

---

Title Parental perspectives and challenges in inclusive education in Singapore  
Author(s) Meng Ee Wong, Kenneth K. Poon, Sarinajit Kaur and Zi Jia Ng  
Source *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 35(1), 85-97  
Published by Taylor & Francis

---

This document may be used for private study or research purpose only. This document or any part of it may not be duplicated and/or distributed without permission of the copyright owner.

The Singapore Copyright Act applies to the use of this document.

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis Group in *Asia Pacific Journal of Education* on 28/06/2013, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/02188791.2013.878309>

**Notice:** Changes introduced as a result of publishing processes such as copy-editing and formatting may not be reflected in this document. For a definitive version of this work, please refer to the published source.

**Parental Perspectives and Challenges in Inclusive Education in Singapore**

S1 Manuscript ID: CAPE-2012-0224.R3

Received: 2012-07-10

Accepted: 2013-06-28

**Author Information**

---

Dr Meng Ee Wong PhD (Corresponding Author)

Email: mengee.wong@nie.edu.sg

Affiliation 1:

National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Early childhood & Special Needs Education, 1 Nanyang Walk, Singapore, 637616 Singapore

---

Dr Kenneth K Poon Ph.D.

Email: kenneth.poon@nie.edu.sg

Affiliation 1:

National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Early childhood & Special Needs Education, 1 Nanyang Walk, Singapore, 637616 Singapore

---

Ms Sarinajit Kaur

Email: sarinajit.kaur@nie.edu.sg

Affiliation 1:

National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, Singapore

---

Miss Zi Jia Ng

Email: zijia85@gmail.com

Affiliation 1:

National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, Singapore

PARENTAL PERSPECTIVES AND CHALLENGES IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

**Abstract**

Relatively little work has focused on inclusive education in Singapore. This study examines the experiences and perceptions of parents whose children with disabilities are attending mainstream secondary schools in Singapore. Data was drawn from interviews with 13 parents of children with mild disabilities. Our findings reveal that parental perspective on inclusive education in Singapore is not only about classroom support but also reflects a deeper concern about whether their children with disabilities will emerge from school as contributing individuals in society. While parents strive to effectively include their children with disabilities in mainstream classrooms, there were dichotomies in their (a) understanding of disabilities, (b) expectations of school support, and (c) expectations for their child with disabilities. Given that academic and social prowess is a critical prerequisite to have a shot at entering the meritocratic Singapore society, the tension parents experience is to gauge a reasonable amount of pressure to exert on their children, the school and themselves as they assert their children's educational entitlements within an imperfect but evolving state of inclusion.

## **Parental Perspectives and Challenges in Inclusive Education in Singapore**

Inclusion generally describes the practice of “educating children with disabilities in regular classrooms of neighbourhood schools—schools which they would attend if they did not have a disability—and providing them with necessary services and support” (Rafferty, Boettcher, & Griffin, 2001, p. 266). However, for countries like Singapore where inclusion is still evolving, it is defined as “partial or full inclusion in regular classrooms, with the level of inclusion being dependent upon the severity and number of disabilities and the level of additional support available for that student” (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994, as cited in McNally, Cole, & Waugh, 2001, p. 258).

Parents play a pivotal role in the initiation and maintenance of support for inclusion. They have been the driving force behind the movement to include children with disabilities in mainstream education (De Boer, Pijl, & Minnaert, 2010). Moreover, there has been a growing recognition in the shift of parental involvement paradigm from the role of client to that of a collaborative partner (Ainscow, Howes, Farrell, & Frankham, 2003). Parents possess unique knowledge and experience of their child’s strengths (e.g., academic interests) and difficulties (e.g., behavioural problems). They offer valuable insight into the areas of needs and the best ways of supporting children with disabilities in schools.

### **Parents and Inclusion**

When there is societal pressure to ensure that their child is equally as good as or better than their neighbours, parents of children with disabilities experience a state of consternation upon learning the diagnosis of their child’s disability (Heiman, 2002). This includes the process of coming to terms with a significant loss of an idealised child, the ensuing denial, acceptance, and spontaneous and unpredictable repetition of the emotions at any time

(Rogers, 2007a). This early perspective underpins parenting experience and subsequently influences parental choice of education.

There is a wide range of opinions among parents about the placement of children with disabilities in educational settings (Palmer, Fuller, Arora, & Nelson, 2001). Parents who favour mainstream placement view inclusion as a platform for children with disabilities to establish positive interactions and friendships with typically developing peers, and to learn culturally appropriate behaviours and develop greater social skills (Scheepstra, Nakken, & Pijl, 1999; Turnbull, Turnbull, Shank, Smith, & Leal, 2002; Elkins, van Kraayenoord, & Jobling, 2003, O'Conner, 2007). Similarly, parents expect inclusion to boost the learning potential and educational attainment of children with disabilities given the greater cognitive stimulation and focus on academic curriculum—rather than basic life skills—in regular classrooms (Palmer et al., 2001; De Boer et al., 2010)

Parents who prefer separate placement express deep reservations about the practical implementation of inclusion, especially for children with moderate to severe behavioural or cognitive difficulties. They are apprehensive about the willingness and capacity of mainstream schools to manage and educate their child. Attitudinal barriers such as ill-informed stereotypical views of disability and prejudiced behaviours have a significant negative impact on the emotional development of children with disabilities (Bennett, DeLuca, & Bruns, 1997; Duhaney & Salend, 2000; De Boer et al., 2010). Similarly, pedagogical barriers such as limited resources, inadequate training in special needs, and lack of inclusive teaching practices (e.g., differentiated instruction, individualized learning strategies) leave children with disabilities unable to cope with curricular demands (Pivik, Mccomas, & Laflamme, 2002; Runswick-Cole, 2008). Though the challenges remain in ensuring that children with disabilities are not merely physically present in mainstream schools or confined to the periphery of school life, Swedeen (2009) continues to champion for authentic inclusion

where the entire staff and student body share parental expectations of children with disabilities being full and equal members of the school community.

Regardless of parental stance on the choice of education for children with disabilities, the push and pull seems to be a consequence of what Rogers (2007b) describes as “a denial of difficulty” (p. 60). Denial is present within inclusive education policies where the attempt to combine all differences and therefore deny or normalize aspects of learning or behavioural difficulties is apparent. Inclusive education has a normalizing effect, but to normalize is to deny the severity of difficulty, or indeed deny difference. Cohen (2001) suggests that “denial and normalization reflect personal and cultural states in which suffering is not acknowledged” (p. 52). Bearing in mind that it is not unusual for parents to hold onto an idealized image of their child (Rogers, 2007a), this situation describes parents seeking to “normalize” their child with disability. When normalization fails to deliver, special education becomes the pragmatic option. Yet what are the implications in a context where inclusive education policy is less explicit and overshadowed by socioeconomic principles that guide educational and human resource policies? Understanding such exclusionary structures is a precondition for more inclusive schooling in the future (Slee, 2011).

### **Education in Singapore**

For a small country without any natural resources, the government is clear that people are its only scarce resource that it has to nurture in order to compete in the world arena. Education in Singapore is the vehicle for nation building by producing a competent, adaptive and productive workforce and promoting social cohesion among the various ethnic groups (Kang, 2005). Two major ideologies guide Singapore education: meritocracy and multiculturism.

Supporting these ideologies is a competitive education system built on equality of opportunity regardless of race or economic status. There are opportunities for every child in

Singapore to undergo at least six years of general education. Primary education is compulsory for all children in Singapore but children with disabilities are exempted from this legislation. The mainstream school system features a national curriculum, with major national examinations at the end of the primary, secondary and pre-university years. After completion of primary education, students choose from a range of education institutions and programs that cater to different strengths and interests (Ministry of Education, 2011).

With the competitive education system converging towards a meritocratic Singapore society, stress-related issues in school achievement features prominently. Academic problems are cited as a common and constant source of stress for adolescents in Singapore (Huan, Yeo, Ang, & Chong, 2008). Perhaps one reason is that the Singapore education system seeks to inculcate values such as diligence, hard work, motivation, and high achievement in students from a very young age. Tan and Yates (2011) suggested that while Singapore embraces both eastern and western influences, it is still at heart an East Asian society in which Confucian values such as academic excellence predominate (Tan & Yates, 2011). This is evidenced by studies on Singaporean adolescents who attributed the highly stressful educational environment to the expectation and pressure to succeed in school with the goal of attaining a highly remunerated job and an equivalent socio-economic status (Ho & Yip, 2003; Isralowitz & Ong, 1990). Given the educational disadvantages associated with disability, parents of children with disabilities may experience dissonance in mainstream education where there is an overemphasis on academic achievement as opposed to the all rounded development of children. With so many factors at the heart of education in Singapore, it is imperative to understand the perspectives and concerns of parents of children with disabilities in mainstream schools.

### **Inclusion in Singapore**

As mentioned, Singapore does not have any legislation on the provision of special education or inclusion of students with disabilities in mainstream education (Lim & Nam, 2000; Poon, Musti-Rao, & Wettasinghe, 2013; Yeo, Neihart, Tang, Chong, & Huan, 2011). However, the Advisory Council for the Disabled (1988) recommended that “whenever appropriate and feasible, special education should be provided within the regular educational system. A child should only be placed in a special school if he cannot be well educated in a regular school” (pp. 37-38).

Yet the absence of legislation is not the only obstacle towards inclusion in Singapore. Lim and Tan (2001) identified three significant societal forces in the educational system that work towards against inclusion: (a) marketization of education system to foster competition, (b) risk-adverse attitudes of schools to decline inclusion as a negative impact on league tables, and (c) an elite-oriented educational system. With these underlying forces, special education in Singapore is organized along a continuum ranging from total segregation to partial integration to total inclusion. A child is placed anywhere along this continuum based on his or her abilities and needs (Lim & Nam, 2000). Students with moderate and severe disabilities are taught in one of 20 special schools (MOE, 2012). Students with mild disabilities, who are cognitively able to access mainstream curriculum, are part of the general education system with support.

An estimated 2.5% of school going children (or about 13,000) aged between 7 and 18 years are reported with disabilities (Enabling Masterplan, 2012). Of these, about 7,600 are estimated to be in mainstream schools and another 5,400 in special schools. The requirement for students to pass the Primary Six Leaving Examination in Singapore before being admitted to a secondary school implies that the number of students with disabilities in post-primary education is likely to be smaller.

Despite the absence of legislation or explicit doctrinal policy for disability provisions, Singapore introduced two major initiatives in 2005 to facilitate the inclusion process (Lim, Wong, & Tan, 2013). First, all primary schools and one-third of secondary schools are resourced with at least one Allied Educator (Learning and Behavioural support), or AED (LBS), who performs a role similar to that of a learning support staff in the United Kingdom (Department of Education, 2012). AED (LBS) are trained to support the learning and behavioural needs of children with disabilities via in-class support, individual or small group intervention (e.g. literacy skills, social skills, study and organizational skills), transition support as well as case management (MOE, 2012). Next, ten to twenty percent of teachers in each primary and secondary school are trained in special needs to meet the academic needs of these students. They provide individual or small group support within classroom; monitor the academic progress of students with disabilities; and share expertise and resources with other teachers and parents (MOE, 2012).

Although studies on inclusion are widely conducted in countries characterized by a more developed inclusive education system, their outcomes cannot be directly applied to Singapore whose system is still in its infancy (Poon, et al., 2012). Furthermore, there are few studies of parental attitudes and perspectives of inclusion in Singapore. This study contributes to the research literature by understanding the phenomenology of being a parent of a child with disabilities in a secondary school environment. This is timely as O' Connor (2007) pointed out that parents favour inclusion from a philosophical standpoint, but with the caveat that educational reform is necessary to meet to the growing demand for inclusive practices in schools. O'Connor (2008) also highlighted that parents want to be active and equally involved decision-makers in their child's education. Both trends are reflected in Singapore's evolving practice towards a more inclusive education.

## Method

### Sample

Thirteen parents of children with mild disabilities participated in this study. In four cases the child's mother and father were interviewed together. In other five cases the child's mother was interviewed alone. Of the 13 parents, ten were Chinese and three were Malay. Average educational attainment of the parents was 17 years (range, 12–21 years). The sample was made up of lower to upper middle income families, reflecting a general representation of the larger population. Children discussed in the interviews included six boys and three girls who were aged 14 to 17 years at the time of the study. Children's disabilities were first identified at an average age of 6 years (range, 2-10 years), and their diagnoses included autism spectrum disorder, dyslexia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, visual impairment, and complex medical condition (e.g., lupus, rickets). The nine children were students from two mainstream secondary schools which were identified by professionals (i.e., teachers, psychologists, and psychiatrists) and other parents of children with disabilities as good exemplars of an inclusive school (see Poon et al., 2012 for a description of schools).

### Materials

A semi-structured interview guide was developed to provide insight into parents' experiences and perspectives on inclusive education. To ensure consistency in the data collection process, all participants were asked the following questions: (a) how did you select your child's current placement, (b) how is your child coping emotionally in school, (c) how is your child doing academically, (d) how is your child supported in school, and (e) what are your child's current areas of need. Additional questions were posed to probe for more in-depth responses. Unlike the primary questions, probe questions were not asked verbatim and were adapted to facilitate the flow of the interview and enhance participant comprehension.

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of Nanyang Technological University and the Ministry of Education for the study. Prior the interviews, participants were provided with written and verbal explanations of the nature and purpose of the study, and assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of data to encourage candour and open sharing of information. Each interview lasted from 90 to 120 minutes. All the interviews were conducted in English, audio-taped, and transcribed verbatim for subsequent analysis. Pseudonyms were used for each participant to ensure anonymity.

### **Data analysis**

The constant comparative method introduced by Glaser and Strauss (1976) was employed to analyze the transcripts. The first and last authors independently read the interview transcripts and coded pertinent segments of the text which were relevant to research purposes. Following that, transcripts were re-read and the inductive category coding was refined through comparison with all data. The list of codes was then compared among coders. Discrepancies and redundancies were resolved via a discursive process. Finally, connections between codes were analyzed and related codes were clustered into core themes which were determined to be valid when they were endorsed by at least one-third of the study participants (5 or more of 13 parents).

### **Findings**

Three main themes (understanding of disabilities, expectations of child with disability, and expectations of school support) emerged during the interviews as factors that shape parental perspectives towards inclusive education in Singapore.

#### *Understanding of disabilities*

The parents interviewed in our study appear to have varying degrees of understanding of what constituted a disability for their child. Parents with little knowledge often defer to schools on important decisions about their child's education and have minimal expectations

of school support. The impact is significant if schools are limited in their capacity or less embracing of inclusive practices:

*Mrs. Jones (AED [LBS]) tries her best to support him [but] how they support that I don't know. Zack just told me [that] anything he goes to Mrs. Jones. We don't know what he does [there]. (Zack's father)*

Parents with considerable knowledge, on the other hand, can be adamant about the type and level of school support. They may be forceful in their push to gain opportunities and remove barriers for their child (e.g., flexible class attendance, personal teacher aide) and consequently create tension in home-school partnership:

*The school has tried as much as possible to accommodate him. That means for example he doesn't have to attend assembly; he doesn't have to attend pastoral care; he doesn't have to attend a lot of non-academic classes. (Calvin's Father)*

#### *Expectations for child with disability*

This perception of their child's disability appears to relate to differing expectations. Parents who have educational aspirations for their child view inclusion as an opportunity for them to stretch their learning potential and promote social mobility. They do not see their child's disability as an insurmountable barrier to academic excellence:

*We always remind him that whatever the sighted can do, he can also do. And we told him that he can even do better than them... we know he can achieve great things, so we are not going to let go. (Calvin's Father)*

Moreover, they tend to emphasize their child's "normality" (Rogers, 2007a) and make mild references to their disability (e.g., condition, difficulty), sometimes clinging onto the hope that their child's disability will be miraculously cured:

*That's why in my mind I keep asking "Is he really Asperger?" I keep asking that question... I still don't know is he really Asperger or is he just having problems in school? (Ivan's Mother)*

*"When my wife bought the white cane for him, I was very angry. I don't want him to be classified as blind... I believe one day he will be cured miraculously. If he does not carry the white cane, one day his eyesight will be healed. (Calvin's Father)*

In contrast, there are other parents who recognize and accept their child's disability—albeit with some resignation—and who depart from the conformity to “normalization”. They are well aware of their child's limitations and assiduous efforts in learning—trying their best to pass the examinations—and hence proud of all their accomplishments regardless of how big or small. Since these parents perceive disability as a cap on educational potential, they discount their child's high personal expectations in fear of the undue stress they place upon themselves and the potential disappointment when targets are not met. Similar findings have been reported by Kim, Lee and Morningstar (2007), notably parental perception of their child's disability preclude them from envisioning a positive future:

*Every day we just live as [if it is] like a gift, and we don't think too much. We don't push him in any way and I think he is happy in that sense. (Jason's Mother)*

*All along I have never really set any goals for him. I just tell him to study hard, pass the exam, that's all. (Ivan's Mother)*

The typically developing siblings of these children with disabilities often serve as a comparison point. Parents have distinctly lower expectations for their children with disabilities. They viewed disabilities as an impediment to their child's educational progress:

*For our older boy, we are harsher in the sense that we expect more from him... we don't put an expectation on her... She actually wants to do well, but we know that there is a limit [to how far] she can go. (Elise's mother)*

*For my eldest and youngest we have different expectations. But Wayne [middle child] is different...We want him to go at his pace; we don't want to push him. My eldest one and youngest one, I will push [them]. (Wayne's Mother)*

The close coupling between education and social outcomes is evident in our interviews. Parents advocate for mainstream placement to obviate the possibility of their children being consigned to a circumscribed adult life (Runswick-Cole, 2008). They perceive mainstream placement as a chance to boost their child's academic potential and improve social mobility in anticipation for life in a meritocratic Singapore society where employment opportunities singled out for persons with disabilities are limited and pigeonholed (Wong, 2004). For instance, many persons with visual impairments resort to selling packets of tissue paper in public areas, relying on the compassion of others to make a living (Wong, 2013):

*When you look at people selling tissue papers outside, who are those people?*

*Low vision. Why must he be like that? All we want is my child to have an equal playing field unless they say that all low vision children should go and sell tissue papers. (Calvin's Father)*

Parents associate special education with social segregation. Inclusion, on the other hand, serves as a platform for children with disabilities to foster positive peer relationships and strengthen social skills in preparation for life beyond school and within the local community (Scheepstra et al., 1999; Turnbull et al., 2002; Elkins et al., 2003; O'Conner, 2007):

*We were contemplating whether we should send her to Lightville [special school], but we felt that she shouldn't go there because it is a very enclosed and protected environment... We wanted [her] to live in the real world and learn how to interact with people. (Elise's Father)*

Despite parental emphasis on the need to achieve an appropriate degree of social competence, many reported that their child is confined to the periphery of social life because of their inadequate interpersonal skills:

*Zack is not like other boys. He does not hang out with other boys... His friends are books and the computer. (Zack's Father)*

*I think her social skills have not come to a level where she is comfortable with her peers. Neither does she know how to build friendships. (Elise's father)*

Likewise, the parents interviewed expressed divergent views of whether their child should be more fully included in society:

*He doesn't go to the [canteen] stall. The boys are rowdy; they push. So what we have arranged is for my wife to either buy or prepare food... If they can create more space, then low vision children can learn to be more independent.... but at this point in time, the physical environment does not permit or I won't allow Calvin to do it because it is just too dangerous. (Calvin's Father)*

*I force myself to cut my apron strings... wherever he goes I want to go because I am afraid. I am afraid he falls. There is so much fear in me that I didn't realize it.*  
*(Jason's Mother)*

#### *Expectations of school support*

Another theme frequently discussed was the question of how the responsibility of supporting children with disabilities is shared between home and school. Some parents are unclear about the mechanisms of school support, specifically how and what support is provided:

*I don't know he (AED [LBS]) is using what materials to help Jason or just following up on his school work. [I] just leave it to Mr. Carter to handle.*  
*(Jason's mother)*

*Twice or three times a week, he (AED [LBS]) helps them out. I think he teach them a lot of general knowledge, you know? (Wayne's mother)*

Despite the exorbitant costs in supporting children with disabilities and concerns about its affordability in the long term, parents actively seek help beyond school to enhance their child's academic and social competencies. In Singapore, private tuition has become commonplace due to the prominence placed on high educational achievement (Cheo & Quah, 2005). Most parents hire private tutors to get extra coaching for their child. Additionally, parents of children with disabilities engage licensed external practitioners such as psychologists, speech and language therapists, and occupational therapists for remediation support. Both private tuition and professional therapy supplement areas not adequately provided for in mainstream schools.

*The tutors know that Ivan has autism spectrum disorder and sensory issues. If Ivan is frustrated during the session, they will not agitate him... they will give him downtime for about 15 minutes. If he calms down and is willing to move on, then they will continue. And they will normally shift the focus to something lighter... something easier. (Ivan's Mother)*

*We do have one educational psychologist. I'm still in contact with her. We fall back on her to help us with certain issues that we cannot handle. (Elise's mother)*

## **Discussion**

*How realistic should parents be?*

This study's findings raise the question of what is one's best? It is crucial that parents scaffold their child's learning by setting appropriately high and realistic expectations based on cognitive ability and individual needs. On the same note, should academic failure be tolerable when children are performing at their best? Constant failure in academics may be a

sign that mainstream education is not responsive to the needs of children with disabilities. Russell (2003) and O'Connor (2007) highlighted that advocacy of inclusion is defensible only as and when schools and teachers can adequately meet the diverse and unique needs of children with disabilities. While every child should be guaranteed access to mainstream schools, mainstream placement is not necessarily the best or most appropriate option for all children with disabilities at this point in time where policies and structures to promote inclusive education in Singapore have yet to mature.

While Rogers (2007a; 2007b) looked at parents of infants and young children, this study found that parents of teenage children also held onto an idealized picture of their child. The implications are that these parents may pressurize their children to conform to “normality” at the expense of understating or dismissing the disability, leading to inappropriate provision of support which may otherwise be available in special schools. In a climate where socioeconomic ideals are meritocratically driven, parental expectation of ‘normality’ is further intensified in the chase for academic excellence. This suggests that the denial of difficulty that Rogers (2007b) describes is not merely limited to inclusive educational policy alone but accentuated in societies espousing broader competitive ideals tending to exclude (Slee, 2011). The danger is when this “normalization” shifts from denial of difficulty to denial of suffering experienced by child.

#### *Cutting the apron strings*

The relatively lower level of social skills may be attributable, at least in part, to parents’ tendency to shield their children from the capricious and harsh realities of life in a society that has inchoate understanding and demarcated acceptance towards physical and/or mental disabilities. Parents have difficulty striking a balance between their innate desire to overprotect their child and the societal need to promote independence. In their effort to shelter him or her from potential dangers of the “real world”, parents unintentionally give

their child little room to explore and grow, which in turn stifles social and autonomy development. Congruent findings were reported by Holmbeck and his colleagues (2002) who found that parents of preadolescents with a physical disability experience a dichotomy between the desire to foster independence in their child and the desire to protect their child from unfavourable outcomes. Fear for the emotional and physical safety of children is understandably greater for parents whose children are in a constant struggle with their disabilities. However, it is timely for parents to gradually loosen and eventually cut the “apron strings” to instil a sense of confidence and independence in their teenage children (Antle, Mills, Steele, Kalnins & Rossen, 2008).

*Supporting parents*

To better involve parents in addressing the needs of their child, a reference guide to the learning, emotional and behavioural difficulties of children with disabilities could be provided for parents. The guide should cover a wide range of disabilities and include a comprehensive list of resources (e.g., financial support, professional therapy). Parents can also better appreciate disability as they are introduced to, and work from a social model of disability (Dowling & Dolan, 2001), rather than the largely entrenched perspective reflecting the medical model.

Parents of children with disabilities often need additional support other than that provided by professionals (Olsen & Fuller, 2008). None of our participants, however, are involved or acquainted with a support group. Parent support groups could be formed to share information, resources, and personal experiences related to the care of children with disabilities (Ainbinder et al., 1998; Singer et al., 1999; McCabe, 2008).

*Implications for educational policy*

Parsons and her colleagues (2009) pointed out that information on formal support provided in schools should be communicated clearly to parents. It follows that a systematic

and holistic framework of supporting children with disabilities in schools should be established. The framework should describe key dimensions (e.g., pedagogies, referral and discipline systems, home-school partnership) of effective inclusion based on research literature. The framework will lay foundation for the structure and delivery of support, and hence assuage parental concerns and demands.

Given that special education in Singapore is still viewed with hesitation and reluctance owing to the national premium placed on educational excellence (Wong, 2013), parents are anxious for their children with disabilities to be part of mainstream education. To secure full and equal membership in the society, exposure to mainstream education in formative years is deemed critical for children with disabilities. While the endorsement of meritocracy has contributed to Singapore emerging top in international rankings in benchmark tests and positioned Singapore amongst the top cities in the world with high standards of living (Wong, 2013), such societal structures also acts as a sieve where children and youth unable to cope with a competitive environment are channelled to more appropriate settings. However, what is appropriate is debatable and parents respond divergently to these structures as they confront the challenges to inclusive education.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

It is important to note that this study was limited to parents of students from two secondary schools. Similarly, the sample size of this study was too small to meaningfully compare parents of different demographic characteristics. Though the purposeful and small sample limits the representativeness of our qualitative findings, our intention is not to generalize the findings but to provide a rich and in-depth understanding into parental experiences and perspectives of inclusive education in Singapore. The application of these findings to other contexts warrants careful consideration and caution. In addition, due to time and ethical constraints, one-time interview of each participant limits the trustworthiness of

our data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Future research could involve more interviews with individual participants to verify the themes. Although a more extensive research is needed to capture a broader range of parental voices, the themes emerging from this study may provide a useful framework for understanding the perspectives and challenges of parents of children with disabilities in Singapore. Finally, issues pertinent to home-school partnership need to be examined more fully in future research.

### **Conclusion**

The narratives reported here illustrate that parental perspective on inclusive education in Singapore is not only about classroom support but also reflects a deeper concern about whether their children with disabilities will emerge from school as contributing individuals in society. As parents strive to effectively include their children with disabilities in mainstream classrooms, private tuition is seen as an effective solution to the inadequacies experienced in the classroom. Supplementary tuition then features significantly for adolescents with disabilities who have unique learning difficulties in relation to their disability and need to deal with the greater specialization of subject areas and corresponding complexity of schoolwork at secondary level. This questions the veracity of inclusion if private tuition is a necessary condition to realize inclusive education. In providing supplementary education, it is crucial for parents not to “normalize” their children’s disabilities, but to accommodate diversity and ensure provision of adequate and appropriate intervention. At the same time, parents need to support the emerging autonomy of children with disabilities without neglecting or interfering with their potential for independence. Given that academic and social prowess is a critical prerequisite to have a shot at entering the meritocratic Singapore society, the tension parents experience is to gauge a reasonable amount of pressure to exert on their children, the school and themselves as they assert their children’s educational entitlements within an imperfect but evolving state of inclusion. This calls for a broader

definition of meritocracy as traditional connotation of the word excludes persons with disabilities. There is a need to revisit the concept and practice of meritocracy in relation to the worth of a person with disability in a meritocratic society.

## References

- Advisory Council for the Disabled (1988). Opportunities for the disabled: Report of the Advisory Council for the Disabled. Singapore: Author.
- Ainbinder, J. G., Blanchard, L. W., Singer G. H. S., Sullivan, M.E., Powers, L.K., Marquis, J.G., & Santelli, B. (1998). A qualitative study of parent to parent support for parents of children with special needs. *Journal of Pediatric Psychology*, 23(2), 99-109.
- Ainscow, M., Howes, A., Farrell, P., & Frankham, J. (2003). Making sense of the development of inclusive practices, *European Journal of Disabilities Education*, 18(2), 227-242. doi:10.1080/0885625032000079005
- Antle, B.J., Mills, W., Steele, C., Kalnins, I., & Rossen, B. (2008). An exploratory study of parents' approaches to health promotion in families of adolescents with physical disabilities. *Child: care, health and development*, 34(2), 185-193. doi:10.1111/j.1365-2214.2007.00782.x
- Bennett, T., DeLuca, D., & Bruns, D. (1997). Putting inclusion into practice: Perspectives of teachers and parents. *Exceptional Children*, 64(1), 115-131.
- McCabe, H. (2008). The Importance of Parent-to-Parent Support among Families of Children with Autism in the People's Republic of China. *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education*, 55(4), 303-314. doi:10.1080/10349120802489471
- Cheo, R., & Quah, E. (2005). Mothers, maids and tutors: An empirical evaluation of their effect on children's academic grades in Singapore. *Education Economics*, 13(3), 269–285. doi:10.1080/09645290500073746
- De Boer, A. A., Pijl, S. J., & Minnaert, A. (2010). Attitudes of parents towards inclusive education: A review of the literature. *European Journal of Disabilities Education*, 25(2), 165-181. doi:10.1080/08856251003658694
- Department of Education. (2012). Learning support staff. Retrieved from

<http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/careers/traininganddevelopment/staff/b00202532/school-support-staff/roles/learning>

Dowling, M. & Dolan, L. (2001). Families with children with disabilities - Inequalities and the social model, *Disability & Society*, 16:1, 21-35.

Duhaney, L. M. G., & Salend, S. J. (2000). Parental perceptions of inclusive educational placements. *Remedial and Special Education*, 21(2), 121-128.  
doi:10.1177/074193250002100209

Elkins, J., van Kraayenoord, C. E., & Jobling, A. (2003). Parents' attitudes to inclusion of their child with disabilities. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 3(2), 122-129. doi:10.1111/1471-3802.00005

Enabling Masterplan. (2012). Report of the Enabling Masterplan Committee 2012-2016.

Retrieved April, 20, 2012 from

[http://app1.mcys.gov.sg/Portals/0/Topic/Issues/EDGD/Enabling%20Masterplan%20012-2016%20Report%20\(8%20Mar\).pdf](http://app1.mcys.gov.sg/Portals/0/Topic/Issues/EDGD/Enabling%20Masterplan%20012-2016%20Report%20(8%20Mar).pdf)

Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago: Aldine.

Heiman, T. (2002). Parents of children with disabilities: Resilience, coping, and future expectations. *Journal of Developmental and Physical Disabilities*, 14(2), 159-171. doi: 10.1023/A:1015219514621

Ho, K. C., & Yip, J. (2003). *YOUTH.sg: The state of youth in Singapore*. Singapore: National Youth Council.

Holmbeck, G.N., Johnson, S.Z., Wills, K.E., McKernon, W., Rose, B., Erklin, S., & Kemper, T. (2002). Observed and perceived parental overprotection in relation to psychosocial adjustment in preadolescents with a physical disability: The mediational role of behavioural autonomy. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 70(1), 96-110.

doi:10.1037//0022-006X.70.1.96

Huan, V. S., Yeo, L. S., Ang, R. P., & Chong, W. H. (2008). The impact of adolescent concerns on their academic stress. *Educational Review*, 60(2), 169-178.

doi:10.1080/00131910801934045

Isralowitz, R. E., & Ong, T. H. (1990). Singapore youth: The impact of social status on perceptions of adolescent problems. *Adolescence*, 25(98), 357-362.

Kang, T. (2005). Creating educational dreams: The intersection of ethnicity, families and schools. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Academic.

Kim, K. H., Lee, Y., & Morningstar, M. E. (2007). An unheard voice: Korean American parents' expectations, hopes, and experiences concerning their adolescent child's future. *Research & Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 32(4), 253-264.

Lim, L., & Nam, S. S. (2000). Special education in Singapore. *Journal of Special Education*, 34(2), 104-109. doi:10.1177/002246690003400205

Lim, L., & Tan, J. (2001). Addressing Disability in Educational Reforms: A Force for Renewing the Vision of Singapore 21. In J. Tan, S. Gopinathan & W.K. Ho (Eds.), Challenges Facing the Singapore Education System Today (pp. 175-188). Singapore: Prentice Hall.

Lim, S. M. Y., Wong, M. E., & Tan, D. (2013). Allied educators (learning and behavioural support) in Singapore's mainstream schools: first steps towards inclusivity? *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, advance online publication.

doi:10.1080/13603116.2012.758321

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). Naturalistic inquiry. London, UK: Sage.

McNally, R. D., Cole, P. G., & Waugh, R. E. (2001). Regular teachers' attitudes to the need for additional classroom support for the inclusion of students with intellectual disability. *Journal of Intellectual and Developmental Disability*, 26(3), 257-273.

doi:10.1080/13668250120063421

Ministry of Education. (2011). Education statistics digest 2011. Retrieved from

<http://www.moe.gov.sg/education/education-statistics-digest/>

Ministry of Education. (2012). Support for children with disabilities. Retrieved from

<http://www.moe.gov.sg/education/programmes/support-for-children-special-needs/>

O'Connor, U. (2007). Parental concerns on inclusion: The Northern Ireland perspective.

International Journal of Inclusive Education, 11(5-6), 535-550.

doi:10.1080/13603110600586300

O'Connor, U. (2008). Meeting in the middle? A study of parent-professional partnerships.

European Journal of Disabilities Education, 23(3), 253-268.

doi:10.1080/08856250802130434

Olsen, G. & Fuller, M. L. (2012). Home and School Relations: Teachers and Parents

Working Together (4th ed.). New Jersey: Pearson Education.

Palmer, D., Fuller, K., Arora, T., & Nelson, M. (2001). Taking sides: Parent views on

inclusion for their child. Exceptional Children, 67(4), 467-484.

Parsons, S., Lewis, A., Davison, I., Ellins, J. & Robertson, C. (2009). Satisfaction with

educational provision for children with SEN or disabilities: A national postal survey

of the views of parents in Great Britain. Educational Review, 61(1), 19-47.

doi:10.1080/00131910802684755

Pivik, J., Mccomas, J., & Laflamme, M. (2002). Barriers and facilitators to inclusive

education. Exceptional Children, 69(1), 97-107.

Poon, K. K., Musti-Rao, S., & Wattasinghe, C. M. (in press). Special Education in Singapore:

History, Trends, and Future Directions. Intervention in School and Clinic.

Poon, K. K., Soon, S., Wong, M. E., Kaur, S., Khaw, J., Ng, Z., & Tan, C. S. (2012). What is

school like? Perspectives of Singaporean youth with high-functioning autism

- spectrum disorders. International Journal of Inclusive Education, (ahead-of-print), 1-13.
- Rafferty, Y., Boettcher, C., & Griffin, K. W. (2001). Benefits and risks of reverse inclusion for preschoolers with and without disabilities: Parents' perspectives. *Journal of Early Intervention*, 24(4), 266-286. doi:10.1177/105381510502700305
- Rogers, C. (2007a). 'Disabling' a family? Emotional dilemmas experienced in becoming a parent of a learning disabled child. *British Journal of Special Education*, 34 (3) 136-143.
- Rogers, C. (2007b). Experiencing an 'inclusive' education: Parents and their children with special educational needs (SEN) *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 28 (1) 55-68
- Runswick-Cole, K. (2008). Between a rock and a hard place: Parents' attitudes to the inclusion of children with special educational needs in mainstream and special schools. *British Journal of Special Education*, 35(3), 173-180. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8578.2008.00390.x
- Russell, P. (2003). Access and achievement or social exclusion? Are the government's policies working for disabled children and their families? *Children and Society*, 17, 215-225. doi:10.1002/CHI.779
- Scheepstra, A. J. M., Nakken, H., & Pijl, S. J. (1999). Contacts with classmates: The social position of pupils with Down's syndrome in Dutch mainstream education. *European Journal of Disabilities Education*, 14(3), 212-220. doi:10.1080/0885625990140303
- Singer, H.S., Marquis, J., Powers, L., Blanchard, L., DiVenere, N., Ainbinder, B.G., & Sharp, M., (1999). A multi-site evaluation of parent to parent programs for parents of children with disabilities. *Journal of Early Intervention*, 22(3), 217-229.
- Slee, R. (2011). *The irregular school: Exclusion, schooling and inclusive education*. London:

Routledge.

- Swedeen, B. L. (2009). Signs of an inclusive school: A parent's perspective on the meaning and value of authentic inclusion. *TEACHING Exceptional Children Plus*, 5(3), article 1. Retrieved from <http://journals.cec.sped.org/tecplus/vol5/iss3/art1>
- Tan, J. B., & Yates, S. (2011). Academic expectations as sources of stress in Asian students. *Social Psychology of Education*, 14(3), 389-407. doi:10.1007/s11218-010-9146-7
- Turnbull, R., Turnbull, A., Shank, M., Smith, S., & Leal, D. (2002). *Exceptional Lives: Special Education in Today's Schools* (3rd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill, Prentice Hall.
- Wong, M. E. (2013). Disability in Singapore: Navigating through the rat race. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- Wong, M. E. (2004). Higher education or vocational training in 'riryoka'? Post-school choices of visually-impaired students. Part 2, Japan. *British Journal of Visual Impairment*, 22 (2), 59-66.
- Yeo, L. S., Neihart, M., Tang, H. N., Chong, W. H., & Huan, V. S. (2011). An inclusion initiative in Singapore for preschool children with disabilities. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 31(2), 143-158. doi:10.1080/02188791.2011.566990