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# Perspectives of Mainstream Students with Special Educational Needs on Inclusion

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## ABSTRACT

The increase in the number of students with special educational needs (SEN) studying in mainstream schools in Singapore has largely been influenced by international developments in inclusive education practices. This has led to strong advocacy towards the inclusion of these students in local mainstream schools. Despite increased support and resources to implement inclusion and inclusive education practices, there has not been substantial investigation into how these practices are perceived by local students with SEN. This research project seeks to examine the perspectives of students with SEN on the inclusion and inclusive education practices in their regular mainstream schools and classes. An in-depth qualitative approach was used to generate data through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with three students with SEN who were attending literacy intervention lessons in a local SEN organisation. A thematic analysis coding system was employed in analysing the transcribed data. Students' perspectives were organized in the results according to a framework based on three guiding questions: (1) To what extent do students with SEN feel included (or excluded) in their schools and classrooms, i.e. during both academic and social situations?; and (2) What academic or social-emotional barriers do they face that may affect their perspectives of the inclusion or inclusive education practices in their mainstream schools and classrooms; and (3) How can these barriers be overcome? The findings indicate that students had both positive and negative perspectives on the following themes that emerged: Teachers' attitudes, the school system, academic support and peer support. Barriers related to the themes were also identified with recommendations as to how these can be overcome. These recommendations include a need to develop teachers' attitudes further, to explore later school start times, to regulate homework assignment and to promote a culture of respect in the classroom. Future research could look at expanding the criteria and numbers of the sample group and supplementing questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with field observations.

**Keywords:** Inclusion; Inclusive practice; SEN

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## INTRODUCTION

The idea of inclusion and inclusive educational practices constitute both a rhetoric and reality which has largely neglected the opinions of students with SEN. On the other hand, the perspectives of teachers, teacher assistants and parents have been sought over countless studies (Hwang and Evans, 2011; Yeo, Chong, Neihart and Huan, 2014). However, the need to listen to those who are directly involved and experiencing the practices first-hand is inherent for successful progress for inclusion and inclusive education practices.

Few studies have investigated the perspectives of students with SEN within the local context in Singapore. Moreover, these studies have mainly focused on students with visual impairments and autism (West, Houghton, Taylor and Phua, 2004; Poon et al., 2012). The majority of students with SEN have been overlooked, especially those with learning difficulties such as dyslexia, which actually make up the greatest percentage of local students with SEN (Lim, 2016).

The main objective of the current research project is therefore based on the principle that the perspectives of students with SEN matter. Although many studies on inclusion and inclusive education practices have been undertaken worldwide, their findings cannot be directly transferred to the local context. This is because Singapore's inclusion and inclusive education practices are still at the infancy stage, while most of the research mentioned below was undertaken in countries with a more established inclusion and inclusive education system. Therefore, listening to the perspectives of students with SEN in Singapore and understanding their experiences in local mainstream schools and classrooms is central to the current research project in order to ensure appropriate provision for students with SEN is in place. The findings of the current research project could be used as points of recommendations for existing teacher preparatory programmes, schoolwide programmes or SEN support guidelines in mainstream schools to be reviewed.

### Definitions used in the current research project

For the purposes of the current research project, the following descriptions of terms will apply:

#### Inclusion

According to Humphrey and Lewis (2008), inclusion is part of a much larger picture than simply being placed in a class within the mainstream school setting. They note that this involves four main domains - presence, participation, acceptance and achievement. The first domain, presence, refers to attendance and the use of withdrawal and segregation. Participation, on the other hand, refers to the quality of the learning experience and

engagement in activities. The third domain, acceptance, refers to being accepted by peers and staff, with diversity valued. Finally, achievement refers to students in the mainstream schools achieving in the academic, social, personal and emotional aspects. 'Inclusion' in this case, therefore refers to being included physically, emotionally, socially and academically in all aspects of school life.

### **Inclusive education**

'Inclusive educational practices' will be used to refer to a set of practices that promotes inclusion as described above. For the purposes of the current research project, the terms 'inclusion' and 'inclusive education' will be used interchangeably.

### **Students with Special Educational Needs (SEN)**

Students with 'Special Educational Needs' (SEN) will refer to children and young people who have special educational needs, referring to those who have learning difficulties or disabilities that make it harder for them to learn than most peers of the same age. These students could be physically, mentally, socially, emotionally or cognitively delayed, which places them behind their peers in terms of development. These delays could be in the form of learning difficulties, specific learning impairments, sensory or physical disabilities, communication disorders and medical or health conditions (Hampshire County Council, 2016). Their needs cannot be met within the regular classroom setting of a mainstream school and thus, they require specialised instructions to meet their unique needs.

However, considering that the SEN population is very diverse and different populations have different needs, each population might end up with very different perspectives. Hence, this research project will only focus on a similar population - students with dyslexia. While the studies in the literature review look at students with various mild to moderate SEN, the current research project is therefore targeted at only students with dyslexia.

This research project considers the various academic and social-emotional aspects, as well as barriers that may affect the perspectives of these students. In the past, students with special needs tended to be educated separately from their typically developing peers. They were either home-schooled or attended special schools (McLeskey, Landers, Williamson and Hoppey, 2012; Sailor, 2014). As a result, there was very little interaction between students with SEN and other students. However, changes in special educational policies have paved the way for students with SEN to be given the same opportunity as typically developing students to be educated in regular mainstream schools and classes (Forlin and Lian, 2008). This then gives them the chance to have 'mainstream' academic and social-emotional experiences.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### I. Physical Inclusion: Policy Changes

In recent years, the policy of enrolling students with SEN in mainstream schools has largely been influenced by international developments leading to changes in national legislation. For example, ever since the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994; Gibb et al., 2007), governments around the world have slowly adopted the principle of inclusive education to inform policy and practice. As a result, the number of students with SEN in mainstream schools has grown steadily over recent years (Paton, 2009; Forlin, 2006).

Similarly, in the local scene, ever since Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong made the call for an inclusive society (Lim et al., 2013), changes were made to the educational policy in a bid to foster inclusion and create an inclusive education system for all students, especially those with SEN. For example, there was a significant increase in funding allocation for the redevelopment of school infrastructure and professional development of mainstream teachers to better support students with SEN in mainstream schools (Poon, Musti-Ra and Wettasinghe, 2013). Allied educators were also introduced in mainstream schools to provide remediation for students with SEN (Poon et al., 2013). As a result of these changes, more students with SEN are being educated in mainstream schools with their typically developing peers. In fact, since 2015, 18,000 students with mild SEN are studying in mainstream schools, compared to only 13,000 students in 2013. This constitutes about four per cent of the total student population, with students with dyslexia forming the largest group (Lim, 2016). More emphasis is also being placed on supporting these students. For example, all primary schools have recently introduced the school-based dyslexia remediation programme (Siau, 2015) and are now staffed with at least one Learning Support Coordinator for both literacy and mathematics remediation (Ministry of Education, 2004; 2007). Questions arise however, as to how the enrolment of students with SEN is being managed in the mainstream schools and whether the inclusion of these students has resulted in satisfactory outcomes on their part.

### II. Academic Inclusion Practices: Perspectives and Barriers

There is in fact, a body of research internationally that focuses on the perspectives of students with SEN as a result of being educated alongside their typically developing peers in regular mainstream schools and classes. Several studies in the literature have discussed these perspectives with regards to their academic experiences in these settings. For example, students with SEN also have academic aspirations similar to their typically developing peers. According to Kurth and Mastergeorge (2010), students with SEN placed in an inclusive education setting had increased learning expectations and in fact outperformed their peers in special education settings. This therefore suggests that these students also aspire to achieve a certain level of academic success in their respective regular mainstream schools, despite their SEN.

However, research evidence on academic performance of students with SEN in inclusive settings has shown mixed results. Most of the research findings are from comparative studies that compare student outcomes in inclusive and non-inclusive settings. These outcomes, whether positive or negative, might suggest how these students would perceive and evaluate inclusion and inclusive education.

### **Inclusive Classrooms**

For example, a study by Cole, Waldron and Majd (2004) found that students with SEN in inclusive classrooms have a stronger academic performance than students in non-inclusive classrooms. Similarly, Rea, McLaughlan and Walther-Thomas (2002) also found that students with SEN experience better academic success when placed in inclusive settings. The students in the inclusive classrooms obtained higher grades in various subjects in comparison to their peers in the pullout classes.

In addition to progressing academically, students with SEN who attended inclusive classrooms have also been found to receive better support as compared to their peers in non-inclusive classrooms. For example, Kurth, Lyon and Shogren (2015) found that a high level of support was given to students with SEN through non-traditional co-teaching arrangements to support student engagement and self-reliance as well as collaboration with other staff to discuss students' progress. Their findings were based on classroom activities in six US schools that were structured and organised to include students with SEN, utilising a co-teaching model. This approach included diverse elements of instruction through self-determination and student direction, frequent feedback and teaching as well as multiple means of representation, expression, engagement and technology.

Students with SEN felt supported by their teachers' efforts in helping them to develop self-direction and self-determination. They also appreciated the fact that teachers went over content several times and that they were always available for help (Shogren et al., 2015). This positive feedback may be indicative of greater student satisfaction with the programs in the inclusive settings, hence in turn, might translate into a positive perception by the students on the inclusion and inclusive educational practices in their mainstream schools. However, it should be noted that the six schools were exemplars of successful inclusive school reform in the United States. Hence, the findings of this study would not necessarily translate to other schools in the region or beyond.

Moreover, despite these positive outcomes, there have also been studies that have indicated placement in an inclusive academic environment did not inevitably result in better self-concept for students with SEN. This in turn, might therefore not translate to positive perspectives of the inclusion and inclusive educational practices in their respective schools and classes. According to Bear, Kortering and Brazier (2006), a typical characteristic of students with SEN is poor academic performance, regardless of

educational setting. This then suggests that they may be predicted to have a lower academic self- concept compared to their typically developing peers. In fact, Lindsay (2007) found that some students with SEN, despite being in inclusive classrooms, reported negative self-concepts, and hence negative perspectives on the inclusion and inclusive educational practices in their schools and classrooms. This could be because they recognised that their typically developing peers succeed with less effort, yet they need to work harder, to achieve the same results.

Furthermore, Lackaye and Margalit (2006) found that feelings of academic competence play an important role in students' self-concepts. In their study, students with SEN had lower grades, and seemed to invest less effort, leading to a lower level of academic self- concept, a level similar to students without SEN who had failed in their academic achievement. Consequently, they held higher negative perspectives on the inclusive academic structure in their respective mainstream schools.

### **III. Special Groups and Pull-out Classes**

In addition to inclusive classrooms, students with SEN also attended special groups and pull-out classes. According to Hurt (2012), pull-out classes involve taking students with SEN out of their regular mainstream classes to receive some form of individualized or small group instruction. The aim of such instruction is to target the student's individual learning needs, those that might not be effectively addressed in the regular mainstream classroom.

Some studies have found that the perspectives of these students on special groups and pull-out classes were quite positive. For example, Vaughn and Klingner (1998) found that some students with SEN preferred to receive instructions from special groups or pull-out classes for the majority of the day, rather than in their regular mainstream classes, as they felt that the work was easier and fun, and that they received the help that they needed in order to complete their work.

However, in contrast to the findings previously discussed, other studies have found that not all students with SEN had positive perspectives on pull-out classrooms. For example, Heimdahl-Mattson and Roll-Pettersson (2007) examined the perspectives of 12 students with reading and writing difficulties on the support that they received in pull-out classrooms. They found that the students felt some ambivalence towards leaving their regular classrooms to attend these small group lessons.

### **IV. Teacher Assistant**

Teacher assistants have been found to be one source of support for students with SEN in regular mainstream schools and classes (Wren, 2017). They assist in providing instruction in academic subjects and supporting students with challenging behaviours (Tews and

Lupart, 2008). Despite their roles in assisting students with SEN in inclusive settings, there is limited research on their impact on the academic outcomes of students with SEN (Blatchford, Bassett, Brown and Webster, 2009).

Despite that, the perspectives of students with SEN on the support provided by teacher assistants have been well-documented. For example, the students in Chmiliar's (2009) study still spent time in the learning assistance lessons. As a result of attending these learning assistance lessons, two of them mentioned that they experienced teasing. Similarly, based on Cooney, Jahoda, Gumley and Knott's study (2006), a majority of the students with SEN studying in pull-out classrooms in the mainstream school setting also experienced bullying and teasing. They had indicated that they were treated in a stigmatized manner by their typically developing peers because of the 'different' support they received. In fact, Rose et al., (2015a) and Rose et al., (2015b) found that support from teachers and school staff served as a predictor for increased victimisation in bullying. It seemed that when students were viewed as dependent on adult support, these students tended to be victimized and bullied more than those who were more independent.

O'Rourke and Houghton (2008) also found that even though the participants in their study found teacher assistant support to be most helpful, there was still the issue of potential social stigma, where they were viewed less favourably by their peers because of this one-to-one support. This was also expressed by students with SEN in Tews and Lupart's (2008) study. It was observed that some of the students felt that the existence of a teacher assistant, although intended to facilitate inclusion, had instead created inadvertent effects on the autonomy of these students. In fact, it made students feel even more different from their peers and thus excluded from the group.

## **V. Homework**

Homework was also perceived to be a negative experience for students with SEN in McCray, Vaughn and Neal's (2001) study. They found homework to be a difficult, frustrating and laborious task and felt that it would be better if they were given the opportunity to complete it at school with the help of their teachers. In a more recent study conducted by Wilson and Rhodes (2010), although about sixty-five percent of the students felt that homework was meaningful and reinforced concepts learnt in class, a significant eighty-seven percent of students felt that they were assigned too much homework each night and that the homework was boring and repetitive.

## **VI. Social-Emotional Inclusion Practices: Perspectives and Barriers**

Research has also focused on the social-emotional experiences of students with SEN in inclusive and non-inclusive settings. Some studies have found that there are students with SEN who experience difficulties in social skills and therefore, lower social self-

perspectives compared to their typically developing peers in mainstream schools (Luciano and Savage, 2007). This is because these students feel that they do not belong within their class, and are often lonely or isolated (Tavares, 2011). In fact, according to Canadian statistics, the majority of students with SEN who attend regular mainstream classes are at an increased risk for social exclusion (Lindsay and McPherson, 2012; Vreeman and Carroll, 2007). On the other hand, several other studies have found positive social results for students with SEN (Frederickson, Simmonds, Evans and Soulsby, 2007; Chmiliar, 2009).

## VII. Student-Teacher and Peer Relationships

Chmiliar (2009), for example, found that a majority of students with SEN who were placed in mainstream schools and classes reported positive experiences. They reported strong student-teacher relationships, with the teacher playing a major role in supporting them and positively affirming them. Another study conducted by Loreman et al., (2008) found that students with SEN who were studying in a regional school division in Canada generally had positive perspectives about school. They enjoyed going to school and felt that the school gave them sufficient opportunities for self-efficacy and social interaction. These students felt satisfied with the expectations that their teacher placed on them and this resulted in strong self-esteem.

Besides teacher-student relationships and a positive school culture, positive peer relationships also steered students with SEN towards forming positive perspectives of the inclusion and inclusive educational practices in their regular mainstream schools and classes. According to Avramidis (2010), the social participation of students with SEN in regular mainstream schools and classes does result in positive social situations for them. For example, Chmiliar (2009) found that students with SEN enjoyed the fact that they were able to have friends from the mainstream school settings, something that was also found in Estell et al., study (2008) where some students with SEN developed friendships and acquired membership in a peer group. In fact, it seems that more inclusive classrooms can indeed aid some aspects of social acceptance, such as reciprocal friendships.

As mentioned above, some students with SEN had strong student-teacher relationships, and this might certainly contribute to them having positive perspectives on the inclusion and inclusive educational practices in their mainstream schools. However, not all students with SEN enjoy such relationships with their teachers. Gibb et al., (2007) found that inflexible staff attitudes contributed to students with SEN having negative perspectives on the inclusion and inclusive education practices in their regular mainstream schools and classes. For example, teachers had difficulty changing their perspectives of adequate progress and in general, had an unwillingness to adapt their teaching styles to fit the needs of the students with SEN. They were also unwilling to adapt behaviour expectations and they merely saw a student as 'naughty' instead of



recognising the SEN viewpoint. This shows that the characteristics of teachers also played a part in students with SEN forming negative perspectives of the inclusion and inclusive educational practices of their regular mainstream schools and classes.

### **VIII. Bullying**

As previously mentioned, teasing was perceived as a negative experience for some students with SEN. This however, was not the only negative experience reported. The study by Monchy, Pijl and Zandberg (2004) illustrates a common theme, bullying, that is often one of the reasons for students with SEN to have negative perspectives on the inclusion and inclusive educational practices in their mainstream schools and classes. According to Kokkinos and Antoniadou (2013), bullying is the infliction of psychological distress upon victims, which is repetitive and intentional in nature with a perceived imbalance of power between the bully and the victim. Bullying has in fact been found to be one of the barriers to successful inclusion and inclusive education practices in regular mainstream schools. Bullying includes isolation, physical bullying or even emotional bullying (Gibb et al., 2007). Emotional bullying was found to be the most frequent form of bullying, where students with SEN were called names, received derogatory remarks and even condescending attitudes, not only from peers, but also from teaching staff.

Social exclusion has also been found to negatively contribute to the perspectives of students with SEN on the inclusion and inclusive education practices in their mainstream schools and classes. For example, a study conducted by Monchy et al., (2004) found that some students with SEN, who were placed in full-time regular education settings, were socially included less than their typically developing peers. This was exacerbated by teachers not facilitating inclusion, because they themselves had too positive a view of the situation. The teachers had also underestimated the frequency of bullying of students with SEN or of them bullying others. This is consistent with the findings of Swearer et al., (2012) study, where teachers in Hong Kong tended to overrate the social position of their students with SEN and thus, underestimate the degree of bullying. In fact, Bradshaw, Sawyer and O'Brennan (2007) found that 71.4% of the teachers in their study believed that only 15% or less of their students were bullied, whereas their students indicated that 40.6% were bullied. This clearly reiterates the point made by Swearer et al., (2012) where teachers underestimate the degree of bullying that takes place in school.

### **IX. Social Participation**

Despite Avramidis' (2010) findings that there is positive social participation of students with SEN in the regular mainstream schools and classes, this is not always the case. For example, Estell et al., (2008) found that some students with SEN do have difficulties with peer social functioning. They tended to have higher rates of social isolation due to low social competence and rejection by their typically developing peers. Both Pijl and Frostad (2010) and Rujis and Peetsma (2009) also found that on average, students with

SEN have fewer friends than their typically developing peers and that they interacted less with their peers. The fact that students with SEN are less accepted and have lesser social relationships (Garrote, Dessemontet and Opitz, 2017) makes it hardly surprising that students with SEN in regular mainstream schools and classes reported higher levels of loneliness and thus negative perspectives of the inclusion and inclusive education practices in their respective schools (Pijl, Skaalvik and Skaalvik, 2010; Rubin, Fredstrom and Bowker, 2008; Bossaert, Colpin, Pijl and Petry, 2012).

Despite the negative findings as discussed above, it appears that social acceptance also depends very much on acceptable social behaviour. Some studies have found that despite having SEN, some of these students were still accepted by their peers due to their own positive social behaviour (Koster, Pijl, Nakken and Van Houten, 2010). According to Tsang (2013), apart from social interaction ability, another critical factor in positive social relationships in the regular mainstream school settings is acceptable social behaviour. While students with SEN who exhibit low levels of positive social behaviour, such as inappropriate assertiveness and impulsiveness (Poulou, 2010) are rejected, those who exhibit low levels of negative social behaviour are well accepted (Koster et al., 2010). In this case, these low levels of negative social behaviour were largely due to good social skills and participation. The consequent successful social inclusion of these students, would engender a more positive perspective on the inclusion and inclusive education practices in their mainstream schools and classes.

In order to address the lack of evidence for SEN students in Singapore, a qualitative study was undertaken.

## **METHOD**

The current research project aimed to gather data relating to the perspectives of three students with SEN on the inclusion and inclusive practices in their regular mainstream schools and classes. It also examined how included these students with SEN are in their mainstream schools and whether they face any barriers to inclusion and inclusive education. The guiding questions for the research project were as follows:

1. To what extent do students with SEN feel included (or excluded) in their schools and classrooms, i.e. during both academic and social situations?
2. What academic or social-emotional barriers do they face that may affect their perspectives on the inclusion or inclusive education practices in their mainstream schools and classrooms?
3. How can these barriers be overcome?

The current research project therefore involved two methods of data collection; (a) collating responses from questionnaires, and (b) follow-up semi-structured interviews.

In the first phase, questionnaires were given out to the participants. The second phase, which was the main data collection method, utilized the semi-structured interview method. A letter containing information about the current research project and parental consent forms was firstly sent to parents of potential participants by hand or via email. Potential participants were selected based on their age (10 years old) and that they have been receiving literacy intervention at the Dyslexia Association of Singapore (DAS), for at least a term. DAS offers several programmes for students who are diagnosed with dyslexia. The Main Literacy Programme (MLP), which covers phonics instruction, grammar and writing components as well as reading comprehension support, is catered for students from 7 years old to 17 years old. Potential participants selected were all attending the MLP at the time of the research project.

**Participants**

Five parents of children attending DAS agreed to their child's participation in the current research project. They returned the signed consent forms and were then given a time schedule indicating when their child needed to come for the questionnaire session. These sessions were held either before or after their child's existing classes at the learning centre (Note: Out of these five participants, two participants had to be dropped from the research project as they withdrew from the literacy intervention programme before the data collection process.)

Table 1: Gender and mean age of participants

<b>GENDER</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>MEAN AGE</b>
Female	2	10.42
Male	1	10.16
(Total)	3	10.19

During the questionnaire session, the researcher went through the details of the current research project with the participants and addressed any questions that they had with regards to the research project. The researcher then asked for the participants' written and verbal consent to participate in the current research project, emphasising that there were no right or wrong answers and that they did not need to answer a question if they felt uncomfortable doing so. The researcher also explained that participation in the current research project was entirely voluntary and that the participants could withdraw from it at any point.

The researcher then proceeded with the questionnaire. The questionnaire, which had sixteen questions in all, related to inclusion and inclusive education practices in regular mainstream schools. Questions ranged from the things participants liked or disliked about school, the extra support they receive in school to whether there were any changes they would like to see in school (Refer to Appendix 1 for the full questionnaire).

Once all participants had completed the questionnaire session, a different time schedule was then sent to their parents to inform them when their child needed to come for the follow-up session: a semi-structured interview session. Again, these sessions were either before or after their child's existing classes at the learning centre.

At the start of each interview session, the researcher sat down with participants and established rapport before commencing the interview. The researcher also reminded them of the previous questionnaire session they had. The researcher informed the participants that the interview session was to allow the researcher to get a better understanding of their responses on the questionnaire that they had completed previously. Participants were also reminded that the interviews would be audio-recorded and assurance was given that their identities would not be known to anyone except the researcher.

During the interview session, the researcher's mobile phone was used to audio-record the conversation between the researcher and the participants. On average, each interview took about twenty-five minutes.

When all interviews were completed, the responses were transcribed for qualitative analysis purposes. After the transcripts were completed, participants were given a copy each to check if the transcripts presented were fair and accurate.

Interview transcripts were then analysed manually. The transcripts were read repeatedly and key phrases and statements relating to the guiding questions were identified and their meanings were interpreted. These were then examined further and statements related to participants' perspectives on the inclusion and inclusive education practices in their respective mainstream schools were developed.

The initial key phrases and statements identified, in relation to the guiding questions, were then used to see what categories and themes would emerge from the data. The data gathered was then grouped according to the themes related to the research questions.

Initially, several codes were identified and they were reviewed a number of times to find links among them. Themes were then recognised and reviewed. Finally, four themes were finalised and defined in Table 2.

Table 2: Themes categories and codes emerging

THEMES	CATEGORIES	CODES
Teachers' Attitudes	i) Positive perspectives of their teachers	- understanding, kind - fierce, strict
	ii) Negative perspectives of their teachers	- no time, self-absorbed in own work - reprimanded and humiliated for not being able to read
School System	i) Negative perspectives of school hours	- too early - too long
	ii) Negative perspectives of school structure	- classroom on the seventh floor
Academic Support	i) Positive perspectives of extra academic support	- extra time - completing tests and examinations in a separate room, less distractions - having a buddy may be helpful
	ii) Negative perspectives of extra academic support	- not necessary to have a buddy - teacher assistant
	iii) Negative perspectives of homework	- too much homework - same type of homework every day - to be given on alternate days
	iv) Negative perspectives of teaching styles	- teaching styles (no variety to teaching approaches, teacher-centred)
Support from Peers	i) Positive perspectives from their peers	- peers understanding their learning difficulties and extra academic support - peers helping them in their school work - get along well with friends and classmates
	ii) Negative perspectives from their peers	- peers thinking that they are not clever, and not able to read or spell because of dyslexia

## RESULTS

Two types of data will be discussed in this section. The first part is the qualitative findings where the data takes on the framework of a case study analysis with each part beginning with a brief description of each participant's experiences and perspectives. These were extracted from the data drawn from the questionnaire responses and interview transcripts. Secondly, these findings were organized into categories and themes.

### Student 1

Student 1 indicated that he likes school because of his friends and Physical Education classes, but is quite neutral when it comes to the work he does in school and his teachers. He has not received any form of formal extra support in school for his difficulties.

### Student 2

Student 2 indicated that she does not particularly enjoy school due to its long hours. Nevertheless, she mentioned that she receives extra help at school, which she has found beneficial. Student 2 also mentioned that she is alright with telling her classmates that she has dyslexia.

### Student 3

Student 3 indicated that in general she enjoys school, though at times she does not feel like going to school because of the early hours. She also reported that she does not receive any form of extra support. The structure of the school is also something Student 3 does not like.

## Theme 1: Teachers' Attitudes

Two categories were found to be related to one another and they were grouped together under this theme. Students' perspectives on their teachers attitudes towards themselves and their needs were identified from data from the transcripts.

### 1. Positive perspectives of their teachers

Students had a more positive perspective of lessons when teachers were understanding and kind. Student 1 expressed how his teacher would willingly re-explain a particular question for him if he does not understand and asks the teacher. Student 1 also mentioned that his teacher is sometimes understanding and treats the majority of the students well, though he did not elaborate much on this.

As for Student 3, she enjoys Art lessons as the teacher is nice and allows them some flexibility during lessons. Student 2 also finds her Science teacher understanding when

she has a problem. She is able to approach her Science teacher even with personal problems - "when I fight with 'Jane' then after that I go to my Science teacher, then my Science teacher go and talk to 'Jane'... then after that now she is okay".

## 2. Negative perspectives of their teachers

Students had a more negative perspective of lessons when teachers were strict and fierce. For example, Student 3 does not like her English Language teacher because she finds that she is very "strict" and "OCD". According to Student 3, things need to go the teacher's way and sometimes, the teacher punishes students for simple reasons like 'yawning'.

Student 2 also does not like her Mother Tongue teacher because "the teacher is so fierce". Interestingly, although she also finds the Science teacher assistant "fierce", she does admit that the teacher assistant does her job well. Nevertheless, she hopes that her teacher can be "not fierce" and "a little kind". Besides that, Student 2 does not find that her English and Math teacher are understanding or approachable as "he only do his own work", "sometimes she got no time" and "if you talk so much later she will get very angry... after that she will [switch off] the aircon and the light". She also thinks that her Math teacher knows about her learning difficulty but is not doing anything about it.

## Theme 2: School System

The way the school functions was also discussed during the interview session. In general, there were no positive perspectives. Two categories (both negative: school hours and school structure) were identified.

### 1. Negative perspectives of school hours

Both Student 2 and Student 3 expressed that school started too early. Student 3 mentioned that she sometimes finds it hard to wake up so early to go to school and hopes that school can start later. Student 2 expressed the same desire for school to start later. However, for Student 2, she also feels that school hours are too long, and as a result affects her focus towards the end of the school day. She also indicated that if school starts later, students can have more rest and will be more focused in school.

### 2 Negative perspectives of school structure

Student 3 expressed her dislike towards the fact that her classroom is located on the 7th floor. She mentioned that it is tiring having to climb up and down the stairs a few times a day. Besides that, she felt that it takes time away from lessons which is "hateful and loathful".

### **Theme 3: Academic Support**

Extra academic support during or after school hours, as well as for examinations and tests may be taken as a measure to see how well-supported students with SEN in a regular mainstream school are. This would then affect how students perceive the inclusion and inclusive education practices in their respective mainstream schools. Under this theme, a total of four categories (positive perspectives of extra academic support; negative perspectives of extra academic support; negative perspectives of homework; negative perspectives of teaching styles) were identified.

#### **1. Positive perspectives of extra academic support**

During the interviews, students were asked about the extra support they receive (or do not receive) in schools. Only Student 2 receives extra time and the opportunity to complete her examinations and tests in a separate room, presumably because she holds a diagnosis of dyslexia. She is also the only participant who receives extra help for her school work in the form of a teacher aide. Student 2 expressed that she has found this extra support helpful. However, although Student 2 does not have a study buddy, she thought that having a buddy would help her. She could then "ask them how to do" questions she needs help on.

Although Student 1 and Student 3 do not receive the opportunity to complete their tests or examinations in a separate room, both agree that this might be helpful for them as there would be fewer distractions.

#### **2. Negative perspectives of extra academic support**

All three participants had no extra support in the form of a buddy specifically assigned to them. Student 1 and Student 3 felt that there was no need for them to have a buddy. Student 3 noted "Why would I need a buddy in the first place? ... I'm fine by myself." Student 1 mentioned that "everybody [doesn't] have a buddy.." and that having a buddy would not really help him. He indicated that he can just ask for help from other classmates.

As for extra time, Student 1 noted that he does not feel that the extra time would be helpful to him because "when I complete the exam, I just literally lay there for like ten to twenty minutes". Student 1, in fact, finishes his tests or examinations much earlier than the allocated time (without the extra time).

Out of all three participants, only Student 2 receives extra support from a teacher assistant. Although Student 2 acknowledged that the teacher assistant is helpful, she still does not like the support as she feels that the teacher assistant "is not a real teacher" but rather just a "relief teacher".



### **3. Negative perspectives of homework**

In every school, homework is given. However, how students perceive homework is an entirely different matter. From the data collected, students had negative perspectives on homework. Student 3 noted that teachers "already gave me heaps of... we already get one Math worksheet everyday". In fact, Student 3 gets more than one Math worksheet every day. She is given an additional course book exercise on top of the Math worksheet every day. Student 2 also thought that homework should be given on alternate days, so that students can have a break.

### **4. Negative perspectives of teaching styles**

All three participants indicated some form of ambivalence towards their teachers' teaching styles. Student 2 noted that she gets confused when the teacher tries to teach using a different method, in response to her classmates' questions. She also gets overwhelmed when the teacher gives her too much information. Student 1 also reported that for certain topics, even after his teacher has re-explained it to him, he still needs some help.

As for Student 3, she mentioned that learning Math now is not the same as how she learnt in P1 and P2, which was fun. She reported that her Math teacher hardly uses manipulatives now and most of the time, only goes through the work on the whiteboard or visualizer, accompanied with some handouts and an occasional video here and there.

## **Theme 4: Support from Peers**

Peer support plays an important role in defining how students perceive themselves, and how they navigate through their school life, both academically and socially. Different areas of support were discussed and shared by the students during the interviews. Two categories were concluded from the data from the interview transcripts.

### **1. Positive perspectives from their peers**

In general, all three participants reported that they got along well with their classmates and peers. They also expressed that they "ask my friend" and that they have friends to help them in their work. Student 2 also reported that her peers do ask why she receives extra support, and that when she explains her learning difficulty to them, they have been understanding and have accepted it positively.

### **2 Negative perspectives from their peers**

Only one participant, Student 2, specifically mentioned that some of her classmates and peers know about her learning difficulty - dyslexia. Although in general, she is alright with

the idea that they know, she talked about some possible negative perspectives - that her peers think of her as 'not clever' and not being able 'to read or spell'.

## DISCUSSION

The first theme that emerged was the teachers' attitudes towards the students. From the research findings, it was seen that different teachers had different attitudes towards the students. How the teachers "interacted" with the students clearly had an impact on how the students perceived the teachers. These findings are certainly in line with previous literature where teachers' attitudes towards the students play a part in influencing the perspectives of students with SEN (Chmiliar, 2009; Loreman et al., 2008; Gibb et al., 2007). Moreover, Spencer and Boon (2006) also found that the two most frequently used adjectives to describe teachers in classrooms where positive learning experiences take place were 'fun' and 'nice'. This is in line with the findings of the current research project where all three participants used the words 'understanding' and 'kind' to describe teachers of particular subjects they had positive learning experiences with, whereas they used the words 'fierce' and 'strict' for teachers of subjects they had negative learning experiences with. This therefore again reiterates the point that the teachers' attitudes towards the students, as well as how the students view their teachers, may affect their perspectives on the lessons, their classroom learning experiences and eventually the school's overall practice of inclusion and inclusive education.

The importance of teacher attitudes and characteristics, when practicing inclusion and inclusive education practices in schools, cannot be over emphasized (Adu, Galloway and Olaoye, 2014). The findings of previous literature and that of the current research project indicate that teachers' actions and words contributed to students' attitudes towards them. This might then affect their student-teacher interpersonal relationships, which in turn determines their perspectives on school and its inclusion and inclusive education practices (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli and Pickeral, 2009). In fact, students consistently identify teacher characteristics that they view as being important and perceive student-teacher relationships to be critical aspects of their academic and social experiences in school (Groves and Welsh, 2010). For example, a high quality student-teacher relationship, characterized by high levels of closeness and low levels of conflict, have been found to positively contribute to students' social-emotional, behavioural and academic adjustment (Roorda, Koomen, Spilt and Oort, 2011). These students are able to regulate their own academic behaviour and develop positive beliefs and attitudes about themselves (Baker, 2006). On the other hand, student-teacher relationships can also be characterized by greater conflict and lower levels of closeness (Murray and Murray, 2004). These students are then more likely to have poor academic, motivational and behavioural outcomes (McCormick, O'Connor, Cappella and McClowry, 2013). No doubt the nature and extent of such relationships may not always be the same for different groups of students and teachers; however, clearly, many students still perceive the student-teacher relationship as a highly influential factor affecting their perspectives on

the school's practices.

The second theme that emerged was how the school system affected the perspectives of the students with SEN. One issue raised by the participants of the current research project was the school hours. The participants felt that school hours were too long and that school started too early in the morning.

It seems that the argument for a later school day is not new. According to the American Academy of Sleep Medicine (AASM), middle and high school should start no earlier than 8.30am (Watson et al., 2017). In Singapore, this translates to students aged between 11 and 18. It is noted however, that the participants of the current study are only 10 years old, one year short of the minimum age of 11. Nevertheless, it might be fair to say that even at 10 years old, students are already feeling the dreariness of early school hours, and hence the reason for such a perspective. In fact, studies have suggested that starting school earlier in the morning prevents children from getting a full night's sleep, which can then affect not only their academic performance, but also their health. According to the *Journal of Clinical Sleep Medicine*, if students are given the opportunity to wake up later in the morning, they will be more focused during the day (Watson et al., 2017). For example, research has found that students in Hong Kong who had their school start times delayed by just 15 minutes, slept a little longer and this actually resulted in better mental health and focus (Chan et al., 2017). However, because many schools in Singapore start before 8 a.m., students are falling short of their sleep targets and in the long term, this has been associated with poor school performance (Bowers and Moyer, 2017)

Despite this, it needs to be taken into consideration firstly, that the students who participated in the studies above did not have SEN. Nevertheless, if typically developing students have such perspectives on school start times and school hours; it is highly likely that this would also apply to students with SEN, considering that they have to work harder than their typically developing peers. Secondly, according to Price (2017), students in America, on average, start school at about 8.10am and spend about 6 to 7 hours (National Center of Education Statistics, 2018) in school. Similarly in Hong Kong, students on average spend 7 hours in school, from 8am in the morning. In Singapore, students on average start school at 7.30am, and similarly spend about 7 hours in school just like their American and Hong Kong counterparts. However, although these students spend the same amount of time in schools, the fact that school starts much earlier in Singapore than in Hong Kong and America is a concern for the majority of the participants in the current research project

Another issue that was raised by Student 3 in the current research project was the physical structure of her school. More specifically, it was the placement of her classroom on the seventh floor of the school building, such that students have to walk up and down seven floors each day, sometimes with heavy school bags. To be fair, there are several

studies that have investigated how the physical structure of a school affects the learning and participation of students, but these studies mostly discuss the effects on and the perspectives of students with physical disabilities (Egilson and Traustadottir, 2009; Eriksson, Welander and Granlund, 2007; Hemmingsson, Gustavsson and Townsend, 2007). To date however, there are very few studies on how the physical structure of a school affects the perspectives of students with SEN, not limited to those with physical disabilities. It seems plausible to suggest that the extra efforts SEN children need to put in to their academic work, will affect their tiredness levels adversely, impacting on their energy for climbing stairs.

The third theme that emerged was the academic support that students received. This is in line with several studies discussed in the literature review that show that academic support is an important factor in the way students perceive inclusion and inclusive education practices in their school (Kurth et al., 2015; O'Rourke and Houghton, 2008; Shogren et al., 2015). For example, students in O'Rourke and Houghton's study (2008) found that the additional support they received from a teacher assistant was especially beneficial. Moreover, the high levels of support students with SEN received in Kurth et al., (2015) study, in terms of co-teaching arrangements and staff collaboration towards students' progress, also helped to support these students' engagement and self-reliance. In fact, according to Martinez (2006), employing a co-teaching instructional model, where there are two teachers in a classroom, increases the likelihood that students will feel supported academically. With better support, these students would therefore have positive experiences of school, and this would probably translate to positive perspectives on the school's inclusion and inclusive education practices.

Besides this co-teaching arrangement, special groups and pull-out classes are also a form of academic support that students with SEN receive. Based on the literature review, students with SEN who received these forms of academic support had mixed perspectives on them (Heimdahl-Mattson and Roll-Pettersson, 2007; Vaughn and Klingner, 1998). However, these findings cannot be replicated in the current research project as none of the participants attended any form of special groups and pull-out classes, apart from Student 2 who received teacher assistant support at the back of the classroom during lessons.

Besides academic support from school staff, peer support arrangements can also be made by engaging the help of one or more peers without SEN to provide academic support to their classmates with SEN (Carter, Sisco, Melekoglu and Kurkowski, 2007; Carter, Cushing, Clark and Kennedy, 2009). Academically, working alongside peers may increase the amount of individualized support.

However, despite the benefits of peer support arrangements for academic purposes (Carter et al., 2007; Carter et al., 2009), the findings of the current research project indicated that the participants did not receive or have never received any form of official

peer support. They do not have a specific buddy assigned to each of them to help them in their academic work. Interestingly, the majority of them also felt that although having a buddy might be helpful, there was no real need to have a buddy.

Homework was also an issue raised by the participants of the current research project. Not only did they feel that there was too much homework, they also felt it was too repetitive. Student 3 felt she was given the same type of homework every day. This finding is certainly in line with previous literature where students with SEN felt that homework was a laborious and negative experience (McCray et al., 2001; Spencer and Boon, 2006; Rhodes and Wilson, 2010). In fact, the sentiments shared by the participants of the current research project echo those of Spencer and Boon's (2006) study where they found that students felt they had an overwhelming workload in some of their classes and usually spend hours on homework every night. Some students also reported feeling stressed by the volume of homework collectively assigned by all their subject teachers (Kohn, 2007). This resulted in the students being burdened and overworked, and hence they would appreciate the 'homework to be given on alternate days' suggestion from Student 2 in the current research project.

Apart from the homework load, similar to Student 3's sentiments, students do not enjoy homework assignments which they feel are boring, routine and repetitious (Pasi, 2006). This is further supported by Groves and Welsh (2010), where students felt that repetitive class work is disengaging and unmotivating. When students feel that their homework assignments are not meaningful (Darling-Hammond and Olivia, 2006), they have a more negative perspective, which can in turn lead to an overall negative perspective on the school's practices.

The last theme that emerged was peer support. This is different from the peer support arrangements previously discussed under academic support. The peer support referred to here, involves one or more peers without SEN providing social support to students with SEN (Carter et al., 2009). This includes reciprocal friendships, being understanding and supportive as well as having tolerant perspectives on their peers with SEN.

From the research findings, the participants of the current research project had indicated good reciprocal friendships with their peers and that their peers were mostly understanding and helped them whenever they needed it. These findings are in line with previous literature where students with SEN were socially accepted and had reciprocal friendships (Chmiliar, 2009; Estell et al., 2008). None of the participants of the current research project indicated any negative peer relationships such as those reported in Garrote et al., (2017) and Pijl et al., (2011) studies. As such, the participants of the current research project may therefore have positive social experiences in school and in turn, this may translate to positive perspectives on their school's inclusion and inclusive education practices.

With regards to peer perceptions on their SEN, the findings of the current research project are somewhat in line with that of the Smith-D'Arezzo and Moore-Thomas' (2010) study. In their study, it was found that typically developing fifth graders largely viewed learning disabilities as a negative construct. More specifically, they saw children with learning disabilities as having a limited mental capacity, amongst others. Some of the comments made by the participants of this study were that they were 'below proficient' and 'not as fast as others'. In this current research project, Student 2 had mentioned that although she was alright with the idea of her peers knowing she has dyslexia, her close friend, who coincidentally also has dyslexia, preferred that they not tell their peers about their learning needs for fear that they may be perceived as 'not clever'.

Another issue raised was the lack of peer support for Student 2 when she was humiliated by her teachers in front of her peers for not being able to read. According to Student 2, she had cried and her peers had laughed at her. There was no mention of any peer that comforted her or gave her any form of support. This highlights an important issue on how peer support begins with children observing how adults around them act towards students with SEN (Diamond and Hong, 2010). Typically developing students who learn and observe empathy and acceptance of students with SEN from an early age will demonstrate positive peer support for their peers with SEN (Novak and Bartelheim, 2012). This prevents any form of negative social experience for students with SEN in mainstream schools and classrooms, and therefore avoids negative perspectives on the school's inclusion and inclusive education practices.

Bullying is also another form of negative social experience previously identified in the literature review. Interestingly, however, the findings of this research project did not match the findings of Rose et al., (2015a) and Rose et al., (2015b), where students with SEN had higher rates of victimisation in inclusive settings. Only student 3 had mentioned that she had been bullied when she was much younger. However, she did not wish to elaborate much on it. It is therefore unclear whether or not this bullying was a result of her SEN.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS BASED ON THE FINDINGS OF THE CURRENT RESEARCH PROJECT**

While the findings of the current research project should be considered preliminary and caution should be exercised when interpreting and generalizing the results, they do make several contributions to the understanding of perspectives of students with SEN on the inclusion and inclusive education practices in local mainstream settings. The findings of the current research project suggest that barriers affecting the perspectives of these students do still exist in local mainstream schools.

**Barrier 1: Teachers' attitudes**

The findings of the current research project showed that not all teachers demonstrate positive attitudes towards students with SEN. This suggests that there is a need to work on teachers' attitudes and their understanding of students with SEN. In fact, research has found that for inclusion and inclusive education practices to be successfully implemented, systemic changes in the attitudes and perspectives of school professionals need to be made (Singal, 2008). For example, the beliefs of the principals on inclusion and on the roles and responsibilities of teachers in carrying out inclusive practices affect how teachers view and support their students with SEN (Jordan, Schwartz and McGhie-Richmond, 2009).

Teachers' attitudes and understanding of students with SEN are also affected by lack of training in the specialized skills they need. Most teachers do support the concept of inclusion and inclusive education, but are faced with time constraints and limited resources (Buford and Casey, 2012).

Perhaps, changes need to occur both in individual schools' practices and teacher preparation programs to ensure better understanding and attitudes towards students with SEN, as well as more effective teaching practices. Promoting positive teachers' attitudes for inclusion and inclusive education as well as diversity in teacher preparation programs (Sharma, Forlin and Loreman, 2008) is an important issue to consider in ensuring that the concept of inclusion and inclusive education is fully understood and accepted.

**Barrier 2: School System**

School hours were interestingly found to be a barrier that affected the perspectives of participants. Based on the findings of the current research project, the majority of the participants actually felt that school started too early and this affected their focus towards the end of the day. Later school start times, have in fact been found to have a positive correlation with academic performance (Edwards, 2012; Hinrichs, 2011), concentration and attention problems (Lufi, Tzichinsky and Hadar, 2011). It is possible that with delayed start times and therefore, increased sleep, students would be better prepared to focus on tasks (Barnes et al., 2016).

A local study (Lo et.al, 2018) similarly found that a delay of school start times resulted in the students being more energetic and focused throughout the school day. However, the study was conducted with students from only one school as other schools were concerned with transport and logistical provisions, traffic conditions and effects on dismissal times. Nevertheless, delaying school start times is something worth considering for these schools as the long-term benefits on the students may outweigh the difficulties.

### **Barrier 3: Academic Support**

Homework was also found to be a barrier to academic support that affected the perspectives of the participants. They felt that homework could either be reduced, be given on alternative days or made less repetitive.

According to Cooper (Bembenutty, 2011), homework should be given in amounts that are consistent with the student's developmental stage and take into consideration what the students are capable of, as well as their unique needs and circumstances. It should be meaningful and avoid draining students of their motivation to learn. A study by Trautwein, Ludtke, Schnyder and Niggli (2006) found that students were more willing to put in greater effort on their homework when they had a more favourable perception of the quality of the homework assigned to them. For example, homework which has been carefully prepared and selected to reinforce the concepts learnt in class, as well as identify each student's learning progress and difficulties (Trautwein and Ludtke, 2007).

The quality of homework should also take precedence over quantity. A study conducted by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) found that Singapore ranked third globally in the amount of time middle school students spent on homework (Teng, 2014). These students spent an average of 9.4 hours of homework each week, and this translates to an average of 1.8 hours of homework each weekday. This exceeds the ten-minute homework guidelines suggested by Cooper, Robinson and Patall (2006). Based on these guidelines, 10 year olds should at the most only be spending an hour on homework each night.

Perhaps, schools could look into the homework policies they currently have in place and better regulate the assignment of homework. Clearly, the quality of homework, and not the amount of time spent on homework, should be the main factor in student learning.

### **Barrier 4: Support from Peers**

Contrary to the literature review, where students with SEN were teased, called names and even bullied (Monchy et al., 2004; Luciano and Savage, 2007), the findings of the current research project indicated otherwise. Participants here had not experienced any form of teasing or bullying from their peers. In fact, it was found that their peers were rather helpful, from the academic support they provided to the positive peer relationships they had.

However, Student 2 had faced instances of lack of peer support when she was younger. As previously described above, when she was humiliated by the teacher, her peers had laughed at her, instead of comforting her. This could be due to several factors, for example, lack of awareness and respect on both the teacher's and the students' part. Clearly, developing a respectful sense of community within a class is vitally important.



This can only happen when teachers themselves demonstrate respect for students, regardless of differences. Teachers must be unbiased in how they respond to the various skills and abilities displayed by their students (Lumpkin, 2008). As teachers lead by example, their actions and words will show the students how to interact with, accept and respond to their peers with SEN. Therefore, teachers should model positive support for students with SEN. Students are likely to replicate this, promoting a culture of respect in the classroom.

However, while teachers can be a role model for positive support for students with SEN, positive peer support should also be concurrently encouraged. Research has found that teaching students coping strategies may be one way of promoting peer support against negative peer behaviours such as bullying or teasing (Frydenberg, 2004). This could be done through universal school programs that guides students on skills for effective communication, effective problem-solving, decision-making as well as eliminating unhelpful strategies and finding alternative strategies (Frydenberg and Brandon, 2002 as cited in Lodge and Frydenberg, 2005). Introducing such programs may help students to use a more productive style of coping and hence be more inclined to display positive peer support.

## LIMITATIONS

As with any research project, there are limitations. The limitations for the current research project are as follows:

- 1) The current research project was a small-scale study and confined to only one learning centre of one organization. The findings of this research project might not necessarily represent the perspectives of other students in that learning centre, in other learning centres, or even in other literacy intervention organisations in Singapore. Besides that, the sample size of the current research project was very small. Only three students were interviewed out of the three hundred students in the learning centre. The data is therefore not sufficient to generalise to the larger population of students with SEN studying in local mainstream schools and classes.
- 2) Social desirability bias affects the information that participants disclose, especially when talking about sensitive, highly personal issues. When talking about these issues, participants tend to be unwilling to disclose much information or do not answer honestly (Davis, Thake and Vilhena, 2010). This seemed to be at play with the participants of the current research project. For example, Student 1 had a tendency to answer questions with one or two word answers such as 'Yeah', 'No' or 'Kind of' without wanting to elaborate. He also answered some questions with 'I don't know' and when prompted further, he would answer with 'I really don't know' or 'I don't really remember'. Student 3, on the other hand, had a tendency to veer off-topic, either before or after answering the questions asked. Similar to Student 1,

she also answered certain questions with one or two word answers such as 'Because' or 'Just because' without elaborating.

These perhaps suggest that participants are limited in what they are prepared to reveal about their perspectives on events and opinions. They recognise that their responses are being recorded, and that they might be evaluated or judged. Therefore, it is in the participants' best interest to try to present themselves more favourably, either by not elaborating on the answer or veering off-topic (Al-Yateem, 2012). However, it is to be noted that one participant was more forthcoming with her answers, and this may relate to a greater self-awareness based on her understanding of her own needs.

- 3) Acting both as a researcher and an educational therapist providing intervention for some of these students might have reduced the capacity to remain objective. In fact, the process of recruiting participants is often influenced by the researcher's own background, location and connections (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006). Besides that, the majority of the participants were actually the researcher's own students. Although consent forms had been sent out to other students of the other educational therapists at East Coast Learning Centre, most of those who agreed to the current research project were the researcher's own students. This therefore indicated that perhaps parents of the other students, as well as the students themselves, may not have been comfortable with the idea of someone they barely know interviewing their child as part of a research project.
- 4) It might well be argued that there were differences within the participants, with 2 students who had not been formally diagnosed with dyslexia, in comparison with one who held a diagnosis. It might also be suggested that there were differences in intelligence between the participants. This would be supported by, for example student 1 who was unable to benefit from extra time, because he had not enough material to contribute, was exhausted by the effort and completed the tests early.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Based on these limitations, one recommendation for future research would be to consider the appropriateness of using questionnaires and interviews as the only means of eliciting data. Perhaps, these methods of data collection could go hand-in-hand with other methods to provide a more in-depth and accurate information about participants' perspectives. For example, field observations could also be undertaken to supplement questionnaires and interviews as this would allow researchers to gain a better and less biased understanding of participants' academic and social-emotional experiences in school that could in turn, affect their perspectives.

Moreover, widening the scope to include more students with SEN, and not limiting it to only those attending literacy intervention classes within one organization, might produce more significant findings. Because of the guidance they receive, these students may have developed certain expectations on the inclusion and inclusive education practices that would be beneficial for them, and hence use these as benchmarks to compare the support they receive in their respective schools. However, students who have had no prior intervention for their SEN might have no such expectations and therefore may have differing perspectives. It would be worth investigating whether there would be significant differences in perspectives between students with SEN who receive intervention and those who do not. The current definition of SEN would still be applicable in this case as it would still include students who have learning difficulties or disabilities that make it harder for them to learn than most peers of the same age (Hampshire County Council, 2016). Further research could not just be limited to those who might justify a diagnosis of dyslexia, as there are students who have contributions to make with other diagnoses as well, apart from dyslexia.

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**APPENDIX 1: QUESTIONNAIRE FOR STUDENTS**

1. Do you enjoy school?

Yes

No

2. List three things you like and three things you dislike about school.

LIKE	DON'T LIKE
1	1
2	2
3	3

3. Do you find the following subjects easy, okay or hard?

*Leave blank any subjects you do not take.*

SUBJECT	EASY	OKAY	HARD
English Language			
Mathematics			
Mother Tongue			
Science			
Art			
Social Studies			
Any others?:			

4. Do you find the following areas easy, okay or hard?

AT SCHOOL	EASY	OKAY	HARD
Making friends			
Listening to instructions			
Learning new topics			
Following school rules			
Working in Groups			
Communicating Feelings			
Using Appropriate Behaviour			
Using Appropriate Social Skills			
Any Others			

5. Do you receive any extra help at school in the subjects you find hard?

Yes                       No                       Used to

If no, do you think this would benefit you?

Yes                       No

6. Do you get along with the other students in your class?

Yes                       No                       Some

Please give reasons for your answers

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7. What do you usually do during recess?

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8. Are you given the opportunity to complete your school tests/exams in a separate room from the rest of your class?

Yes  No

9a. If No, do you think you could achieve better results if you were allowed to complete your school tests/exams in a separate room from the rest of your class?

Yes  No

b. Would you like this opportunity?

Yes  No

10. Do the following things happen to you at school?

AT SCHOOL	OFTEN	SOMETIMES	NEVER
Being bullied/teased			
Arguing with classmates/friends			
Not understanding work			
In trouble with the teacher			
Not fitting in			
Any Others:			

11. Is there a place in school that you can go to if you feel upset or angry?

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12a. Is your teacher understanding if you have a problem?

Yes  Sometimes  No

b. Are the other students in your class understanding if you have a problem?

Yes  Sometimes  No

13a. Do you have a buddy to help you in school?

Yes  No

b. If yes, how does this help you?

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14a. Have you ever felt like not wanting to go to school?

Yes  No

b. If yes, why

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15a. Have you ever wanted to change school?

Yes

No

b. If yes, why?

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16a. Are there any changes you would like to see in school that would help to make you happier and more settled?

Yes

No

b. If yes, what are they?

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