



One third of Singaporeans think Singapore is an inclusive society

Lien Foundation's Inclusive Attitudes Survey examines Singaporeans' views of inclusiveness with regard to children with special needs and education

One in 10 Singaporeans are confident of interacting with children with special needs

71% are supportive of inclusive education, but gap exists; for only half of parents polled are comfortable having their child seated next to a child with special needs in class

30 May 2016

1. The **Inclusive Attitudes Survey (General Public)** has revealed a gap between our ideological support for inclusiveness for children with special needs and our actions – especially in social acceptance, education and laws. The survey found broadbased support for inclusive education (71%) but low interactions with children of special needs. Only half of parents polled are comfortable having their own child seated next to a child with special needs in class.
2. The Lien Foundation commissioned Blackbox Research to conduct the survey to examine how truly inclusive Singapore is, focusing its questions **on the experience of inclusion in daily life and early education**. In April 2016, over 1,000 people were polled about their views and attitudes towards children with special needs.
3. In addition to the above-mentioned findings, the survey found that Singaporeans aspire towards greater inclusion:
 - a. Close to half (49%) think new laws are needed to better promote the rights of children with special needs

- b. Majority (78%) believe that the education of children with special needs should be made compulsory as every child has the right to be educated. (In Singapore, children with special needs are currently exempted from the Compulsory Education Act.)
 - c. Almost three quarters of respondents (69%) feel that the presence of children with special needs in the same classroom will help typically-developing children learn to be more accepting of diversity
 - d. Close to half of the parents (47%) polled indicated their wish to let their child have more opportunities to interact with children with special needs
- 4. However, when asked about the current level of acceptance and degree of social interaction,
 - a. One in ten (11%) were of the view that Singaporeans are not willing to share public spaces with children with special needs
 - b. More than half (64%) think that Singaporeans are willing to share public spaces with children with special needs, but not interact with these children
 - c. Just 8% felt that Singaporeans in general are willing to go the extra mile to make a child with special needs feel welcomed

Casting a mirror on whether Singapore is inclusive

- 5. These responses suggest that Singaporeans are more tolerant than accepting of those with special needs. Only a third of the respondents (32%) agree that typically developing children are comfortable interacting with children with special needs.
- 6. "Singaporeans embrace the idea of inclusion, but there is a gap between what we think and what we do. We must be brave enough to ask ourselves why," said Mr Ng Tze Yong, Programme Manager, Lien Foundation. "Building handicapped ramps, parking lots and toilets is the easy part. We now need to move beyond that to dismantle the obstacles in our minds and the barriers in our hearts."

Lack of interaction a key cause

7. One of the possible reasons for low tolerance or acceptance of children with special needs is the general lack of interaction between the public and such children. For over a third of respondents, children with special needs are not part of their social circle. One in four respondents with some association with children with special needs (through family, friends' children, neighbours or the community) report that they have casual interactions with them (for eg. passing by them on the streets or sitting next to them on the bus) once a year or never. However, the survey indicated that Singaporeans' uncertainty about interacting with children with special needs falls when the frequency of their interactions rises.

8. Noting this correlation, Dr Kenneth Poon, Researcher and Clinical Psychologist said, "If we can create opportunities at every level of society to make full participation and inclusion a way of our life, Singaporeans - regardless of their abilities or disabilities - would have correspondingly more chances to interact on a deeper level to form friendships and shared interests. This way, negative attitudes can gradually give way to mutual understanding and respect. Preschools are a great starting point to seed this process of change."

Normalising interactions through inclusive education

9. The provision of inclusive education¹ to preschoolers can provide a platform for children with different abilities to interact. In the survey, only 26% of parents say their typically developing child has a friend with special needs. 64% of parents whose child does not have a friend with special needs cited the lack of conducive opportunities for interaction as the main reason.

¹ Inclusive education in the survey is defined as an approach to education where:

- All children are valued equally and have equal opportunities to participate meaningfully in class activities, regardless of their needs;
- The culture, curriculum and environment of the school responds to the diversity of children's needs, with the best interests of the child as the primary consideration. Dignity and the freedom to make one's choices during the learning process are valued over convenience and speed;
- Inclusion in school is recognised as an important aspect of greater inclusion in society.

10. Mr Tim Oei, CEO of AWWA, the non-profit preschool operator of Singapore's first inclusive preschool, Kindle Garden, said, "We firmly believe that inclusive education is a critical change agent to developing an inclusive society. When our children, regardless of disabilities and differences have the opportunity to play and learn together, they will learn values that celebrate and respect differences." With an environment and curriculum designed to let children with special needs and typically developing children learn and grow together, Kindle Garden has received enthusiastic support from parents and the public. To date, all places in Kindle Garden have been taken since it started operations in January 2016. This affirms the growing appetite and desire for inclusive education among Singaporeans, just as the survey has also shown with 71% of respondents in support of such education.

11. Currently, however, only 14% of respondents who are parents with preschoolers say their child has classmates with special needs. "Inclusion in society cannot succeed without inclusion in schools, for a school is a microcosm of society. Schools are where we demonstrate to children what's important to us as Singaporeans, and what's not," said Mr Ng.

Awareness and knowledge promotes understanding

12. According to the survey, Singaporeans are more accepting towards children with special needs when informed and made aware of the children's condition in advance; 75% of respondents say they will be more understanding and less judgmental if the child with special needs' disruptive behaviour arises. Being upfront is especially important for children with special needs whose condition is not easily noticeable. This preference for prior information suggests that preparation and education can ease relations and improve comfort levels.

Communication & education

13. Other possible ways to build greater inclusion are through appropriate exposure and education. "We need to allow for and create more

opportunities to facilitate appropriate interactions with children with special needs. This will let Singaporeans appreciate both the strengths and limitations of these children, as well as gain positive modelling on how to relate and connect with the children,” said Mr Tang Hui Nee, Educational Psychologist, Assistant Director and Head of Community Services, KK Women's and Children's Hospital. He added, “This way, we begin to demystify the beliefs and negative stereotypes of children with special needs. Over time, with increased visibility and acceptance of these children in our midst, the unfounded fears or discomfort of including them in our daily lives will fade away.”

Laws that uphold or promote inclusion

14. While public education can improve society's acceptance of children with special needs, legislation is another key area that can create an important structure of support for inclusion. In the survey, close to half of those polled (49%) think new laws are needed to protect the rights of children with special needs. Majority of respondents (78%) believe that education of children with special needs should be made compulsory as every child has the right to be educated.

15. “When there are no laws to mandate inclusive education or make education for children with special needs compulsory, any provision of inclusion will unfortunately still be considered a privilege instead of a right. That impacts the allocation of resources to support these children with special needs,” said Ms Peggy Zee, Early Childhood Consultant. “As an inclusive society, we have a responsibility to ensure equitable resources so children with special needs are not disadvantaged.”

16. While Japan has such laws to safeguard the development of children with special needs, Singapore has not made education of special needs children mandatory. However, Singapore has acceded to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child since October 1995. Singapore is also a

signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities that enshrines the right to education as part of Article 24. The question remains if current laws provide sufficient impetus to support or promote inclusion for children with special needs, and if there is a need for new legislation to safeguard their interests.

Moving from tolerance to respect and relationships

17. The insights from the survey can help move our society from tolerance to respect, and to creating meaningful relationships with children with special needs. Improving public understanding and knowledge of children with special needs, making inclusive education widely available and creating pervasive opportunities for interactions with children with special needs – these measures can unlock the doors of many more hearts to embrace inclusion and put it into practice – in schools and the community, and from colleagues to families and friends.

18. To better understand the position and perspectives of children with special needs and their families, the Lien Foundation also posed similar questions from the Inclusive Attitudes Survey to 750 parents of children with special needs. These results, which shed new light onto the needs of a community facing significant challenges and responsibilities, will be released in June 2016.

Annex A - Executive Summary of the Inclusive Attitudes Survey

Annex B - Results Presentation: Inclusive Attitudes Survey by BlackBox Research

~oOo~

About the survey & methodology

The survey was formulated with the assistance of a steering committee comprising five experts from diverse professions, all of whom have direct experience working with special needs children and their families. They are: Mr Daniel Koh, Psychologist, Insight Mind Centre, Dr Kenneth Poon, Associate Professor, Office of Education Research, Early Childhood & Special Needs Education, National Institute of Education, Ms Peggy Zee, Founder of Zee Preschool, Mr Tang Hui Nee, Educational Psychologist, Assistant Director and Head of Community Services, KK Women's and Children's Hospital and Mr Tim Oei, CEO, AWWA. It was conducted through an online platform in April 2016, reaching out to a total of 1086 respondents. Together, they formed a representative sample of Singaporeans on key demographic parameters including gender, age, ethnicity, income, and housing type.

About the Lien Foundation

www.lienfoundation.org

The Lien Foundation is a Singapore philanthropic house noted for its model of radical philanthropy. It breaks new ground by investing in innovative solutions, convening strategic partnerships and catalysing action on social and environmental challenges. The Foundation seeks to foster exemplary early childhood education, excellence in eldercare and effective environmental sustainability in water and sanitation. In the area of early childhood education, the Foundation aims to create a better playing field by strengthening capacity in this area and opening up opportunities for disadvantaged preschoolers.

To advocate greater access to quality early childhood education, the Foundation commissioned a study, *Vital Voices for Vital Years*, that examined leaders' views on improving Singapore's preschool sector. In June 2012, the Lien Foundation released a global benchmark study called *Starting Well* that ranked 45 countries on their provision of preschool education. The use of I.T forms a key strategy in the Foundation's efforts to increase efficiencies and enhance professionalism in the preschool sector.

The Foundation championed a community-based model of care where specialists go into mainstream preschools to help children with learning difficulties. Its success has inspired a scaled-up national version in Singapore. In its push for inclusivity in education, the Foundation set up Singapore's first inclusive preschool, *Kindle Garden*, with AWWA. To improve outcomes for disadvantaged preschoolers, the Foundation spearheaded *Circle of Care*, a child-centric model of care where teachers, social workers and therapists look after the children's holistic development and the needs of their families in an integrated way.

Media contacts

Joanne Lee	Qeren Communications	joanne@qeren.biz	+65 9002 7696
Genevieve Kuek	Qeren Communications	gen@qeren.biz	+65 9763 3110