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The attitudes of students towards people with disabilities in integrated environments in Singapore

Guat Lan Abi Tan
University of Wollongong

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Faculty of Education

**The Attitudes of Students Towards People with Disabilities in
Integrated Environments in Singapore**

Abi Tan Guat Lan

**"This thesis is presented as part of the requirements for the
award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy of the
University of Wollongong"**

July 2009

ABSTRACT

This thesis examined the attitudes of regular students in Singapore towards peers with physical and sensory disabilities who were integrated into the mainstream classroom. The concept of integration impacting on the attitudinal development in this study is based on the socio-cultural perspectives of child development (Bronfenbrenner, 1989; Vygotsky, 1993) and the discourse of contact experience (Allport, 1954; Zajonc, 2001). Child development theorists advocate that children's learning requires support structures such as informed adults to guide learning and that development is intricately intertwined with the socio-cultural contexts. Alternatively, contact theory suggests that the contact experience has an inherent positive impact on attitudes and behaviour.

The 397 participants were grade 4 and grade 5 students from integrated and regular classes in integrated and regular schools in Singapore. Qualitative and quantitative methodologies were used to assess the attitudes of regular students in both integrated and regular classes towards people with disabilities. The participants completed a researcher-designed questionnaire, took part in focus group interviews and were observed in class. The integrated class teachers were also interviewed.

This study supported the conclusion that an integrated learning environment had a significant impact on regular students' attitudes towards people with disabilities. In the quantitative study, regular students in integrated classrooms were found to have negative attitudes towards peers who had a disability. On the other hand, students in regular classes were found to be generally more able to appreciate the strengths of people with disabilities. The findings challenged the 'contact model' that states that contacts with people with disabilities influence children's attitudes in a positive way.

The qualitative study highlighted the importance of the socio-cultural context and the quality of the contact experience in students' attitudes towards people with disabilities. It was found that contact which was supported by specific school and classroom programs at school and class level was associated with positive attitudes of regular students towards peers with disabilities. Such support programs promoted inclusive ideals, positive differentiation and provided opportunities for meaningful experiences. The study affirmed the significant role of the teacher in facilitating the positive contact experience. The integrated class with the teacher, who modelled positive communication that promoted acceptance and positive perception, was found to have more positive attitudes. The teachers in the integrated classes, where students' attitudes towards people with disabilities were found to be negative, were lacking in knowledge of special education and needed guidelines to intervene with their special needs students. This suggests that appropriately informed teaching practice that encourages social interaction among students could help reduce misunderstanding and stereotyping of people with disabilities.

The social-cultural contexts at a broader level were also examined in this research. It was found that societal aspirations for academic excellence had an impact on students. The students in this study displayed signs of being anxious over their academic performance being affected by the presence of peers with disabilities. Regular students perceived integration as acceptable only if it was not at the expense of their academic performance.

The findings of this study have significant implications for the future of integration in Singaporean schools and understanding the impact of integration on regular students. The study affirmed that positive integrated learning experiences articulated through supportive school cultures, effective classroom practice and enlightened teachers could affect regular students' attitudes towards people with disabilities in a positive way. However, an achievement-focused culture can impact on students' acceptance of people with disabilities. Achievement pressure experienced by regular students is entwined with societal values and this can challenge the potential outcomes of integration programs in the Singaporean context.

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Most of all, I thank God for His immense Grace and Love.

STATEMENT OF AUTHENTICATION

I, Abi Tan Guat Lan, declare that this thesis, submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of degree of Doctor of Philosophy, in the Faculty of Education, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualification at any other academic institution.

Signed

Abi Tan Guat Lan

Date: 28 July 2009

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ABBREVIATIONS

ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorders
ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder
PWD	People with a disability
SPED schools	Special education schools
VWO	Voluntary Welfare Organization

DEFINITIONS

General terms

Inclusion	Inclusion is a philosophical approach where schools make the commitment to include the students with disabilities and they adjust the school environment to meet the students' needs.
Integration	Integration refers the students with disabilities attending a regular school where the school feels that the students can participate in their curriculum, and expects them to fit into their existing system.

Terms used in the research

Integrated school	A school that had official record of students with a physical or sensory disability.
Regular school	A school that did not have official record of students with a physical or sensory disability.
Integrated class	A class in an integrated school that had at least one student who has a physical or sensory disability.
Regular class	A class that did not have any official records of having a student who had a physical or sensory disability. A regular class could be found in a regular school or an integrated school.
Group 1 participants	Students in integrated classes who had experienced at least four months of integrated classroom learning with a peer who has a physical or sensory disability. They were in designated schools that provided an integration program for students with a disability.
Group 2 participants	Students in integrated schools who were in classes that did not have students with a physical or sensory disability. They were in the same grade as Group 1 participants from the respective schools.
Group 3 participants	Students in regular schools who had no experience of integrated classroom or school experience of learning with students with a physical or sensory disability.