

# Challenges and Barriers in Tahfiz Education for the Visually Impaired in Malaysia

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## ABSTRACT

Tahfiz education for the visually impaired (People with Disabilities - OKU) is increasingly gaining attention in contemporary Islamic education discourse, but its implementation still faces various challenges. This study aims to examine critical issues in tahfiz education for the visually impaired (OKU) in Malaysia based on an analysis of interviews with subject matter experts. The methodology of this study uses a qualitative approach with semi-structured interviews followed by reflexive thematic analysis. The analysis results indicate that there are five main issues hindering the effectiveness of inclusive tahfiz education. The five issues are: the absence of a feeder system at the secondary level, rigid entry requirements of tahfiz institutions, misalignment between the Malaysian Braille mushaf and the Madinah's mushaf, a shortage of trained specialist teachers in Braille Qur'anic pedagogy, and a societal mindset that still underestimates the potential of visually impaired students. Although policies such as the Zero Reject Policy and the Action Plan for Religious Agencies for Muslim Persons with Disabilities 2024–2028 have been established, their implementation at the institutional level is still not comprehensive. The discussion found that these issues are closely related to the structure of the education system, weaknesses in teacher training, and the psychosocial challenges faced by students. The article outlines several important strategies, including developing clear educational pathways, providing alternative admission assessments for tahfiz institutions, standardizing the Braille mushaf, enhancing teacher training, and encouraging community advocacy. This study concludes with a recommendation to strengthen multi-agency collaboration among the government, JAKIM, tahfiz institutions, NGOs, and the private sector to successfully achieve truly inclusive and sustainable tahfiz education. These findings have important implications for the development of Islamic education policies in Malaysia and contribute to the global literature on Quranic education for the visually impaired community.

**Keywords:** Tahfiz Education, Visually Impaired Persons with Disabilities (OKU), Inclusive Education, Braille Mushaf, Islamic Education Policy, Malaysia.

## INTRODUCTION

Quranic education for the visually impaired (People with Disabilities - OKU) is increasingly gaining attention in academic discourse and national education policy, but it still faces major challenges in terms of structure, institutions, and societal acceptance. Although Islamic history records have an outstanding visually impaired scholars such as Imam al-Syatibi (Rabitah Ulama Iritriya, 2020), the current reality shows that opportunities for inclusive tahfiz education remain limited. The most significant gap occurs at the secondary level where there is no feeder system connecting students from special primary or secondary schools to tahfiz institutions and higher education. This is further compounded by entry requirements that are equal to those for normal students, which restricts access for students with special needs. Efforts towards inclusive education have been driven by institutions such as the Ibnu Umami Maktum Research Center (UMMI) and non-governmental organizations like PERTIS, in addition to the production of the Malaysian Braille Mushaf Al-Quran by JAKIM, which standardizes the official Braille Quran at the national level.

However, the study findings show the existence of several constraints such as a shortage of trained teachers, limited support technology, and a societal mentality that still limits the learning potential of tahfiz students who

are visually impaired. Therefore, this article aims to examine the challenges and obstacles of tahfiz education for the visually impaired (OKU) based on an analysis of interviews with the experts. This study also discusses the role of national inclusive education policies such as the Zero Reject Policy and the Action Plan for Religious Agencies for Muslim Persons with Disabilities 2024–2028 and summarizes recommendations towards building a more inclusive and sustainable tahfiz education system.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the 1994 Salamanca Declaration, inclusive education has been a worldwide priority, emphasizing the need to ensure Education for All. UNESCO (2020) stresses that inclusive education is vital for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, especially SDG 4, which focuses on quality education. In Malaysia, the Zero Reject Policy by the Ministry of Education Malaysia (2018) guarantees that all students, including persons with disabilities (OKU), have the right to be admitted to mainstream schools. Meanwhile, the *Action Plan for Religious Agencies for Muslim with Disabilities 2024–2028* (Department of Islamic Development Malaysia [JAKIM], 2024) strengthens the commitment of religious institutions to expand inclusive education based on Islamic principles.

From a local perspective, several studies show several critical issues in Quranic education for the visually impaired (OKU). Raus et al. (2013) highlighted the inconsistency in teaching the Braille Qur'an before the Malaysian Braille Mushaf was introduced. More recently, Rasdi et al. (2024) pointed out a misalignment between the Braille Mushaf and the Madinah Mushaf, which may disrupt students' memorization. Tengku Puji, Mohd Noor, and Sabaruddin (2015) looked into early efforts to improve Qur'anic education for visually impaired students and suggested standardizing the curriculum. Pedagogical and technological advances have also made a significant difference. For example, Othman et al. (2024) evaluated the *Abahata* method's success in helping visually impaired students master the Braille Qur'an, while Zulkifli et al. (2022) emphasized the need for teacher training and innovative teaching aids. Ahmad, Wan Zahari, and Kirin (2020) showed that the study of hadith for visually impaired students requires modifications in the delivery methodology.

International studies reveal different challenges and approaches. The power of self-regulation (internal motivation, time management, cognitive strategies) becomes the main driver of success for visually impaired Quran memorizers. This is based on in-depth interviews with eight visually impaired huffaz (Taufik et al., 2022; Gani, 2024). In Indonesia, Gani's (2024) study shows that a specialized tahfizh teaching and learning design (structured planning, sensory/auditory training, strengthening review muraja'ah) is seen to improve the memorization quality of visually impaired students. Meanwhile, in Pakistan, a lack of training, teaching aids, and facilities has been identified as the main obstacles to Quran teaching and learning for visually impaired students (Iqbal, 2024). In the context of Malaysia, Asmilyia, Noor & Dahnil (2022) emphasize the challenges of religious literacy among the visually impaired Muslim community as well as community-based solution strategies. Awang, Abdul Rani, and Kway (2024) argue that inclusive education is only effective when supported by trained specialist teachers, a disability-friendly curriculum, and a stable, supportive education system.

Overall, the literature review shows that tahfiz education for visually impaired individuals is still at a crossroads between increasingly strong inclusive policies and the reality of ongoing practical challenges. Local studies emphasize the issues of non-uniform Braille mushafs, lack of specialist teachers, and limited pedagogy, while international studies from Turkey, Indonesia, and Pakistan show that the effectiveness of tahfiz education for visually impaired individuals greatly depends on the balance between internal aspects of the students, such as self-regulation, and external aspects of the education system, such as teacher training, availability of teaching aids, and an inclusive curriculum structure. Earlier research emphasizes that community-driven initiatives, adaptable teaching methods, and solid institutional support are key to enhancing memorization quality and ensuring the long-term success of tahfiz education for students with special needs. These findings align with the interview analysis of this study, which highlights the main issue of gaps at the secondary level due to the absence of a feeder system, equal admission requirements as typical students, and societal and parental mindsets that still limit the potential of visually impaired students. Therefore, there is an urgent need to develop an inclusive, structured, and comprehensive tahfiz education model through collaboration between government policies, religious institutions, and the community.

## METHODOLOGY

Methodology is the main pillar in ensuring the rigor, reliability, and validity of an academic study. Choosing the right methodology not only shapes how data is collected and analyzed but also ensures that the research approach aligns with the study's objectives. In this case, a qualitative approach is particularly effective, as it allows the researcher to delve into the complex experiences, perceptions, and social contexts shared by expert informants. This method aligns with the study's goal—not just to measure phenomena, but to uncover the underlying meanings, challenges, and potential solutions shared by the experts. Therefore, the selection of semi-structured interview methods with reflective thematic analysis is considered the most suitable method to provide a comprehensive overview of the issues and challenges faced in inclusive tahfiz education. A detailed explanation of the research methodology is further elaborated in the following subtopics.

### 1. Study Design

This study uses a qualitative approach in the form of semi-structured interviews with reflexive thematic analysis. This approach was chosen because it is suitable for exploring the meanings, experiences, and underlying rationale in the complex context of tahfiz education for visually impaired individuals.

### 2. Location and Participants

Data collection was conducted within the Islamic-OKU education ecosystem in Malaysia, centered at the Ibnu Ummi Maktum Research Center (UMMI). This context was chosen because UMMI serves as an active research and training node on Braille Quran issues and inclusive education. The participants consisted of two expert informants (purposeful expert sampling). Among the criteria were 5 years of experience in Islamic/OKU education, direct involvement in curriculum design/training/standardization of Braille Quran, and willingness to allow the use of data for academic purposes.

### 3. Sample Size and Saturation Rationale

Although the number of participants is small, this qualitative study focuses on depth rather than statistical generalization. Empirical evidence shows that saturation of basic themes is usually reached around 6–12 interviews in homogeneous studies. Therefore, two experts with systemic roles can provide sufficient depth for the research questions.

### 4. Interview Protocol and Instruments

The interview guide was developed based on the literature of inclusive education, Braille Quran standardization, and institutional practices. The core questions cover the direction and structural gaps, admission requirements of tahfiz institutions, the roles of UMMI/PERTIS/JAKIM, Braille Mushaf standardization, teacher competencies and support technology, perceptions of parents/community, and policy recommendations.

### 5. Data Collection Procedures

The interviews were conducted in Bahasa Melayu, audio-recorded with permission, and transcribed verbatim.

### 6. Data Analysis

The analysis followed Braun & Clarke's six phases: data familiarization, initial inductive-deductive coding, code grouping, theme review, theme definition and naming, and analytical narrative writing with representative excerpts.

### 7. Trustworthiness

The quality of the study is ensured through several criteria that is credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability.

## FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The interviews with subject matter experts revealed that tahfiz education for visually impaired individuals in Malaysia is still at a stage that requires structural and implementation system strengthening. One of the most prominent issues is the absence of a feeder system at the secondary level, which causes visually impaired students to face difficulties in continuing their tahfiz studies after completing special education at the primary level. This situation underscores a gap between policy and implementation, as highlighted by Asmilyia, Noor, and Dahnail (2022), who identified the lack of continuity in education as a significant obstacle to enhancing religious literacy among visually impaired Muslims in Malaysia. This situation also proves that although policies such as the *Zero Reject Policy* and the *Action Plan for Religious Agencies for Muslim Persons with Disabilities 2024–2028* have been introduced, their implementation is still not fully inclusive at the level of tahfiz education institutions (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2018; JAKIM, 2024).

In addition, rigid admission requirements at mainstream tahfiz institutions have also been identified as a major barrier. According to subject matter experts, assessments that use the same criteria as for typical students prevent visually impaired students (OKU) from being accepted, even though they possess strong memorization skills and high motivation. These findings align with the work of Awang, Abdul Rani, and Kway (2024), who emphasize that the success of inclusive education relies on a disability-inclusive curriculum, qualified specialist teachers, and ongoing support systems. In this context, experts also recommend that tahfiz institutions assess students based on memorization potential as well as cognitive and sensory abilities, rather than solely on academic performance.

The issue of Braille mushaf standardization also became a major focus in the study findings. Subject matter experts pointed out that the Malaysian Braille Mushaf, which isn't fully aligned with the Madinah Mushaf, creates difficulties for students trying to maintain consistency in memorization. This concern is echoed by Rasdi (2024), who highlights that the lack of standardization between different Mushafs results in variations in reading symbols and sentence structures between local and international versions. This highlights the urgent need for global efforts to standardize Braille mushafs so that visually impaired students can follow memorization more accurately and systematically.

Next, the shortage of specialist teachers in Braille Quran is also identified as a major barrier. Subject matter experts emphasize that most mainstream tahfiz teachers are not specifically trained to teach visually impaired students, which reduces the effectiveness of teaching and learning (PdP). These findings are supported by studies from Zulkifli et al. (2022) and Othman et al. (2024), which emphasize the vital role of teacher training and innovative teaching tools—such as the *Abahata* method—in enhancing Qur'an education for visually impaired students.

Lastly, the findings also reveal that societal attitudes and perceptions remain the greatest social challenge in strengthening tahfiz education for visually impaired individuals. Subject matter experts believe that stereotypical perceptions still exist among parents and the community that visually impaired students have limited potential in careers and life. This perception weakens both moral support and access to further learning opportunities. These findings are consistent with Taufik et al. (2022) and Gani (2024), who argue that the success of visually impaired students in memorization depends not only on internal factors like motivation and self-regulation, but also on external support systems, including social encouragement, access to learning resources, and institutional recognition.

Overall, the interviews with subject matter experts reveal that the main challenges facing tahfiz education for visually impaired students in Malaysia arise from structural, pedagogical, and socio-psychological factors. These findings are in line with international research that underscores the need to balance internal factors—like student motivation and cognitive strategies—with external supports such as an inclusive curriculum, well-trained teachers, and strong community involvement. Therefore, a collaborative approach between government agencies, religious institutions, and the community is a key necessity in shaping a truly inclusive and sustainable tahfiz education ecosystem.

The summary of this sub-topic can be seen in Table 1.0 below.



| Main Issue                         | Explanation   | Strategic Recommendation   |
|------------------------------------|---|--|
| No feeder system                   | No continuity from special schools to tahfiz institutions | Develop structured education pathways                                |
| <b>Rigid admission criteria</b>    | Same standards as typical students limit access           | Use alternative assessments based on memorization and sensory skills |
| <b>Braille Quran inconsistency</b> | Differences with Madinah's mushaf hinder memorization     | Standardize Braille Quran nationally and internationally             |
| Lack of expert teachers            | Mainstream teachers lack Braille Quran training           | Provide inclusive pedagogy and Braille technology training           |
| Negative societal perception       | Parents and communities underestimate students' potential | Launch awareness and advocacy programs                               |

Table 1.0: Summary of Findings and Strategic Recommendations

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study show that tahfiz education for visually impaired individuals in Malaysia still faces complex structural and policy implementation challenges. The absence of a feeder system connecting special primary and secondary schools with tahfiz institutions or higher education causes special needs students to lose continuity in formal education. This indicates that the Zero Reject Policy (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2018) and the Action Plan for Religious Agencies for Muslim Persons with Disabilities 2024–2028 (JAKIM, 2024) have not yet fully achieved their intended goal of comprehensive inclusivity. These findings support the views of Asmilyia, Noor, and Dahnil (2022), who stated that the implementation gap between policy and practice causes the visually impaired Muslim community to still face difficulties in accessing structured religious education. Theoretically, this phenomenon can be explained through Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which emphasizes the influence of microsystems (institutions) and macrosystems (policies) in shaping balanced educational opportunities.

Furthermore, the rigid admission criteria in mainstream tahfiz institutions reveal a tension between conventional merit-based standards and the necessity for flexible, adaptive teaching approaches. Applying uniform assessment standards without considering sensory abilities and alternative learning methods often prevents visually impaired students from continuing their memorization studies. This perspective is backed by researchers such as Awang, Abdul Rani, and Kway (2024), who emphasize that effective inclusive education depends on a flexible curriculum, specialized teacher training, and strong support systems. Other studies such as Gani (2024) in Indonesia and Taufik et al. (2022) in Malaysia emphasize that the effectiveness of memorization among visually impaired students is closely related to self-regulation, auditory strategies, and institutional community support.

The findings also highlight the issue of misalignment between the Malaysian Braille mushaf and the Madinah's mushaf. This misalignment affects the accuracy of memorization and recitation. This challenge demands serious attention as it involves the epistemological aspects and the *sanad* (chain of transmission) of the Quran. Rasdi et al. (2024) highlight that standardizing the Braille mushaf goes beyond a technical matter—it also plays a crucial role in ensuring consistency in recitation and memorization practices across the international tahfiz system. Therefore, efforts to establish a standard harmonization framework for the Braille mushaf between Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Middle East become a strategic step to ensure uniformity of qiraat knowledge and the global tahfiz sanad.

At the same time, the findings regarding the shortage of specialist teachers reinforce previous findings by Zulkifli et al. (2022) and Othman et al. (2024), which emphasize that teacher training and innovations in teaching aids

are key to ensuring the effectiveness of Braille Quran teaching and learning. Mastery of specialized pedagogy and assistive technologies such as audio tactile learning and digital Braille readers has the potential to expand access and improve memorization performance. However, the absence of specialized training modules for mainstream tahfiz teachers results in teaching practices that remain conventional and unresponsive to the needs of visually impaired students.

Finally, socio-psychological factors and societal attitudes toward visually impaired students emerge as major challenges. Judging their abilities primarily by physical limitations can undermine their motivation and hinder their opportunities for personal development. These findings align with Bronfenbrenner's mesosystem, which explains that negative interactions between educational institutions and the local community can hinder the development of students' potential. Therefore, community-based advocacy programs and media campaigns need to be expanded to build positive perceptions of the abilities of visually impaired tahfiz students.

Overall, this discussion reinforces the idea that inclusive tahfiz education needs a holistic approach—one that balances policy, institutional frameworks, curriculum, technology, and community culture. The development of a sustainable tahfiz education model needs to be based on the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and multi-agency support, so that visually impaired students are not only accepted into the system but truly empowered as authentic and authoritative guardians of the Quranic heritage.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study asserts that tahfiz education for visually impaired persons in Malaysia is still at a transitional stage between the idealism of inclusive policies and the reality of limited implementation. Although various policies such as the *Zero Reject Policy* and the *Action Plan for Religious Agencies for Muslim Persons with Disabilities* 2024–2028 have strengthened the commitment to non-discriminatory access. However, the findings show that its implementation has not yet fully ensured continuity in formal education pathways. The absence of a clear pathway connecting special schools with secondary and higher tahfiz institutions creates a structural gap that restricts students' opportunities. Additionally, strict admission criteria in mainstream tahfiz schools, discrepancies in the Braille mushaf, and a lack of trained teachers present further obstacles for visually impaired students.

In this context, the findings of this study reinforce local and international findings such as those by Taufik et al. (2022) in Malaysia, Gani (2024) in Indonesia, and Iqbal (2024) in Pakistan. These studies consistently highlight that the success of tahfiz education for visually impaired students relies on a mix of internal factors—like self-regulation, spiritual motivation, and auditory techniques—and external supports such as teacher training, an adaptive curriculum, and backing from religious institutions. In line with Bronfenbrenner's ecological approach, inclusive tahfiz education requires synergy across multiple system layers (policy, institutions, community, and family) to ensure an educational environment that truly empowers visually impaired students.

In that regard, this study proposes several strategic measures to strengthen inclusive tahfiz education in Malaysia:

1. **Establishing a structured educational pathway (feeder system)** from special schools to higher tahfiz institutions to ensure continuity in Quranic learning.
2. **Developing alternative assessment mechanisms** for the admission of visually impaired students that consider their special sensory and cognitive abilities.
3. **Standardizing the Braille Mushaf of the Quran** between Malaysia and the Islamic world to ensure accuracy in memorization and international reference.
4. **Implementing continuous and certified tahfiz teacher training** focused on inclusive pedagogy, the use of assistive technology, and teaching and learning (PdP) innovations.
5. **Expanding community awareness programs and advocacy** to change perceptions of visually impaired students' potential as guardians of the Quranic heritage.

6. **Strengthening multi-agency collaborative networks** involving JAKIM, the Ministry of Education, Islamic NGOs, and private institutions to provide a sustainable and inclusive tahfiz education ecosystem.

The implementation of these recommendations will not only enhance the quality and inclusiveness of tahfiz education for visually impaired persons with disabilities but also contribute to achieving the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 4: Quality Education) and strengthen the maqasid shariah in ensuring the right to knowledge for all people, regardless of physical ability.

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