (Lee, 2024). By fostering these community connections, public libraries not only improve individual literacy levels but also enhance social cohesion and empowerment through shared experiences (Thompson et al., 2014). As such, libraries serve as incubators of social inclusion by offering accessible education and promoting peaceful co-existence among diverse populations (Tibbits & Keet, 2023).

The Research Gap

Despite growing awareness of inclusive education and assistive technologies in academic libraries, several areas require further exploration to ensure the full participation of students with special needs. One key research gap lies in evaluating the effectiveness of assistive technologies (AT) in fostering learning outcomes. Although libraries are increasingly equipped with these technologies, such as screen readers and Braille displays, studies are still needed to assess how well these tools enhance students' academic success and engagement (Mahoney & Hall, 2017).

Additionally, research must explore the practical challenges librarians face when implementing inclusive services. Barriers such as insufficient staff training, limited funding, and inadequate infrastructure continue to hinder the adoption of AT in libraries (Lee, 2024). Further studies could investigate the specific training needs of library staff to ensure that they can effectively support students with various disabilities.

Finally, while much of the existing literature addresses AT availability in developed countries, research is limited to how libraries in low-resource settings, particularly in developing countries, can provide inclusive services. Comparative studies between regions can shed light on best practices and sustainable strategies for integrating inclusive technologies across diverse socio-economic contexts (Mahoney & Hall, 2017). Addressing these research gaps will contribute to more equitable and accessible library environments worldwide.

Challenges Faced by Libraries

Funding and staffing constraints pose significant challenges to the effective delivery of library services. Limited financial resources restrict libraries from investing in new technologies, expanding collections, and offering innovative services, which directly impacts the quality-of-service delivery. For example, the incorporation of assistive technologies in academic libraries, necessary for supporting students with disabilities, is often limited by budgetary constraints (Lee, 2024). Without adequate funding, libraries struggle to keep up with technological advancements and ensure inclusive access for all users.

In addition to funding challenges, staffing shortages are another critical issue. Libraries require skilled professionals who can manage digital resources, support research, and provide specialized assistance. However, insufficient staffing reduces the ability of libraries to deliver personalized services and affects the overall efficiency of operations (Mahoney & Hall, 2017). This shortage also makes it difficult to provide adequate training to existing staff, which is crucial for adapting to the evolving needs of users.

Libraries in developing countries face even greater difficulties in addressing these constraints. With limited budgets, they often rely on outdated technologies and operate with minimal staff, which hinders their ability to support academic and community needs effectively (UNICEF, n.d.). These challenges highlight the need for sustainable funding models and capacity-building initiatives to ensure that libraries can continue to provide essential services to their communities.

Addressing the need for more inclusive library spaces and digital resources is crucial for fostering information literacy among students with special needs. Libraries are increasingly recognizing their roles as inclusive spaces that cater to diverse community needs. This includes creating physical environments that are accessible to individuals with disabilities and providing digital resources that can be easily navigated by all users, including those with varying cognitive and physical abilities (Brannen, Milewski & Mack, 2017).

Moreover, the development of assistive technologies within libraries plays a vital role in enhancing accessibility. These technologies empower users with disabilities to engage with digital resources, participate in programs, and utilize library services effectively resources (Potnis & Mallary, 2021). Libraries are also encouraged to adopt inclusive programming practices that cater to the specific needs of students with special needs, which can enhance their overall learning experience and foster a sense of belonging within the community (Kong, 2008).

Ultimately, promoting inclusivity in library spaces and resources is not just about compliance with accessibility standards; it is about creating an environment where all students can thrive and develop their information literacy skills, thus bridging the gap between diverse learning needs and available resources (OECD Education, 2021).

The Relevant Studies & Best Practices

Libraries play a pivotal role in promoting literacy among students with special needs by providing access to tailored resources and inclusive learning environments. Research by Lee (2024) highlights that libraries are instrumental in improving academic outcomes for students with learning disabilities (LDs). Through personalized learning materials and targeted interventions, libraries help these students overcome educational challenges, enhancing their literacy levels and overall academic performance. This sentiment is echoed by teachers who have observed positive literacy growth among their students when given access to appropriate resources and programs.

Further studies emphasize the social dimension of literacy development facilitated by libraries. Ronning (2024) points out that inclusive library programs foster participation and social inclusion, helping students with disabilities engage with their peers and community. Despite these benefits, some challenges persist, as not all libraries are equipped to fully address the needs of children with disabilities. Similarly, Abu Qaadan et al. (2024) found that while libraries provide essential academic support, students with disabilities sometimes encounter physical or organizational barriers that limit access to services, underscoring the need for continuous improvements in library accessibility.

Libraries have implemented various strategies to ensure accessibility and inclusivity for all users, including those with disabilities. A common approach is creating physical infrastructure that facilitates access, such as ramps, elevators, and wheelchair-accessible desks, allowing individuals with mobility challenges to use library spaces independently (Ronning, 2024). Additionally, libraries provide accessible resources like audiobooks, large-print materials, and assistive technologies, such as screen readers, to enhance information access for users with visual impairments or learning difficulties.

In Malaysia, libraries have actively implemented strategies to support literacy and inclusivity, especially for individuals with special needs. One successful strategy involves the use of tailored teaching methods in library instruction. Academic libraries in Malaysia adopt approaches like the flipped classroom model and research consultations, which offer more personalized learning experiences and allow students to learn at their own pace (Hassan, Abidin, Hashim, Yaacob & Fuzi, 2024).

Table 1: Summarizes Key Studies From 2021-2025 That Examine Information Literacy Among Special Needs Students

Authors	Year	Title	Method	Key Findings
Ronning, K.	2024	Inclusive Library Education for Students with Extensive Support Needs	Survey & Interviews	Libraries play a critical role in fostering information literacy for special needs students
Abu Qaadan et al.	2024	Facilitating digital accessibility for students with disabilities into information services at Jordanian academic libraries	Mixed Methods	Enhancing library accessibility significantly improves information literacy outcomes
Potnis, D., & Mallary, K.	2021	Analysing service divide in academic libraries for better serving disabled patrons using assistive technologies	Survey	The integration of assistive technologies enhances information literacy skills
Almulla, A. A., & Khasawneh, M. A.	2024	The role of libraries in raising the efficiency of students with special needs in academic performance from the point of view of teachers	Questionnaire	School libraries contribute significantly to developing information literacy among students with disabilities
Lee, P.	2024	Bridging cultural divides: The role of public libraries in Taiwan in enhancing cultural capital and promoting social inclusion	Case Study	Public libraries serve as essential community resources in fostering information literacy for special needs students
Hassan et al.	2024	Revitalizing Education in the 21st Century: The	Experimental Study	Library programs with tailored instructional

Evolution of the Flipped Classroom. Flipped Classrooms and Learning	strategies significantly improve information literacy among special needs students

Source: The authors

Recommendations for Future Practices

Research findings from 2021 to 2025 underscore the significance of assistive technologies, specialized library programs, and inclusive policies in improving information literacy outcomes (Ronning, 2024; Hassan et al., 2024; Lee, 2024). Studies suggest that well-structured library interventions can positively impact students' academic success and independent learning capabilities. However, gaps remain in the empirical examination of library effectiveness in supporting special needs students, particularly in the Malaysian context (Maslina, 2024; Purnomo et al., 2024).

This study builds upon existing literature by focusing on how libraries in Malaysia can develop more inclusive and effective information literacy programs. By identifying current challenges and proposing evidence-based strategies, this research aims to contribute to the development of a comprehensive framework that enhances the role of libraries in supporting students with special needs. Findings from this study will provide practical recommendations for policymakers, librarians, and educators to bridge the information literacy gap and promote equitable learning opportunities for all students.

Methodology

This study employs a narrative literature review approach, analysing existing studies on information literacy development among special needs students. The review synthesizes key themes, challenges, and best practices from the available literature. Relevant research articles, books, reports, and conference proceedings published from 2021 to 2025 were reviewed. The selection process focused on studies that specifically addressed libraries and information literacy for special needs students, as well as research discussing assistive technologies in library settings.

To maintain focus, studies that did not relate to libraries or information literacy were excluded. Articles discussing general education, but not specifically special needs students were also removed. A basic thematic analysis was applied to the selected studies to identify key trends, challenges, and best practices. Findings were then categorized based on theoretical frameworks, intervention strategies, and research gaps to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of libraries in fostering information literacy for students with special needs.

Conclusion

This study anticipates that libraries play a critical role in enhancing information literacy among students with special needs by providing accessible resources, assistive technologies, and tailored support services. The findings are expected to highlight the effectiveness of inclusive library programs in fostering academic success and independent learning among these students (Ronning, 2024). Additionally, the study may reveal gaps in library accessibility, particularly in Malaysia, where the integration of assistive technologies and librarian training remains inconsistent (Hassan et al., 2024). By identifying these challenges, the research aims to provide

evidence-based recommendations for improving library services and ensuring equitable access to information literacy development for all students, regardless of their disabilities (Lee, 2024).

Future research should explore the long-term impact of inclusive library programs on students with special needs, particularly in vocational education settings, where practical skills and independent learning are crucial (Maslina, 2024). Comparative studies between developed and developing countries could provide valuable insights into best practices for library services catering to students with disabilities (Purnomo et al., 2024). Furthermore, there is a need for empirical studies assessing how digital libraries, artificial intelligence (AI), and emerging assistive technologies can further enhance information literacy and support personalized learning experiences for special needs students (Chopra et al., 2024).

Lastly, future research should investigate the effectiveness of librarian training programs in equipping professionals with the skills necessary to support diverse learners. As digital transformation continues to reshape education, exploring the role of AI-driven accessibility tools and adaptive learning systems in library environments is essential (Frank, 2023). Additionally, policy-driven research should focus on developing national guidelines for inclusive library services, ensuring sustainable funding and capacity-building initiatives to improve accessibility for students with special needs (Hidayah et al., 2022). Strengthening cross-sector collaboration between educators, policymakers, and library professionals will be crucial in designing effective, inclusive literacy programs that empower students with disabilities to thrive academically and beyond.

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