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**ATTITUDES TOWARDS INCLUSION OF  
INTELLECTUALLY DISABLED  
CHILDREN IN REGULAR SCHOOLS**

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## **Attitudes towards Inclusion of Intellectually Disabled Children in Regular Schools**

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### **Abstract**

American parents (N=460) in the study by Palmer, Borthwick-Duffy, and Widaman (1998) were compared with their Singaporean counterparts (N=481) for views on inclusion. Comparisons were made on the three dimensions of Palmer et al.'s (1998) *Parent Attitudes Toward Inclusion* (PATI), namely, quality of educational services the ID child receives; mutual benefits of inclusion, and treatment and acceptance of ID students. Singaporean parents held a more optimistic view of inclusion than did the American parents. The Singaporean parents were then compared with ID teachers (N=124) from five schools for the intellectually impaired in Singapore and parents held a more optimistic view of inclusion than did the ID teachers. Implications for the development and implementation of inclusive educational placements is discussed.

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## **Attitudes towards Inclusion of Intellectually Disabled Children in Regular Schools**

### **Introduction**

In this paper, inclusion refers to the integration of students with intellectual disabilities (ID students) into regular classroom settings with non-disabled peers to the greatest extent possible while still meeting their educational needs.

Recent research literature tends to support the inclusion practices of students with mild disabilities. Benefits found for both disabled and their non-disabled peers include improvements in self-concept of non-disabled students (Peck, Carlson & Helmstetter (1992), the development of warm and caring friendships (Bogdan & Taylor, 1989) and the growth in social cognition for the disabled students (Murray-Seegart, 1989). Similarly, in a study by Wang and Baker (1986), disabled students who were mainstreamed outperformed their non-mainstreamed peers in both academic achievement and social adjustments even though these disabled students were found not to indulge in frequent meaningful and spontaneous social exchanges with their regular peers. In a study by Barnett and Monda-Amaya (1998), elementary, junior and high school principals viewed inclusive practices most appropriate for students with mild disabilities.

Studies of parental perception on inclusive practices have also found much positive support (Palmer, Borthwick-Duffy & Widaman, 1998; Garrick Duhaney & Salend, 2000). Duhaney and Salend, (2000) found that parents of ID students believed that inclusive practices promote the acceptance of their ID children by non-disabled peers and that it helps their children develop socially, emotionally and academically as these children have greater access to appropriate role models and friendships and are likely to develop more self-confidence in preparing them for the real world. However, Palmer, Borthwick-Duffy, Widaman & Best (1997) found that parent perceptions regarding inclusive practices are influenced by both parents' and their children's characteristics. Parents who value socialization as an educational goal and have positive perceptions of inclusion are likely to have preference for inclusive practices rather than special class placements whereas, parents who felt that their children require specialized curriculum

over the development of social areas may perceive the special class as a better place for the attainment of functional and independent skills for their children.

While there is increasing research findings regarding the perceived benefits of inclusive education (Sharpe, York & Knight, 1994), parents and teachers remain indecisive toward inclusive practices as to its merits (Katsiyannis, Conderman & Franks, 1995). According to Palmer et al. (1997), parents hold divergent views regarding the efficacy of inclusive practices for their children. Furthermore, these views are likely to be multi-dimensional and differentiated depending on the considerations made with regards to the impact of inclusive practices on different subject domains of educational programming (Anotonak & Larrivee, 1995).

Although the American views on inclusive practices may not be universally shared, it is of theoretical and practical significance to find what the extent to which the values and views of Singapore parents are similar to those of US parents. This is a meaningful question because educational practices tend to be influenced by those found in the States. Moreover, parents' values and views may indirectly affect the educational programmes of their children and thus, be strong and positive advocates for their children's educational programme. For successful inclusion to take place, appropriate values and needs must be understood so that appropriate implications can be derived for inclusive educational placements.

In the Singapore context, although parental and teacher perceptions of inclusive practices for ID children have been studied (Ee & Soh, 2000), there is no published empirical study comparing Singapore and American parents' views on inclusive practices as well as specially addressing the perceptions of parents and teachers in special education settings. This study, therefore, aims to examine:

- 1) Whether American and Singaporean parents in ID schools differ in their views on inclusive practices?

- 2) Whether Singaporean parents and teachers in ID schools differ in their views on inclusive practices?

## **Method**

**Measures** The questionnaire used in this study has two parts. The first includes 11 items from the *Parent Attitudes toward Inclusion Scale* (PATI; Palmer et al., 1998). Respondents rated each item on a four-point scale, scoring from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). In the original version, factor analysis yields three orthogonal sub-scales, namely, *Quality of Educational Services* (four items), *Mutual Benefits of Inclusion* (five items), and *Child Acceptance and Treatment* (two items). The factor names reflect the nature of the sub-scales. Higher scores on these indicate more positive views. For use in the present study, minor changes in wording were made for greater familiarity in terms of language that suits the local style. However, the concepts depicted in the original items remained unchanged. Also, the items were presented as a set of four-point scales instead of six-point scales as in the original version. The second part of the questionnaire includes items related to demographic background such as sex, race, and age. Respondents also indicated whether they were teachers or parents of ID children.

**Respondents** As Table 1 shows, the US respondents (Palmer et al., 1998) consisted of 460 ID parents with nearly two-thirds of the sample being females and Euro-Americans. For the Singapore sample, 604 respondents completed the questionnaire. They were made up of 481 (79.6%) ID parents and 123 (20.4%) ID teachers. There were about one-third (35.2%) of male respondents and about two-thirds were female. More than half (58.7%) of the respondents were Chinese, one-fifth (19.7%) Malay, one-tenth (10.7%) Indian, and one-tenth (10.9%) others. More than half (59.0%) of the respondents were above 40 years of age, with another one-third (32.7%) within the 31-40 age range, and the remaining 8.3% below 31, a representative sample of the parents and teachers in one of the welfare organizations in Singapore. As this is a convenient sample available, it may not be representative of the Singaporean population and thus, the findings need to be read with due caution.

Table 1. Respondents' Characteristics in Percentages

|      |                | ID US Parents<br>(N=460) | ID S'pore<br>Parents<br>(N=481) | ID S'pore<br>Teachers<br>(N=123) | Total S'pore<br>Respondents<br>(N=604) |
|------|----------------|--------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------------------|--|
| Sex  | Male           | 18.3                     | 40.7                            | 13.0                             | 35.2                                   |
|      | Female         | 70.3                     | 59.3                            | 87.0                             | 64.8                                   |
|      | Unknown        | 11.3                     | -                               | -                                | -                                      |
| Race | Euro-American  | 62.6                     | -                               | -                                | -                                      |
|      | Asian-American | 9.1                      | -                               | -                                | -                                      |
|      | Chinese        | -                        | 57.4                            | 63.7                             | 58.7                                   |
|      | Malay          | -                        | 21.4                            | 12.9                             | 19.7                                   |
|      | Indian         | -                        | 10.2                            | 12.9                             | 10.7                                   |
|      | Others         | 22.8                     | 11.0                            | 10.5                             | 10.9                                   |
| Age  | Above 40       | -                        | 65.1                            | 35.4                             | 59.0                                   |
|      | 36-40          | -                        | 22.2                            | 20.2                             | 21.8                                   |
|      | 31-35          | -                        | 8.5                             | 20.2                             | 10.9                                   |
|      | 26-30          | -                        | 1.9                             | 19.4                             | 5.5                                    |
|      | 20-25          | -                        | 2.3                             | 4.8                              | 2.8                                    |

## Results

### *Comparison between American and Singaporean ID Parents*

Following the factor structure of the original form of PATI for scoring, means were obtained for the Singapore respondents and these were compared with those reported by Palmer et al. (1998) for the American respondents. Comparisons were made in terms of effect sizes by dividing the differences with the SDs for the Singaporean group. The results are shown in Table 2. According to the criterion of Rosenthal and Rosnow (1984), the effect size for *Quality of Education Services* is very large (1.01), in favour of the Singaporean parents. The difference for *Mutual Benefits of Inclusion* is large (0.49) and, again, in favour of Singaporean parents. Singaporean parents also held a more positive view regarding *Child Acceptance and Treatment* with a moderate effect size (0.31). In sum, Singaporean parents saw inclusion in a more positive light than did their American counterparts as reported by Palmer et al. (1998).

Table 2. Effect sizes for comparing American and Singaporean ID Parents

|                                 | American ID Parents in<br>Palmer et al.'s (1998)<br>study | Singaporean ID<br>Parents in present<br>study | Effect size |
|---------------------------------|---|---|-------------|
| Quality of Educational Services | 1.87  | 2.67 (.79)                                    | 1.01        |
| Mutual Benefits of Inclusion    | 2.67  | 3.00 (.68)                                    | 0.49        |
| Child Acceptance and Treatment  | 2.41  | 2.67 (.83)                                    | 0.31        |

Note: The means for the American respondents were taken from Palmer et al.'s (1998) and adjusted for scale length of the adapted version.

### ***Comparison between Singaporean ID Parents and ID Teachers***

When comparisons were made between Singaporean parents and teachers (Table 3), parents showed somewhat more positive attitudes toward inclusion, although the differences were small. Specifically, on *Quality of Education Services*, the effect size is negligible (0.09) whereas, on *Mutual Benefits of Inclusion* and *Child Acceptance and Treatment*, the effect size is small (0.25 and 0.10) respectively. When the PATI was taken as a whole, there is a small effect size (0.24) in favour of parents (Table 3).

**Table 3. Effect sizes for comparing Singaporean ID Parents and Teachers**

|                                 | ID Parents | ID Teachers | Effect size |
|---------------------------------|------------|-------------|-------------|
| Quality of Educational Services | 2.67 (.79) | 2.60 (.68)  | 0.09        |
| Mutual Benefits of Inclusion    | 3.00 (.68) | 2.83 (.68)  | 0.25        |
| Child Acceptance and Treatment  | 2.67 (.83) | 2.59 (.93)  | 0.10        |
| Overall                         | 2.76 (.50) | 2.64 (.44)  | 0.24        |

On further analysis (Table 4), results of t-tests show Singaporean parents to be more positive than the ID teachers on the quality of education as well as the positive benefits which may outweigh possible problems as they viewed more meaningful opportunities for ID children in inclusive practices.

**Table 4. Comparison of Responses of ID Parents and ID Teachers in Percentages**

| Items   | ID Parents<br>(n=481) | ID Teachers<br>(n=123) |
|---|-----------------------|------------------------|
| Positive items  |                       |                        |
| 9. Would end up becoming friends with other students. | 70.5                  | 71.8                   |
| 7. Will be treated kindly by the other students.      | 52.4                  | 49.2                   |
| 5. Quality is enriched in the class.                  | 53.6                  | 47.6                   |
| 8. Quality of education will improve.                 | 52.2                  | 29.8**                 |
| 6. Positive benefits outweigh possible problems       | 53.0                  | 38.7*                  |
| 4. Provides more meaningful opportunities             | 47.4                  | 35.5**                 |
| Negative items  |                       |                        |
| 1. Not getting all the necessary special services     | 80.9                  | 73.4                   |
| 3. Impossible to modify most lessons and materials    | 72.1                  | 54.8**                 |
| 2. Not getting the extra help he/she needs.           | 70.1                  | 68.5                   |
| 11. Would end up feeling lonely or left out.          | 57.8                  | 53.2                   |
| 10. Will be mistreated by the other students.         | 51.1                  | 34.7**                 |

\* p<0.05 \*\* p<0.01

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

Both American and Singaporean parents perceived a positive impact in the quality of education of their ID children's learning in inclusive practices e.g. class enrichment and improved quality of education for both ID and non-ID students. The meta-analysis conducted by Wang & Baker (1986) also showed that there were more positive than negative outcomes derived from inclusive practices. This may also highlight the confidence that parents have in the quality of education. However, Singapore parents were more positive than the American parents. It may indicate that Singapore parents, having had no personal experience on inclusive practices, may place higher value on socialization and are willing to trade-off some of the "special education" benefits for social benefits that they consider to be more accessible in inclusive practices as indicated in Palmer et al. (1998), whereas American parents may have a more realistic perception of inclusive practices having had more experience with it over the years. Also, as Palmer et al. (1998) indicated, parent perceptions may also be determined by their children's characteristics and what parents value and perceive their children's needs are greater.

However, in comparing both ID parents and teachers in Singapore, teachers were less likely to display confidence in the quality of education if inclusion were to be practised. Both ID parents and teachers in this study were specifically concerned about the kinds of educational services and treatment that ID students may experience. This may reflect teachers' lack of confidence, perceiving higher expectations of their students, or perceiving the situation more realistically since they were exposed to these children's learning outcomes daily, whereas the parents had no practical idea about the classroom situation. According to Wang & Baker (1986), if successful inclusion is to take place, the ID students' initial capabilities must be determined before individualised educational planning and continuous assessment can take place. As such, maybe, the students should be given self-management programmes, a variety of materials and some choice of goals, peer assistance and group projects to help them to be self-regulated learners. Above all, an adaptive learning environment model must be provided to ensure the use of a variety of materials, activities and allocation of available class time for curriculum-related

activities and learning tasks that are appropriate for the learning needs and achievement levels of ID students.

- The findings that Singapore ID teachers foresaw difficulties in modifying the lessons and materials reflects their sensitivity to the ID students' learning needs. A study by Bennett, Deluca & Bruns (1997) is consistent with this finding, that is, teachers tended to focus more on the need for support and resources whilst, parents were more concerned over the need for more positive attitudes toward ID students. However, the findings also stressed that for successful inclusion to take place, there must be a shared commitment by both teachers and parents.

Thus, if inclusion is to work, both educators and parents must not only be able to accept and accommodate the needs of ID students, they must also have higher expectations of these students so as to enhance these students' potential. Furthermore, there must be real commitment in planning and believing that inclusive practices can work through an adaptive learning environment.

The above findings help understand the reasoning of parents and teachers who are in favour of inclusive practices. It has also brought to light the different dimensions that need be satisfied should inclusive practices be considered. For successful inclusion, regular schools need to ensure programmes have qualitatively meaningful components for ID students and inclusion facilitators must be skilled in teaming, collaborating, communicating and using teaching strategies that would meet the special needs of the ID students.

## **Recommendations**

Principals of both ID and non-ID students need to prepare both their teachers and students for inclusion practices e.g.

- provide an orientation programme to re-orientate their teachers in teaching ID students;
- utilise creative and flexible scheduling to allow time for inclusion facilitation; obtain release time for teachers and others to meet for student conferencing; initiate relevant training for their teachers; offer resources, personnel and consultants for additional assistance to their teachers;
- raise the self-concept of ID teachers and reassure them of their position as well; consider some form of re-training to adapt and prepare ID teachers for inclusion practices.

ID teachers need to change their negative belief systems by:

focusing on the strengths of ID students in planning their ID students' individualised educational programmes (IEPs).

listening for commonalities when discussing and planning educational goals with parents of ID students.

communicate an attitude of acceptance of ID students and show genuine desire and commitment to inclusive practices.

demonstrating flexibility, open-mindedness and commitment

ID parents need be given assurance that their children will get special attention or services that are necessary from time to time

Teachers and parents must take time to prepare their children for inclusion practices. For the ID students, they must attempt to perceive inclusion practices as a better avenue for nurturing their strengths whilst the non-ID students must learn to develop a more caring and understanding attitude for their ID peers.

Finally, if inclusion is generally practised, there will be no ID teacher as current ID teachers will have to be retrained to teach in the 'normal' schools; and current 'normal' teachers will need training to relate to ID students.

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