

## INVESTIGATING THAI TEACHERS ATTITUDES TOWARD STUDENTS WITH AUTISM

ผู้วิจัย

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### ABSTRACT

Greater numbers of students with Autism are being educated in mainstream settings, enrolled in regular classes, placed with 'regular' students, and with teachers who often have limited experience or knowledge about their specific disability. Teachers, with limited knowledge of disability, struggle to successfully include these students into their classes. However, a powerful predictor of successful inclusion of students with a disability into mainstream classrooms is the attitude of the general education teacher (Ainscow, 2007).

A plethora of research abounds to empirically support what is known about quality teaching practice for students with Autism, yet this same research highlights teachers concerns of lack of knowledge, lack of support systems and overriding legislative policy as primary obstacles to the inclusion process. Research suggests that teachers of students with Autism have limited knowledge about the specific traits and idiosyncrasies that define these students learning styles and behaviours.

This research investigated the attitudes of Thai teachers toward their students with Autism. Attitudes were defined by four constructs: attitude toward inclusion, teacher effectiveness, academic climate, and social inclusion. A key premise of this research was that positive teacher attitude was strongly related to more successful outcomes for students.

This research utilised a mixed methods design over two phases, using both survey data and qualitative case studies. The following paper reports only on phase one of the research, the responses to the *Teacher Attitudes Survey*. Participants of the study were 404 teachers from seven schools in Bangkok. Results showed an ongoing need to assist teachers in building their confidence and knowledge in catering for students with Autism in the regular classroom. Teacher confidence (effectiveness) in meeting the education needs of students with Autism was reported as limited, yet teachers reported their understanding about the social inclusion of students with Autism in the regular school setting to be

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## Introduction

Changing attitudes toward disability have resulted as part of a sweeping change in social justice and human rights issues. In 1994 the Salamanca Statement (United Nations; UNESCO) called on all governments to adopt an inclusive education policy by enrolling all students in regular schools. In 2006 the United Nations proclaimed the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and Optional Protocol, which presented Article 24 : Education, which was a comprehensive address as to the educational rights of peoples with disabilities. This Article stated an assurance “to an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning” (p.16). While legislation can dictate and enforce the provision of equal educational opportunity however, it cannot enforce acceptance.

Inclusion of children with disabilities into mainstream educational settings is a well-debated and discussed topic (Lingard & Mills, 2007). Inclusion in education advocates that students with special needs can and should be educated alongside their typically developing peers with appropriate support services, rather than being placed in special education classrooms or schools. General education teachers, therefore, are finding more children with disabilities being enrolled in their classes than they have previously. Teachers welcome these learners into their classroom, yet some experience trepidation, unsure about their

level of skill required to help such students, what support systems they have at their disposal and what will be the impact of this student on others in the class.

One factor influencing the effective implementation of inclusive practice is teachers’ attitudes. There is substantial research examining how teacher attitudes directly influence students’ attitudes and behaviour, and the subsequent success of a program encompassing the principles of inclusion (e.g., Ainscow, 2007; Avramidis, Bayliss & Burden, 2000; Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). Although it appears that teachers tend to support the concept of inclusion as a social and educational principle, their validation at an operational level, and their demonstration of inclusive principles appears to be strongly related to their perceptions of students’ disabilities. It could be argued that these reluctant views are shaped by the surface level, social behaviour or social competence of students.

Teacher beliefs and attitudes are important for inclusive education because they directly impact upon students, as “through their attitudes, teachers may pass on messages of acceptance or disapproval, which may contribute to the success or failure of some interventions (Horrocks, White and Roberts, 2008, cited in Park, Chitiyo, & Choi, 2010, p.107). The connection between the success of inclusion of students with disabilities and teachers’ attitudes towards inclusion is dynamic. With new knowledge teachers are better able to facilitate the successful inclusion of students; this success leads to confirmation and deepening of other elements of

professional knowledge. Other elements impacting on attitude include: teacher's knowledge of Autism; their professional pedagogy and personal skills and experience; opportunities for professional development; the provision of systems support; and, the element of collaboration. These elements have a two-way effect in that they both inform and affect the teacher, and in return are molded and developed by the teacher in response to new and changing beliefs and attitudes.

Influencing the implementation of inclusive education is teachers' knowledge of a wide range of disabilities that fall within the special needs label. Without a sound knowledge base, teachers will be unable to address their students' individual learning needs, academic, social, emotional or behavioural, "teachers may therefore develop negative attitudes towards children with Autism because of lack of understanding of the disorder" (Park et al., 2010, p.108). In light of the increase in enrolments of students with Autism, it is critical for teachers need to have a sound knowledge of Autism, and an awareness of the core characteristics, in order to support their students most effectively.

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a broad term, defined by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, DSM-IV-TR (American Psychiatric Association, 2000) as "pervasive developmental disorders characterised by qualitative impairment in social interaction, qualitative impairment in communication and restricted, repetitive and stereotypic patterns

of behaviour, interests and activities". The three core characteristics of Autism are "impaired social relationships, impaired communication and language, and stereotypic motor mannerisms or a narrow range of interests" (Duchan & Patel, 2012, p.27). These characteristics result in students often requiring additional instructional support and behaviour support, areas in which Avramidis and Norwich (2002) found teachers to be least positive about in relation to inclusion.

Students with ASDs require more than just intellectual support; they often also require attention, behavioural, sensory, and anxiety support, as well as social and communication skill development (Alberta Learning, 2003). Examples of support strategies include explicit teaching of social skills, creating sensory areas for students to support their sensory needs, providing structure routine and preparing students for changes in routine, as well as implementing visual cue systems or social stories. Research suggests that general education teachers are unlikely to be equipped to support students on each of these level outlined above, "teaching students with ASD requires the use of specific strategies and approaches with which general education teachers may not be familiar" (Leach & Duffy, 2009, p.32). As such, "the social, communication, behavioural and cognitive challenges that may affect the performance of students with ASD can be barriers to successful inclusion if general education teachers are not provided with information and support"

(Leach & Duffy, 2009, p.32).

Sainsbury (2000) writes that the single most social relationship for a school child with Autism is their relationship with the teacher. She adds that good experiences with thoughtful teachers made an overwhelming difference to her life. Good teachers are those with a broad knowledge base of Autism, with good organisation skills, and the ability to plan creatively. Carrington and Graham (1999) state that “teachers play a vital role in developing the adaptive and compensatory strategies needed for students with Autism to participate in the school community” (p.22). As a classroom teacher, one must have an understanding of the implications of the various learning characteristics of students with Autism in order to develop more effective teaching sequences.

The research of Chamberlain, Kasari and Rotheram-Fuller (2007) recognises that the social inclusion of students with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder in regular classes is successful when supported by “the active efforts of parents and teachers to make dramatic improvements in the social networking of children with Autism” (p.239). If teachers can promote inclusion as stated above, then teachers can assist with the formation of equal relationships with better social engagement for students.

## **Methodology**

The research design used for this study was one of a mixed methods investigative study,

combining the use of surveys and embedded case studies. In this study, the use of questionnaire responses in conjunction with in-depth interviews and observation allowed for both breadth and depth of data. “Together it is hoped that they yield results from which one can make better, more accurate inferences” (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009, p.34). It must be noted here that this paper reports only on the quantitative data obtained through the survey.

Participants. The implementation of the *Teacher Attitudes Survey (TAS)* was with 404 teachers from seven schools in Bangkok. The schools were 1 private school, 4 Ministry of Education schools, and 2 Bangkok Metropolitan schools. After liaison with school management, the co-researcher took the paper-based questionnaire to the school for staff to complete. Completed questionnaires were then returned to the co-researcher for coding and analysis.

Instrument. The instrument developed for use in this study, titled *Teacher Attitudes Survey*, was based on existing instruments (Avramidis et al., 2000; Lambe & Bones, 2006) and was developed by the researcher to focus specifically on teacher attitudes toward the inclusion of students with Asperger Syndrome. This questionnaire has been used previously in Australia. Collaboration with Thai colleagues deemed the specificity of the questionnaire to Asperger Syndrome to be of little relevance to Thai teachers, as there was limited differentiation of the spectrum of Autistic

Disorders in the Thai culture. Thus, the term 'Asperger Syndrome' was replaced with 'Autism' for the Thai participants. The original English version of the *Teacher Attitudes Survey* was translated into Thai by the co-researcher, and then back translated to English by a Thai professional translator, to ensure correct transfer of meaning and intent of the questionnaire items.

Teacher attitudes are influenced by a range of factors, summarised for this research into four constructs: attitudes toward inclusion, teacher effectiveness, academic climate, and social inclusion. The teacher attitudes items assessed teacher's theoretical and practical perceptions of the inclusion of students from special educational populations into regular education classrooms. The teacher effectiveness items measured the level of confidence teachers had about having students with Asperger Syndrome in their classes and their perceived levels of preparedness in catering for said students. The items investigating academic climate sought to explore how teachers perceive the presence of students with Asperger Syndrome in their regular classes and how this subsequently impacted upon their delivery of content. The social inclusion items measured teacher attitudes and understanding of the social inclusion of students with Asperger Syndrome with their same aged peers in their regular education classrooms.

The *Teacher Attitude Survey* utilised a semi-structured, non-participant questionnaire and was presented in two sections. The first section asked for

demographic information and asked for: age, gender, years of teaching experience in both general and special education, current professional capacity or position and the type of school where they were currently employed. The second section of the questionnaire comprising of 22 closed-question items answered on a Likert scale response format. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with each item statement along a 5-point scale (0 – 4) which ranged from strongly disagree to strongly agree with a mid-point neutral

## Results

Before analysis began, the data was 'cleaned' to check for illegal code values and invalid responses. Data was deleted from the statistical analysis procedure where respondents omitted a response or gave two or more responses to an individual item. The cleaning process resulted in 395 valid questionnaires (n = 395) being used in the analysis of the Likert response items. Codes from completed, valid questionnaires were entered onto a spreadsheet with each coding score recorded against the question and item number. When all scores were entered, a number of analyses were undertaken.

An initial descriptive analysis of the data was done on a variable-by-variable basis, with some item analysis of key variables. Frequency distributions were used to summarise and represent the demographic data obtained from the questionnaire. Seventy three percent of participants were female, with 14% of total

respondents aged between 22 and 30 and a majority of participants in the 51+ years age category, which indicated an ageing teaching workforce. This hypothesis was supported by a response of approximately 40% of participants to having taught in general education for more than 15 years. In contrast, only 12% of participants indicated an equivalent length of time teaching in special education. Two hundred fifty six respondents reported holding an undergraduate general education degree with a further 99 reporting a postgraduate degree in general education. Of the total sample population, 100 participants reported as holding a degree in special education, with 74 of these at the undergraduate level. These demographic variables were not used in statistical analysis as research reports that none of these variables are significantly related to teacher attitudes (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002).

The second section of the questionnaire, the 22 Likert response items, were analysed to test the internal reliability of the *Teacher Attitude Survey*. Using SPSS, the Cronbach Alpha was calculated and returned a figure of .74, indicating the questionnaire had good internal consistency. Individual items were coded from 0 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree), with a higher score indicating more positive response to the statement. Mean scores for each of the four constructs was then undertaken. Results showed that three of the constructs; attitudes toward inclusion, academic climate and social inclusion returned positive scores.

Teacher effectiveness however, returned a mean score of 1.73, placing it on the negative side of the scale.

Table 1

*Mean scores of the four constructs*

Construct	Attitudes toward Inclusion	Teacher Effectiveness	Academic Climate	Social Inclusion
Mean Score	2.24	1.73	2.12	2.76

The mean of each item was then calculated to provide a summary of responses and gave an indication of which items scored as outliers. Items 1, 4 and 19 all returned mean scores below 1.2. Items 8, 14, and 20 returned mean scores of 2.9, with Items 11 and 18 scores of 2.8. The remaining items returned scores around the neutral position, which is between 1.5 and 2.5.

The three items that received the lowest mean scores were all found within the teacher effectiveness construct and asked participants to score their responses to statements about adapting curriculum for students with Autism, classroom support, and knowledge of Autism. Item 1 read, *"I believe special education teachers are the best person to respond to the needs of students who need a lot of curriculum adaptation"*. The mean score for this statement was 1.1, indicating Thai teachers were disagreeing with this statement, indicating they believed general education teachers were just as able to adapt curriculum for said students, as were special educators. This stance is further supported by their disagreement with Item 4, mean score 1.2,

*“Receiving extra support in the classroom is necessary in helping me to be able to teach children with Autism in regular classrooms”* and, Item 19, mean score 1.1, *“I feel that I do not have much knowledge of Autism”*.

The responses to these three items of teacher effectiveness indicated Thai teachers were confident about having students with Autism in their classes and felt prepared in catering to individual student need. They were less positive however in their responses to teacher effectiveness items that addressed their experience and perceived success in teaching students with Autism. For example, Item 2 read, *“I have experience to teach children with Autism effectively”*. This item returned a mean score of 1.8, indicating teachers disagreed with this statement.

High levels of agreement were given to all but one of the six item statements of the social inclusion construct. These items asked participants to score their beliefs to statements such as *“I am aware of the social needs of each student in my class”* (Item 14), and *“To be accepted socially is the main important thing for my classroom”* (Item 11). It was evident from the data that Thai teachers had positive attitudes toward the social inclusion of students with Autism. The only statement of the social inclusion construct to which teachers gave a less than positive response was Item 22 that stated, *“I feel that students in my classroom socially reject children with Autism socially”*. This item returned a mean score of 2.1.

There returned a significant difference between the mean scores for the social inclusion (2.8) and teacher effectiveness (1.7) constructs. A paired t-test of these two constructs returned a value of  $p < .0001$  and a significant negative paired sample correlation of -1.72.

## Discussion

Results from the *Teacher Attitudes Survey* indicated that Thai teachers had a positive attitude to inclusion and were positive in their ability to cater to the individual needs of students with an Autism Spectrum Disorder in their classes. Their responses indicated a sound understanding of their roles in the successful inclusion of students with Autism into regular education classrooms, and highlighted their awareness of a variety of systemic and environmental factors that facilitate inclusion.

Teacher confidence (effectiveness) in meeting the educational needs of students with Autism overall was reported to be limited, particularly in the areas of experience and perceived success. Teachers demonstrated confidence in their knowledge and abilities to cater to the needs of students with Autism but expressed they had neither the experience nor the success in teaching students with Autism. This study shows that there is ongoing need to assist teacher's build their confidence and to provide opportunities for successful engagement in the education of students with Autism. This opportunity for success is critical to the formation of a positive attitude. “Respondents

who perceived themselves as competent appear to hold positive attitudes toward inclusion” (Avramidis et.al., 2000, p. 207).

Teachers in this study reported a positive understanding about the social inclusion of students with Autism in the regular school setting. They recognised the value of social inclusion and their role in the facilitation of social opportunities for students with Autism in their classroom. Teachers were less positive however when it came to reporting whether or not students in their class would socially reject students with Autism.

Irrespective of age, gender and years of teaching experience, teachers in Thailand were found to be supportive of inclusion, with responses alluding to positive attitudes toward students with Autism. Teachers reported knowledge of appropriate pedagogy and skills to support students with Autism in their classrooms but requested more

experience. Social inclusion for students with Autism was valued and promoted within regular education settings.

### Conclusion

To conclude, schools in Thailand supported the underpinning premise of inclusion, in that students with special needs, including Autism, were educated alongside their typically developing peers. The respondent teacher beliefs and attitudes reported as positive, particularly for students on the Autism Spectrum enrolled in mainstream classes. The focal elements of attitude: attitudes toward inclusion, teacher effectiveness, academic climate, and social inclusion affirmed a confidence and a positive attitude among Thai teachers to the education of students with an Autism Spectrum Disorder.

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