

Universal Design Learning-Based Support TKYM Model for Malaysian Autism-Inclusion Centers

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Abstract

The UDL3.0 Guidelines provide a rights-aligned, neurodiversity-affirming framework for designing genuinely inclusive learning environments. This paper introduces the UDL-based support TKYM Model for Malaysian autism-inclusion centers. To inspire professional development tailored to the unique needs of each center and district. A mixed-methods approach was employed, involving five administrators, five educators, and five therapists, data collected through questionnaires and interviews, and thematically analyzed: four-pillar framework integrating transformative access, knowledge co-construction, learning agency, and a multimodal environment. Although limited to the Klang Valley, it aligned with the application of SDG 4 & 10 across diverse autism-inclusion settings within the Malaysian autism-inclusion centers.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), TKYM Model, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) 3.0

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1.0 Introduction

Conventional specialized autism-inclusion centers predominantly prioritize behavioral compliance and deficit-based intervention models, systematically overlooking the holistic educational, social, and identity-affirming needs of autistic learners (Jordan et al., 2026). Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is the foundation of inclusive education; it is grounded in neuroscience research and is recognized as supporting neurodiverse learners (Sgambelluri et al., 2025). It is built on three interconnected principles that empower everyone to have agency over their own learning. The significance of this study lies in the UDL-based support TKYM model that Malaysian autism-inclusion centers can adopt to promote inclusivity in line with the SDGs (Priyadharsini V & Mary R S, 2024).

1.1 Problem Statement

The absence of a theoretically grounded, operationalized support model for Malaysian autism-inclusion centers in the development and design of learning programs and environmental progress constitutes the primary problem this paper addresses (Amira et al., 2023). Existing approaches to UDL in autism-inclusive settings have promising outcome data (Guo & Wang, 2025), yet these applications remain context-agnostic, neither tailored to autism-specific developmental needs nor adapted to the institutional architecture of the

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Malaysian special education system. At the same time, neurodiversity-affirming frameworks such as Autistic SPACE (McGoldrick et al., 2023) and rights-based obligations under SDGs 4 and 10 call for educational models that actively advance equity and identity affirmation, rather than merely provide access accommodations. The TKYM Model is proposed in direct response to this convergence of unmet needs.

1.2 Research Aim and Objectives

The aim of this paper is to present the conceptual architecture of the TKYM Model, outline its potential outcomes, and propose validation for related personnel, educators, and therapists for pilot implementation. Specifically, three objectives are pursued: 1) To synthesize the international literature on UDL in autism-inclusive education settings, with particular attention to the Malaysian policy context, 2) To establish the theoretical foundation of the TKYM Model across UDL3.0, neurodiversity-affirming, and rights-based frameworks, and 3) To articulate the TKYM Model's four-pillar structure and its alignment with UDL3.0 principles, SDG 4, and SDG 10.

1.3 Significance of the Study

This paper makes two contributions to the field. Theoretically, it advances the application of UDL3.0's new identity dimension as a standalone operational pillar, departing from prior UDL-based autism models that treat identity as a background variable rather than an active design driver. Practically, it addresses a documented policy-practice gap in Malaysian autism-inclusive education, offering practitioners, policymakers, and researchers a structured, rights-aligned framework that is simultaneously responsive to the Malaysian institutional context. The model's explicit alignment with SDG 4 and SDG 10 positions autism-inclusive education reform within sustainable development commitments, advancing the argument that it is not merely a domestic policy concern but a global educational obligation.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The TKYM Model is built and grounded in four convergent theoretical traditions that, taken together, create a robust framework for UDL-based autism-inclusive education in the Malaysian context: a) UDL3.0, b) Vygotsky's ZPD, c) Neurodiversity Paradigm, and d) Self-Determination Theory. These traditions do not operate independently within the model; rather, they function as mutually reinforcing layers that inform the design of each of the four TKYM pillars – Transformative Access Pathways (T), Knowledge Co-Construction (K), Yielding Learning Agency (Y), and Multimodal Environment Design (M).

2.1.1 Universal Design for Learning (UDL) 3.0

UDL3.0 serves as the primary theoretical anchor for the TKYM model. It provides a comprehensive set of guidelines for designing learning environments and instructional practices that are accessible and effective for autistic learners. The TKYM model specifically integrates UDL's three core principles: The first principle is Multiple Means of Engagement. The TKYM Model's "Yielding Learning Agency" and "Multimodal Environmental Design" components directly address this by fostering motivation, self-regulation, and interest through varied, engaging activities and flexible learning environments. The second principle is Multiple Means of Representation. "Knowledge Co-Construction" and "Multimodal Environmental Design" resonate with this information by presenting it in diverse formats (auditory, visual, tactile) to cater to different learning styles and sensory preferences often seen in autism. And the third principle is Multiple Means of Action & Expression. "Transformative Access Pathways" and "Yielding Learning Agency" support this by providing various methods for learners to demonstrate their abilities, e.g., accommodating different communication and performance abilities.

2.1.2 Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

Vygotsky's ZPD underscores the importance of social interaction and guided learning. The TKYM Model incorporates this theory by emphasizing scaffolding through Knowledge Co-Construction, which encourages collaborative learning and peer/educator support to help learners master tasks slightly beyond their independent capabilities. The model promotes active engagement and shared understanding within the learning environment, recognizing that learning is a social process.

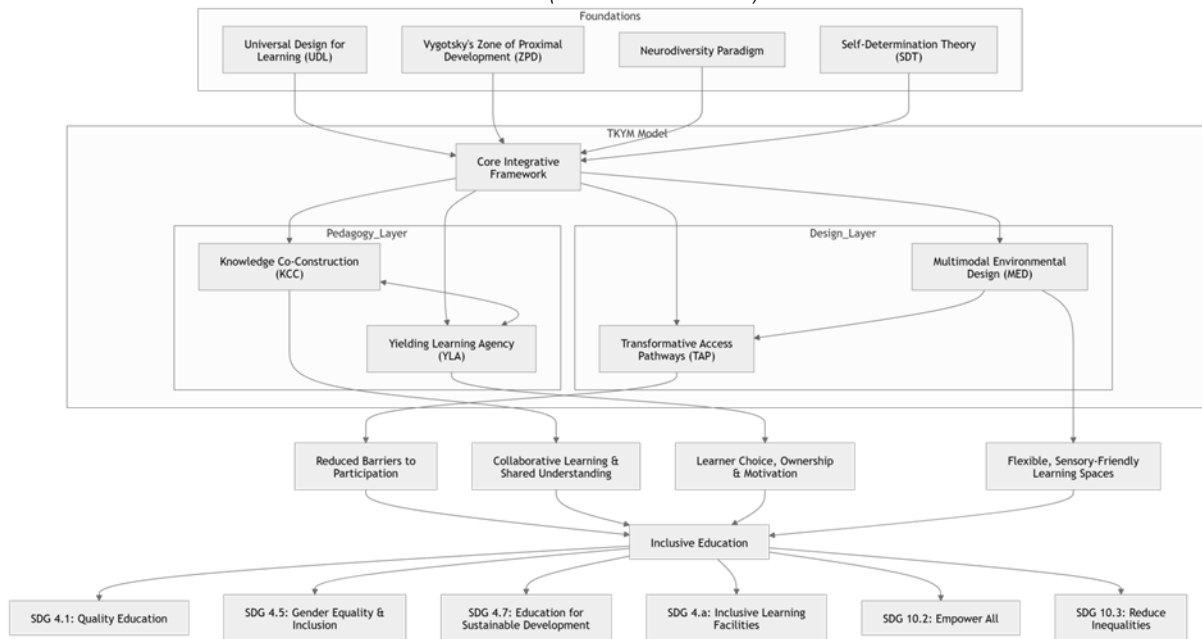
2.1.3 Neurodiversity Paradigm Theory

This theory shifts the perspective from viewing autism as a deficit to recognizing it as a natural variation of human brain function. It aligns with the TKYM Model by a strengths-based approach and acceptance and inclusion. The entire model is designed to create an environment where neurodiverse individuals are valued and fully included. It focuses on leveraging the unique strengths and perspectives of individuals with autism, and, from there, promoting an understanding and appreciation of diverse ways of thinking and learning.

2.1.4 Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

SDT focuses on intrinsic motivation and the psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The TKYM Model supports self-determination by a) autonomy: "Yielding Learning Agency" in autonomy empowers learners to make choices, based on their interest giving direction on their learning, b) competence: the model's emphasis on accessible pathways and mastery-oriented activities helps learners develop a sense of achievement and belief in their abilities, and c) relatedness: "Knowledge Co-Construction" and the overall inclusive design promote a sense of belonging and positive engagement relationships within the learning community.

Fig. 1: TKYM Model Theoretical Framework
(Source: Author Collection)



2.2 Conceptual Framework

The TKYM Model is designed for Malaysian autism-inclusion centers and aligns with key Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to achieve broader societal impact. It combines theoretical foundations with a practical, comprehensive approach. It aims to create an inclusive, equitable, and empowering experience for autistic learners. Each component of the TKYM Model is intrinsically linked to the theoretical framework and collectively works towards the goals of genuine autism inclusion.

2.2.1 Transformative Access Pathways (TAP)

This component focuses on proactively identifying and removing systemic, physical, and pedagogical barriers to participation. It ensures that learning materials, activities, and communication methods are accessible from the outset. Directly supported by UDL3.0, multiple means of action and expression, ensuring diverse ways for learners to navigate and engage with the curriculum. It also aligns with the Neurodiversity Paradigm by recognizing and accommodating diverse processing styles.

2.2.2 Knowledge Co-Construction (KCC)

This emphasizes collaborative learning, where knowledge is not merely transmitted but actively constructed through interaction among learners, educators, therapists, and peers. It involves shared inquiry, problem-solving, and mutual understanding. Strongly rooted in Vygotsky's ZPD, promoting learning through social interaction and scaffolding. It aligns with UDL 3.0's multiple means of engagement by making learning a participatory, socially relevant experience.

2.2.3 Yielding Learning Agency (YLA)

This component empowers mild-level autistic learners to take ownership of their learning journey. It provides opportunities for choice and self-direction, fostering intrinsic motivation and self-regulation. It is directly derived from Self-Determination Theory, nurturing autonomy, competence, and relatedness. It aligns with UDL3.0 multiple means of engagement by supporting self-regulation and encouraging self-advocacy.

2.2.4 Multimodal Environmental Design (MED)

This refers to the intentional creation of physical and digital learning environments that offer diverse sensory inputs, flexible arrangements, and support for various communications and learning preferences. It considers acoustics, visual stimuli, tactile elements, and digital tools. It is closely tied to UDL3.0: multiple means of engagement, and multiple means of action & expression. It also respects the sensory processing differences highlighted by the Neurodiversity Paradigm Theory.

Table 1: TKYM Model Alignment with UDL 3.0 & SDG (4 & 10)

TKYM Pillar	UDL-3.0 Principle		SDG Contribution / Target
T	Transformative Access Pathways	Design Multiple Means of Representation – The “What” of learning	SDG 4.1(free, equitable quality education); SDG 4.a (inclusive learning environments); and SDG 10.2 (empowerment of all)
K	Knowledge Co-construction	Design Multiple Means of Action & Expression – The “How” of learning	SDG 4.1 (quality learning outcomes); SDG 4.5 (eliminate disparities); and SDG 10.3 (equal opportunity)
Y	Yielding Learner Agency	Design Multiple Means of Engagement – The “Why” of learning	SDG 4.7 (sustainable development education); and SDG 10.2 (social, economic, political inclusion)
M	Multimodal Environment (Identity layer)	Closely tied to Design Multiple Means of Engagement, and Multiple Means of Action & Expression	SDG 4.a (safe, inclusive learning environments); SDG 10.2 (social inclusion); and SDG 10.3 (non-discriminatory policies)

Source: Author Collection

2.3 Review of Related Literature

Malaysia's inclusive education architecture reflects a structured but imperfectly implemented commitment to SEN provision. The three-tiered system of PPI (low support), PPKI (moderate support), and special education school (high support) theoretically covers the full range of autistic learners. As of 2023, 6,641 primary and secondary schools had PPI (MARF, 2023). However, enrolment numbers do not guarantee the quality of inclusion. Studies consistently document three structural deficits in Malaysian PPKI settings. These were teachers who lacked autism-specific and UDL-informed pedagogical training, environments that prioritized behavioral compliance over social and emotional inclusion, and a lack of a systematic UDL implementation framework. Comparative analysis with regional neighbors heightens the urgency of this gap. Singapore's inclusive education model, underpinned by the Compulsory Education Act and a dedicated teacher-training pathway in special education, demonstrates that Southeast Asian systems can achieve higher UDL-adjacent implementation fidelity when policy is accompanied by sustained professional development infrastructure. (Singapore Ministry of Education (SEED). However, Malaysia's Zero Reject Policy (2018) is commendable as a genuine commitment, but it has not been accompanied by the pedagogical frameworks or teacher capacity-building required to make inclusion substantive. This gap between legal entitlement and enacted inclusion is the institutional context TKYM is designed to address.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Paradigm

The development and validation of the TKYM Model employs a three-phase sequential mixed-methods design within a pragmatic epistemological paradigm. Pragmatism is adopted as the overarching philosophical stance because it prioritizes research utility, accommodates integration of quantitative and qualitative data, and is consonant with the application of inclusive education research. The three phases progress sequentially: 1) model conceptualization through systematic literature review, 2) structural validation through expert consensus, and 3) empirical evaluation through pilot implementation, which mirrors the sequential exploratory mixed methods typology.

3.2 Phase 1: Model Development – Systematic Literature Review

The TKYM Model's theoretical foundation was established through a systematic literature review in accordance with PRIMA2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021). Five databases were searched in ERIC, Scopus, Web of Science, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar for terms including universal design for learning, autism, inclusive education, neurodiversity, and SDG 4 and SDG 10. Inclusion criteria specified peer-reviewed articles published 2014-2025 addressing UDL implementation, and autism-inclusive practice. A documentary analysis of Malaysian policy instruments, including the Education Blueprint, Zero Reject Policy, and inclusive education operational guidelines, was conducted concurrently.

3.3 Phase 2: Expert Validation

A purposively selected panel of 15 stakeholders, comprising 5 administrators, 5 educators, and 5 therapists. Round 1 uses a Likert-scale questionnaire; Round 2 employs an open-ended questionnaire.

3.4 Phase 3: Pilot Implementation

The validated TKYM Model was piloted across 3 Malaysian autism-inclusive centers, purposively selected for geographic and socioeconomic diversity within the Klang Valley. The pilot sample included 50 autistic participants.

3.5 Data Collection Methods

Quantitative data collected using three instruments: a) the UDL Implementation Fidelity Scale; b) the Learner Engagement and Participation Scale; and c) a researcher-developed Inclusive Environment Quality Checklist aligned to TKYM's four pillars. Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with administrators, educators, and therapists at the midpoint and endpoint. SPSS and NVivo 15 are used to analyze.

3.6 Data Analysis

Quantitative analysis employs paired sample *t*-tests to assess pre- to post-changes in engagement and fidelity, with Cohen's *d* calculated for significant comparisons. Qualitative analysis employs thematic analysis managed in NVivo 15. Mixed methods integration will occur at the interpretation stage through a convergent joint display that compares quantitative outcomes with qualitative thematic findings.

3.7 Trustworthiness, Ethics, and Limitations

Trustworthiness is addressed through member checking, thick description, and peer debriefing. All participation is voluntary, with accessible consent and assent procedures. Acknowledged limitations include a small purposive sample, a single-country scope, potential self-report bias in fidelity measures, and the short duration, which limits the ability to capture long-term developmental outcomes.

4.0 Findings

Findings are reported across two phases: Phase 1 presents quantitative survey results from 50 participants at private autism-inclusion centers in the Klang Valley, Malaysia; Phase 2 presents qualitative findings from 15 semi-structured interviews with administrators, educators, and therapists. Data from both phases are triangulated to construct an integrated understanding of UDL readiness, implementation barriers, and TKYM Model applicability within the Malaysian private autism-inclusive education context.

4.1 UDL Implementation Readiness Across TKYM Pillars

Table 4 presents descriptive statistics for the 32-item UDL Implementation Readiness Scale, organized according to the four TKYM pillars (Likert scale: 1 = Not at all implemented, 5 = Fully implemented). A mean score of ≤ 3.00 is interpreted as indicating implementation levels requiring systematic, structured intervention, consistent with thresholds established by Rose and Meyer (2002).

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics: TKYM Pillar Implementation Readiness (n = 50, Likert scale 1–5)

TKYM Pillar	UDL 3.0 Component	Items (n)	M	SD	Readiness Level
T — Transformative Access	Multiple Means of Representation	8	3.15	0.82	Moderate
K — Knowledge Co-construction	Multiple Means of Action & Expression	8	2.94	0.79	Below Moderate
Y — Yielding Learner Agency	Multiple Means of Engagement	8	2.61	0.88	Low–Moderate
M — Multimodal Environmental Design	UDL 3.0 Identity & Environment Layer	8	3.08	0.74	Moderate
Overall UDL Implementation	All Three Principles	32	2.87	0.91	Below Moderate

Note. M = mean; SD = standard deviation. Readiness levels: 4.00–5.00 = High; 3.00–3.99 = Moderate; 2.00–2.99 = Below Moderate; 1.00–1.99 = Low. Scale adapted from Meyer et al. (2014) and Rose and Meyer (2002).

Source: Author Collection

The overall UDL implementation mean ($M = 2.87$, $SD = 0.91$) indicates that the participating centers, as a group, have not yet reached even a moderate level of implementation across any of the four TKYM pillars. The Y pillar (Yielding Learner Agency, $M = 2.61$, $SD = 0.88$) registered the lowest readiness score, indicating that the systematic cultivation of autistic learner self-determination and agency is the most critically under-implemented dimension of inclusive practice across the sample. Wehmeyer (2003) identifies self-determination as simultaneously the most impactful and the most neglected outcome in special education — a pattern this study confirms in the Malaysian private-sector context.

The T pillar (Transformative Access, $M = 3.15$) and M pillar (Multimodal Environmental Design, $M = 3.08$) registered the comparatively highest scores, suggesting that centers have made greater progress on physical and environmental dimensions of inclusion — consistent with the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025's investment in accessible infrastructure (MOE, 2013) — than on the pedagogical and agency dimensions measured by the K and Y pillars.

4.2 Qualitative Thematic Analysis Finding

Thematic analysis generated four practitioner themes aligned with the TKYM pillars. Across all themes, the defining characteristic of practice in Malaysian private autism-inclusion centers.

Table 4. Qualitative Thematic Analysis: Four Practitioner-Identified Themes and TKYM Pillar Alignment (n = 15)

Theme	TKYM Pillar	Sub-themes / Key Patterns	Illustrative Quote & Implication
1 Access Without Accommodation	T	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Physical access present; pedagogical accommodation absent Visual supports used inconsistently 	<p><i>"We have ramps and wide corridors, but our teaching materials are the same for everyone." — Educator, Center 3</i></p> <p>Implication: Transformative Access requires both environmental and curricular redesign.</p>
2 Compliance Over Co-construction	K	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Instruction predominantly compliance-based Assessment single-mode, summative 	<p><i>"Most of our sessions are one-to-one drills. There is no space for them to explore or build understanding with others." — Therapist, Center 1</i></p> <p>Implication: PD in collaborative pedagogy is a prerequisite, not an enhancement.</p>
3 Agency as Exception, Not Norm	Y	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learner choice offered ad hoc, not structurally embedded Self-regulation supports largely absent 	<p><i>"We sometimes let them choose their activity at the end of the day as a reward. Building in choice as a learning principle — that is not something we have been trained to do." — Administrator, Center 2</i></p> <p>Implication: Agency must be structurally embedded, not offered as an occasional privilege.</p>
4 Technology Present, Pedagogy Absent	M	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> AAC/visual schedules present but not systematically integrated Sensory spaces in only 3 of 10 centers 	<p><i>"We bought the AAC tablets two years ago. We have no policy. The environment looks inclusive, but it does not feel inclusive." — Educator, Center 3</i></p> <p>Implication: Multimodal design requires policy-level embedding and staff training, not merely tool procurement.</p>

Note. All quotations reproduced with informed consent; center names anonymized. Analysis conducted in NVivo 15. κ = Cohen's kappa

Source: Author Collection

5.0 Discussion

Collectively, Malaysian evidence indicates that UDL-aligned practices are present but fragmented across autism-inclusion centers. When TKYM elements are implicitly enacted through access redesign, multimodal instruction, or learners' flexible expression, this demonstrates improved engagement and agency. However, the absence of system-level coherence limits scalability and equity.

Malaysia's SDG4 progress report acknowledges persistent inclusion gaps, especially for learners with disabilities, confirming that policy intent has outpaced classroom transformation. From a TKYM perspective, this reveals a need to shift from compliance-driven inclusion toward transformative learning ecosystems that intentionally cultivate access, co-construction, agency, and environment as interdependent dimensions.

Importantly, Malaysian research consistently cautions against teacher-centric improvisation as a substitute for structured UDL capacity-building. Systematic reviews call for contextualized UDL training modules, signaling a clear pathway for institutional adoption of the TKYM Model as an organizing framework rather than an add-on.

Table 3: TKYM Model Four Pillar Architecture, Learner Outcomes with UDL 3.0 Alignment

Pillar	Full Name	UDL-3.0 Principle	Description	Learner Outcomes
T	Transformative Access Pathways	Representation - “What” of learning	This pillar systematically dismantles physical, sensory, and curricular barriers within autism-inclusion centers. Ensuring that all autistic learners are available regardless of support needs, can access content through multiple, flexible means. Strategies include sensory-sensitive classroom design, accessible digital materials, and the integration of assistive technology.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased transition readiness • Enhanced self-advocacy • Reduced learning anxiety
K	Knowledge Co-construction	Expression – “How” of learning	This pillar promotes participatory pedagogy in which autistic learners co-construct knowledge through collaborative tasks, peer networks, and flexible modes of expression. Educators act as facilitators rather than transmitters, positioning autistic learners as active epistemic agents.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved academic comprehension • Greater cross-modal access • Sustained knowledge retention • Equitable participation in discourse
Y	Yielding Learner Agency	Engagement - “why” of learning	This pillar cultivates intrinsic motivation, autonomy, and self-regulation in autistic learners. Through choice architecture, strengths-based learning plans, and goal-setting supports, learners develop the capacity to direct their own educational journeys, thereby moving beyond compliance toward genuine self-determination.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive autistic identity formation • Improved well-being and belonging • Reduced internalized stigma
M	Multimodal Environment (Identity layer)		This pillar addresses the physical, sensory, and cultural environments as active pedagogical variables. Sensory regulation zones, AAC tools, visual schedules, and culturally responsive practices collectively create spaces where autistic learners’ diverse neurological profiles are not merely accommodated but valued and celebrated.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduced sensory-related distress • Increased expressive communication • Higher assessment participation rates

Source: Author Collection

6.0 Conclusion & Recommendations

This paper presents the TKYM Model – a Universal Design, Learning-Based support framework for Malaysian autism-inclusion centers, as a theoretically grounded, right-aligned, and context-specific response to a documentation gap in the provision of inclusive education for autistic learners in inclusive environment centers. By integrating UDL 3.0, three classical principles with an explicit fourth dimension of learner identity and agency. TKYM advances the field beyond access to accommodation toward the cultivation of genuinely agentic, neurodiversity-affirming inclusion.

The model’s alignment with SDG4 and SDG 10 positions it not merely as a Malaysian policy instrument but as a contribution to the global discourse on disability-inclusive education reform. For Malaysian policymakers, TKYM offers an operationalized framework for translating the Zero Reject Policy’s rights commitments into inclusive classroom practice. For practitioners, it provides a structured, pillar-based implementation guide grounded in the strongest available evidence. For researchers, the proposed three-phase validation methodology offers a replicable model for developing context-specific UDL frameworks that can be applied to other national inclusive education systems in Southeast Asia and beyond.

Future research should prioritize full-scale multi-site validation following the proposed pilot, longitudinal evaluation of TKYM’s impact on post-school outcomes, and iterative co-design of model refinements with autistic learners and their families as central partners. The inclusion of autistic people not merely as research participants but as co-designers represents the logical next step in the model’s development, which was one that is both theoretically consistent with TKYM’s identity-affirming values and practically necessary for the model’s long-term relevance and legitimacy.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This research introduces the **TKYM Model**, comprising transformative access, knowledge co-construction, yielding learner agency, and multimodal environments. As a novel, theory-based framework for applying Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in **Malaysian autism-inclusion centers**. By demonstrating that the TKYM model improves learning outcomes and fosters **learner agency**, this study bridges the gap between theoretical inclusive pedagogy and classroom practice within the Malaysian socio-cultural context. Furthermore, the findings align localized educational strategies with global mandates, specifically advancing the **Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4 and SDG 10)** by promoting equitable quality education and reducing inequalities for autistic learners.

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