

Cross-cultural perspectives on the effect of cultural attitudes towards inclusion for children with intellectual disabilities

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Introduction

This paper presents a cross-cultural review of recent developments in the relatively recent phenomenon of including children with intellectual disabilities in regular schools with other non-disabled children. It looks at traditional cultural issues and values that shape attitudes towards individuals, particularly children with intellectual disabilities. An attempt is made to consider the effect of these culturally derived attitudes on educational decisions and provision in relation to including disabled children in the regular class setting in different parts of the world. The three countries identified in this brief review are Egypt in North Africa, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in Asia, and England in Europe.

The researcher used her linguistic, professional, and cultural access when living and working in the three countries to access, analyse and generate data. Views of some parents and educators of children with intellectual disabilities from the three countries were gathered through interviews. For the purposes of this research, the issue was of attitude formation and how culture is carried through curriculum and pedagogy, and how in turn it could be mediated to support the inclusion of disabled children in regular class settings. The study concludes with a discussion of main key emerging issues in the shaping of cultural attitudes towards children with intellectual disabilities, and how that may affect their inclusion.

Method

The researcher used qualitative research methods such as interviewing to gain insights into parents and teachers from three different countries'

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specific attitudes towards children with intellectual disabilities and towards inclusion in and exclusion from regular class settings. Participation was voluntary and anonymity was guaranteed. Structured interviews with parents and teachers of children with intellectual disabilities were conducted. The main questions revolved around attitudes towards accepting children with intellectual disabilities in their regular classrooms, and justifications of their acceptance of, or opposition to, inclusion.

The researcher also has referred to findings from three different countries where she served as a teacher, an academic and as a researcher in the area of educating children with intellectual disabilities. A review of the literature on current issues and trends in inclusive education for children with intellectual disabilities in the three countries and in other parts of the world is also included. It is hoped that by showing similarities and differences, the present study can draw international awareness to the role of cultural understanding, specifically the social and traditional beliefs, in forming fixed ideas, and expectations of children with intellectual disabilities, as well as in the provision of educational services in regular schools.

The researcher's background in education in the three countries helped in the accessing, gathering and analysing of data as in addition to being a long-term faculty member and experienced educator, the author is a British academic, but a native Egyptian who has lived in the Arabian Gulf for some years. As a native Arabic speaker with specific interest and experience in studying the effect that social values and beliefs have on the education of children with special needs, access to data was not an obstacle. The author also reflected on her cultural knowledge as an insider. Such cultural understanding and local knowledge assisted in assuring the validity of data selection, collection and analysis. There remains, however, for discussion beyond this paper tensions in the cultural mediation of meaning in research.

There were ethical considerations. For example, the author ensured that the confidentiality of all information collected was guaranteed. Participants were fully informed of the nature and aim of the investigation and their prior consent was sought. Limiting, protecting and safeguarding accessibility to the information maintained, together with safety and confidentiality of the hard data as well as the data stored in the computer, was monitored and assured.

Cultural attitudes towards individuals with intellectual disabilities: a brief historical perspective

Inclusive education as a form of educational services offered to children with special educational needs is an international phenomenon (Pierpoint and Forest 1994). It is very difficult to discuss educational services offered to children with intellectual disabilities or any form of disabilities without reflecting on the tenets of each society's traditional life and attitudes. It is only through such reflection that one can understand and appreciate the common conceptualization of intellectual disability (Abosi 1999). The attitude of a given community toward people with disabilities will affect the kind of provision made for such individuals. It is very important, from the author's point of view, however, to stress that careful consideration should be made for the 'individuality' of children with intellectual disabilities and

the diversity of their family circumstances in the complex contexts of different cultures.

Looking back through history, although the literature carries scant detail about cultural attitudes towards children with intellectual disabilities specifically in the three countries of concern, many references give a reasonable idea about how they were treated in the past. In Ancient Egypt, and Sparta, Greece, a state council of inspectors examined neonates. If they suspected that a child was 'defective' in any way, the infant was thrown from a cliff to its death. By the second century AD, individuals with intellectual disabilities, including children who lived throughout the Roman Empire, were frequently sold to entertain or amuse the privileged class. Christianity led to a decline in these barbaric practices and a movement toward care for the less fortunate; in fact, all of the early religious leaders, Jesus, Buddha, Mohammed and Confucius, advocated humane treatment for the 'mentally retarded', 'developmentally disabled' or 'infirm' (Sheerenberger 1983). It is from here that modernist beliefs and practices of charity date.

History is always complex, characterized by competing forces. For instance, in the European Middle Ages, Martin Luther called for the burning of the child and of the mother for consorting with the Devil. The early Christian Church associated the birth of an intellectually disabled child with 'sin' of some kind (Stratford and Gunn 1996).

In contradistinction, the paintings of the ancient Mexican Olmec¹ are a series of cave drawings and wall paintings that represent how children and people with intellectual disabilities had religious and superhuman significance. These Olmec paintings seem to suggest that children with Down's syndrome, for example, were the result of unions between senior women and the jaguar. Stratford and Gunn (1996: 4-5) provide reasons to explain why these children were singled out for special treatment and why ancient cultures endowed people with Down's syndrome with religious or superhuman significance. Besides their rarity, it was mainly their striking physical and facial features which represent Down's syndrome, a phenomenon which called for reason.

The history of other cultures, however, often reveals totally different attitudes, reflecting cultural beliefs that disabled children in general, and those with intellectual disabilities in particular, resulted from some kind of an 'abnormal' sexual relationship. It is known that the Ancient Greeks—the case of the Spartans has already been mentioned—thought that such children would weaken their great culture and exterminated children observed to have intellectual disabilities in a cruel and inhumane way.

Obviously recognisable handicapped babies (those with Down Syndrome would be a case in point) were put out on the hillside to starve or to be taken by wild animals. (Stratford and Gunn 1996)

Current cultural attitudes towards individuals with intellectual disabilities and inclusion

Attitudes drive our behaviour. As individuals and as groups, what we believe and how we feel about a matter largely determines what we do with respect

to it. Human behaviour further reinforces our beliefs and feelings (Vash 2001). Attitudes towards inclusion are affected by cultural beliefs and values. Therefore, it is important to analyse current cultural beliefs and values if one is to examine the extent to which including disabled students in the mainstream is currently accepted, criticized, rejected or applied. In terms of specific treatment, the child is treated with intellectual disabilities in much the same way as the brain-injured child or a child on an accelerated learning programme (Doman 1986).

In most countries, the *terminology* has changed and those with intellectual disabilities are no longer known to society as the mentally retarded or idiots. Those with Down's syndrome, a leading cause of intellectual disability (Carr 1995), are no longer referred to as Mongols, a term which is deeply offensive to people with Down's syndrome. As a description, it is both inaccurate and meaningless (Newton 1997). While appreciating apparent changes in language that have already been achieved, some with Down's syndrome are still referred to as the Down's children. This occurs despite of media, parental groups and those with the syndrome themselves pushing for the term 'with Down's syndrome' rather than 'the Down child' to avoid negative connotations for those individuals and their parents. Of course, the most sensible response is to call them by their names rather than by their condition (Gaad 1998).

Some particularly important changes have occurred since the 1960s world-wide that have influenced attitudes, treatment and expectations for people with intellectual disabilities and have important implications for the nature of early intervention for infants with intellectual disabilities. Most of all, there now exists widespread acceptance and support for raising youngsters with intellectual disabilities at home and having them participate in a variety of activities as part of community integration, rather than placement in institutional settings. This has an impact on early intervention as it was believed that it is preferable to begin working with a child as soon as possible after birth (Doman 1986).

In the UK, however, Booth (1996: 87) argued that it is difficult to offer a single UK perspective on inclusion due to differences in the legal basis of education in England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales, as well as regional differences within these countries related to different politics and policy. Booth stated that: 'there are very few, if any, schools in England which include all the children from a neighbourhood, defined as the catchment area of the school' (p. 89). Recent research indicates that the inclusion of children with Down's syndrome which is one of the most common examples of intellectual disabilities, was widely accepted as being educationally and socially possible at primary level, but it is secondary schools that are presumed to present barriers that were difficult to surmount (p. 93).

Throughout Africa, those with intellectual disabilities are still seen as hopeless and helpless (Desta 1995). African culture and beliefs have not made matters easier. Abosi and Ozoji (1985) found that Nigerians in particular, and Africans in general, associate disabilities with witchcraft, juju, sex-linked factors, God-mediated and super sensible forces. Avoiding whatever is associated with evil historically affected people's attitudes

toward those with disabilities simply because disability is associated with evil. Most of these negative attitudes are misconceptions that stem from a lack of proper understanding of disabilities and how they affect functioning. They stem directly from the traditional systems of thought, which reflect magical-religious philosophies that can be safely called superstition. Chances of inclusion, and other forms of educational services for such children, are affected by the construction of society, as well as traditional values and beliefs.

In Africa, a typical Yoruba woman in Nigeria, for example, would prefer not to have anything to do with disabled children. She would not visit a special school. This, according to that culture, was to prevent or avoid the risk of having a future child with disability in one's own family (Council for Exceptional Children, Division of International Special Education and Services, n.d.).

Interestingly, when interviewing a serving teacher from the UAE, similar attitudes were found. She revealed that an older woman in her family told her when she took her first appointment as a teacher in a Center for Children with Special Needs that if she kept in touch with such children, especially those with mental disabilities when pregnant, she would carry a similar child (Gaad 2004).

In Egypt, a North African country but with Arabic and mainly Islamic cultural foundations, a study the author undertook in 1998 examined educational options for children with Down's syndrome, the most leading cause of intellectual disabilities. It showed that inclusion was not a valid option to any child that is believed to have any form of intellectual disabilities. Such children are only recently offered placement in schools for the mentally handicapped (as it is referred to in Egypt). The author has visited a school for the mentally handicapped in a big Egyptian town in 2002 and data showed that the number of enrolled children with intellectual disabilities was increasing. Negative attitudes towards families of children with intellectual disabilities, particularly with Down's syndrome, was reported in Egypt. Until recently, and as stated by parents, children with such a disability were confined to their homes. There were several reasons for this finding, but the most important was rejection by non-disabled members of society, especially children. There was also the issue of the repetition of genetic norm in families with a history of births of babies with any intellectual disabilities, especially those with the more obvious ones such as Down's syndrome. Young women's marital relationships and possible marriage plans were affected directly by the presence of such a child in the family, especially in small communities where everyone knows everyone else (Gaad 1998).

Looking at attitudes towards inclusion in general and inclusion of children with intellectual disabilities in particular elsewhere in the world, some countries are forming a positive attitude towards inclusion of all children in regular schools because they are going through a new phase, or adopting a new model. 'Special schools for the handicapped' in the USA, for example, is no longer accepted because they reflect an old model in which red squares represent regular schools and blue squares special schools. Mainstreaming involves changing the architecture and teacher training so

children with and without disabilities can get educated in the same schools where they simultaneously learn how to interact with each other. This reflects a new melting pot model in which differently coloured squares melt and merge to create new shapes and colours (Vash 2001).

It is striking, however, to know that one of the poorest countries in the world, Nepal, has set a goal to include children with mild to moderate disabilities in mainstream primary education (Lynch n.d.). Most African countries, however, cannot yet verify the number of persons with intellectual disabilities within their borders. The absence of reliable data on both the quantity and categories of disabilities in Africa present a serious problem in the ability to plan efficiently and effectively for education and general welfare of these individuals (Abosi 1999).

Korea, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, China, Nepal, Indonesia and Thailand are among the Asian countries to have introduced Individual Learning Programs in classrooms, which include children with intellectual disabilities. In India, the Five-Year Plan, 1991-95, increased the budget for children with moderate learning difficulties by more than five times. India supports a major national development programme for the inclusion of such children into ordinary schools. While there is no specific reference to children with certain intellectual disabilities such as Down's syndrome, there is no evidence of opposing their inclusion either. Further research may well uncover differences between reported integration and the degree of inclusion of children.

While in New Zealand, children with intellectual disabilities are already included in the mainstream; until a few years ago, there remained a degree of opposition:

Those who oppose segregation argue that the state can not afford to provide for all possible choices and should not offer services that are of questionable educational and social value especially where this limits funding for inclusion. (Ballard 1996: 40)

Parents of children with intellectual disabilities and the effect of cultural attitudes towards inclusion

It is relevant to start with parents when one discusses attitudes towards children with intellectual disabilities and the impact of disability on their schooling. Ironically, during the first few months of life, babies with many forms of intellectual disability are less likely to be identified as such by strangers. Parents often seem to experience a 'honeymoon' period for the first 6 months or so, reporting that the baby with intellectual disabilities is 'just like' the other children in the family at that age. When the child is wrapped in a blanket and nestled into a parent's arms, it is in fact much more difficult to notice the stigmata of intellectual disability. It is when it is obvious to others that there is something wrong with the baby that the cultural labelling starts. In addition, parents and others are typically unaware of the subtle characteristics that differentiate babies with intellectual disabilities from typically developing babies. In fact, since many tests of early infancy evaluate many of these babies as 'normal' supports parental dreams of escaping the disablement of their child (Shonkoff *et al.* 1992: 21-22).

The continuing care of children with intellectual disabilities is often a stressful experience for parents (Crnic *et al.* 1983, Esdaile and Greenwood 2003). Parents of such children are also affected in many ways. One has to consider, however, that a number of studies have demonstrated that the extent to which parents of children with intellectual disabilities report depressive symptoms and feelings of distress is mediated by a number of factors, including child characteristics and various aspects of the parents' family environment (Moos and Moos 2002).

Seltzer *et al.* (2001) showed that although similar to parents of non-intellectually disabled children at age 18, group patterns of attainment and well being diverged thereafter. Parents of a child with such a disability had lower rates of employment, larger families and lower rates of social participation.

When four Egyptian parents of school-age children with mild-to-moderate intellectual disabilities were asked about how culture can affect their children's inclusion in regular classrooms, many revealed their concerns about how society looks at their children and how that can affect educational decisions. A mother of a 10-year-old girl with an IQ of 65 attending a local school for children with intellectual challenges said that her daughter was in such a school because that was how society placed and categorized her. Although she did not like the idea of marginalizing her child in such a school, she accepted that choice because that was what everybody else in her situation would do.

Another mother of a child with Down's syndrome aged 9 years said that all children like her son attended that school. The family was lucky to have a place there, she revealed. When she was asked her if she wanted her child to be in a regular school, the mother stated that she knew he would never be in a regular school as it was not an available option, and she did not think her child ever would be.

For the purpose of this study, some parents in the UAE were asked about inclusion as an educational option for their children, especially with current trends to modernize and reform education to meet the needs of all learners. A mother of a boy with intellectual disabilities age 8 years attending a special classroom with five other children with mild-to-moderate learning disabilities in a regular school was interviewed. When the mother was asked about her view on inclusion if it was offered to her son, she thought that her son was already included! When it was explained that inclusion did not mean a separate special class in a regular school, she said that her son was in a regular school, and that that was what mattered. She revealed that she rejected the centre idea from the beginning: 'I wanted my son to go to the same school in the same bus as his brothers, sisters, and neighbours', she explained.

In England, however, when the author interviewed a mother of an included secondary school girl with Down's syndrome from Norfolk, the mother revealed that options other than full inclusion were not even considered. She knew her and her daughter's rights, and would not tolerate any form of educational segregation. 'She came a long way', she said, and it helped her come close to being normal.

Although in England legislation and regulations are helping more and more parents to place their children with intellectual disabilities in regular

schools, some parents do not take advantage of that option, preferring special schools. A mother interviewed in 1996 placed her child in a special school because she thought the child had a better chance to learn at her own speed in the special school with only a few children in the classroom and many helpers and specialized teachers (Gaad 1998).

Teachers of children with intellectual disabilities and cultural attitudes towards inclusion

Teachers are the key agents of change; the locus of change is the mundane routine of daily classroom life. What they do on a day-to-day basis does make a profound difference. Let us look closely at the effects of culture on those commonplace routines and how cultural attitudes towards the inclusion of children with intellectual disabilities affect their teachers.

Many data support the increase of included children with intellectual disabilities in regular classrooms in many countries. Such data cite the paramount need for general educators to become knowledgeable and skilful in modifying and adapting their curricula to meet the needs of students with disabilities. However, many teachers in both general and special education have been ill prepared to meet the needs of students with disabilities in mainstream classroom settings (Sindelar 1995, Welch 1996, Lesar *et al.* 1997).

While cultural beliefs and values may affect teachers' attitudes towards including children with intellectual disabilities in regular classrooms, teachers also might have a role to play in changing such attitudes. Newton (1997) states that not only parents, but also professionals like teachers could improve children's performance and public image by adopting a more positive attitude towards the disability. This can affect the attitude of the parents themselves. He argued that: 'If parents of a child with mental disability are confronted by a positive attitude, they are more likely to take a positive view themselves' (Newton 1997: 126).

When the author interviewed an experienced classroom teacher from Suffolk, UK, she believed that including a certain child with intellectual disabilities in her classroom was not a great experience. Despite her beliefs of his rights to be in a normal school with other children, timing, resources and one-to-one teaching was very demanding for an already overwhelmed teacher who had 24 other pupils in the classroom. She revealed that attitudes had changed towards the inclusion of a child in a regular classroom. Twenty years ago, he would not have been here, she stated. The teacher argued, however, that although inclusion seemed to be forcing its way in, the teacher was the one who had to face the day-to-day challenges in the classroom.

A primary school headmaster from elsewhere in England, however, stated that no matter what the funding challenges, there would always be a place for a 7-year-old at her school. The pupil, who had Down's syndrome and multiple disabilities, was included at the school for 2 years and had made good progress. His teacher stated that as well as benefiting the pupil, inclusion had a positive impact on other pupils. 'He [the pupil] allows more

able children to gain the experience of forming a caring and understanding relationship with someone more vulnerable than themselves' (*Times Educational Supplement* 1995).

Teachers in the UAE were knowledgeable about the new trends and voices calling for inclusion of all children with regular classroom. However, they showed less acceptance of the idea of including children with intellectual disabilities. One teacher stated she would be happier to include children with physical disabilities. Another teacher commented on how important the mental abilities of students were and went further to indicate that she would like to know all of her students' IQs if it was possible. That was not surprising as research elsewhere also found that teachers' attitudes differed depending on the severity of the disability (Barnartt and Kabzems 1992). Interestingly AlGhazo and Gaad (2004) found significant differences in including students with intellectual disabilities, with hearing impairments, with visual impairments and with learning disabilities in relation to years of teaching experience when researching Emarati teachers' attitudes towards inclusion. Students with intellectual disabilities were the least accepted of all. Their results showed that teachers with 1-5 years of experience have more positive attitudes towards including students with intellectual disabilities than teachers with more than 6 years of teaching experience. While Gaad (2004) found that cultural beliefs and values affect not only educational options offered to children with intellectual disabilities in the UAE, but also teachers themselves when choosing special education as a teaching profession.

Inclusion is not yet adopted in Egypt, despite calls for bringing this 'new' process that is happening elsewhere in the world to Egyptian schools. Responses were relatively negative and many answered negatively when asked whether or not they would accept children with intellectual disabilities in their classrooms. Those who opposed inclusion were asked the following question: Why would you not accept children with mental disabilities in your classroom? One teacher's answer was 'because they should not be in my classroom. They should be in a special school, that's what special schools are for. Another revealed that the reason was because he was not prepared to teach such children, and it was not fair for everyone'. Teachers, however, were curious about how it is done in other countries. One teacher said that she would not mind inclusion for such children as long as she was trained to do that. In another instance, a response from a teacher revealed that he opposed the idea of teaching children with intellectual disabilities in his classroom because they will fail their exams and he will be blamed for their failure. That would not be surprising in a very competitive culture that places great emphasis on children's' marks and grades (Gaad 1998).

Discussion

It may seem from the author's own research findings and limited observations from various parts of the world that attitudes towards including children with intellectual disabilities in regular classrooms have changed world-wide. However, the chance for inclusion in neighbourhood schools

has not gone that far for many of them. In England, for example, delving into the issue of inclusion reveals different issues. Results and findings of research on children with certain intellectual disabilities such as Down's syndrome show that they can be last on the list for inclusion because of the way they look, despite legislation and regulations in their favour. Warnock (1982: 135) expressed that it was hoped that over time there would be no children with Down's syndrome left in special schools. Booth (1996: 92) has commented concerning that issue: 'This optimism has been born out to only a limited extent'. He also argued that 'although many continue to see young people with Down's Syndrome as "normal" candidates for exclusion, for others their image has shifted' (p. 92).

In Egypt, people are still in a very early stage of learning basic facts about inclusion. Parents and teachers still think it is a 'foreign' experience that 'other' people do in 'other' places in the world. They did not apply it because in a country that is very centralized in decision-making, there was simply no law to oblige schools and teachers to adopt it. It was obvious that when inclusion was not an option, parents accepted what was on offer and appreciated it. It was then understandable to find parents accepting the special school despite their discomfort with the idea of marginalizing their child in such a school. Other parents were even happy with segregation because it secured schooling for their child. It was a matter of it being better than nothing.

While some groups of children in Egypt, for example, are still battling for the right to education, any education, others are being included in the neighbourhood primary school elsewhere in the world such as in the UK (Gaad 1998). Nevertheless, continuing education in secondary schooling can still be a struggle for them. There are many reasons for that, but teachers certainly play a role in establishing positive and negative ideas about inclusion in secondary education for those who are entitled to be included.

In the UAE, however, this wealthy, fast-developing country where change is touching everything, inclusion in general is known, and the trend is to include many children with disabilities in regular classrooms. Children with intellectual disabilities are still a long way away from that happening at the national level. Parents did not know of inclusion, and thought that being in the neighbourhood school, but in a separate class, is inclusion. Although one may argue that it is a form of inclusion, other may seem to think of it as misleading to parents, especially those who are not yet familiar with the concept of inclusion. Teachers on the other hand accepted the idea of inclusion in general, but not for those with intellectual disabilities. Inclusion for some and exclusion for others makes the concept of inclusion meaningless. Literature dating from the 1980s established that inclusion of children with intellectual disabilities was not only effective for them, but also for others in schools. Personal experience of parents, teachers and children has suggested that the majority of children benefit from inclusion (Casey *et al.* 1988, Sloper *et al.* 1988). Other studies emphasize the low levels of achievement typical of those leaving special schools, not because the schools were not trying to help the children reach their full potential, but because of problems inherent in isolating children from their own neighbourhood and from their peers (Buckley and Sacks 1987).

In the 1990s, Perera (1994) stressed the importance of realizing the range of ability within one group of intellectual disabilities such as Down's syndrome. On the one hand, Stratford and Gunn (1996: 280) warned that 'Teachers may have been influenced by the idea that children with Down's Syndrome reach a learning plateau, and therefore may have regarded academic goals as a waste of time for older students'. Buckley and Bird (1994: 17) argued, however, that there was no evidence to support the commonly held view that these children's progress declines as they get older or that they reach a ceiling of development in early adolescence.

There was a sense of anti-inclusion found in the three countries on different levels, and in their own cultural contexts. This was caused because of cultural beliefs about disabled students, particularly children with intellectual disabilities. Before the ways in which culture could be mediated towards the greater inclusion of children with intellectual disabilities in regular classrooms in a certain country are looked at, one should examine the antecedents of anti-inclusion attitudes.

Concern and negative attitudes against children with intellectual disabilities can be found in any society. The underlying contributors to attitude formation are complex and interrelated. The 'look' of a child with intellectual disabilities may play a key role in shaping and directing social attitudes. This establishes disablement as a sociocultural issue. The range of functions found in any one of the causes of intellectual disabilities such as Down's syndrome is extremely broad. However, individuals with the syndrome share distinctive facial and physical characteristics. Consequently, children have to put up with labelling. Some of the more common characteristics found in such children are hypotonia and problems associated with the mouth and breathing. The children tend to mouth breath. This tends to produce a tongue that protrudes and thickens, stifling the proper development of the entire mouth area (function determines structure), which hinders proper articulation. Thus, they tend to let their tongue protrude. Mouth breathing also affects the depth of their respiration, which in turn affects the development of the chest and limits lung capacity. Since these children are not breathing through their nose, the sinus cavities do not develop properly, which affects the development of the facial structure. Some of the specific areas of remediation involve the structure and control of the mouth and nose (Doman 1986).

Now we know why a group of individuals with intellectual disabilities look in a certain way to us. Let us see how we react to that look. This look of a child with an intellectual disability makes him or her a natural candidate for exclusion, labelling and segregation (Stratford and Gunn 1996). To overcome the 'look' issue, some parents world-wide choose to have major plastic surgery performed on their children with Down's syndrome not only to prepare them for mainstream society, but also to avoid segregation and rejection by other children. A mother from the USA has justified her decision to have several operations performed on her daughter 'Georgia' who is 4 years old and has Down's syndrome in the most poignant way: 'It is always easier to change one person, than changing the whole lot' (*Face Value* 1997).

Georgia by that time had already had a tongue reduction operation and skin around the eyes was removed to change the shape of the eyes to a more 'normal' shape by repositioning the eye flaps. She was then waiting to have her ears pinned. Her mother was planning to admit her to a local mainstream school. She went for the operations because: she 'just doesn't want her to suffer teasing or bullying at school', she said. We find here that concerns about academic achievement and inclusion shield a range of deeper issues.

In Egypt, research has shown also that the appearance of a child with intellectual disabilities plays a key role in placing that child in a special school on an automatic basis. The present author conducted research with Rasha, a girl with Down's syndrome, then aged 9 years. The child was judged by how she looked and by what she could not do rather than by what she could do (Gaad 1998: 433). Children with intellectual disabilities in Egypt have been marginalized for so long that it is considered a treat to be in a special school. Fear of failing the exams, which means in the Egyptian contexts the failure of the teacher, was another issue to add to the list of causes that formed such a negative attitude. That is in addition to the lack of supportive legislation.

A report published in the USA has revealed the following:

The educational and therapeutic opportunities being afforded children with DS [Down's syndrome] were based on what the world thought the children were capable of. The world felt that they were not capable of anything. This obviously led to a self-fulfilling prophecy. Zero opportunities—zero results. The past thirty years have been spent trying to determine what really constitutes an opportunity for children with Down Syndrome. (Doman 1986)

A teenage boy with the same syndrome attending a mainstream secondary school in the USA addresses the issue of how people first notice the syndrome. He draws a picture when asked to express his feelings towards his facial characteristics and wrote on it: 'It is not how I look, it's how you see me'.² Despite the simplicity of the phrase, it reveals a mixture of agony and discomfort and is a manifestation of the 'politics of disablement' (Oliver 1990).

Not a great deal has been written specifically on inclusive education for children with intellectual disabilities in Asian cultures. However, some developments towards inclusive education for such children in primary education have been reported in the UAE. The present author undertook nationally funded research in the UAE in 2000/01 to investigate the current educational services provided for children with Down's syndrome. The research recommendations were heavily based on how culture affected beliefs and attitudes towards the inclusion of all children with and without intellectual disabilities in their neighbourhood mainstream schools (Gaad 2001). The research found that while this small but wealthy country has achieved a great deal of development and growth in the last 30 years with rapid change touching every corner of the social system including the education of some children with disabilities, it also needs to touch the education of children with intellectual disabilities who are currently segregated and legally forbidden from admission to regular schools. This study shows that teachers, parents and decision-makers believe that the best

place for those children is in Centres for Preparation and Rehabilitation. Even where a particular individual has a relatively slightly higher intelligence and social ability and has reasonably good health, presenting fewer management problems (Wall 1979: 18), research shows that this, as in many other places, does not appear to lead to much difference in decision-makers' attitudes towards them (Gaad 2001).

Gaad (2001: 168) concluded and warned that 'If action towards inclusion for children with Down's syndrome in mainstream schools is not considered, the only real change in the lives of children with Down's syndrome in the United Arab Emirates; is that the cage is now expensive and gold!' This research has shown, however, that some parents in the UAE still think that if a child attends a special classroom in a regular school, it means that she or he is included.

It remains a poignant contradiction that people with intellectual disabilities such as Down's syndrome achieve success in dealing with audiences, such as in acting or entertaining in many countries while still facing a certain degree of rejection by education. One parent from the USA addresses the issue of appreciating diversity in schools with great clarity.

Those parents, referring to parents of children with intellectual disabilities, went and they found other parents in the same boat and they found understanding and acceptance and it was great. Then one parent turned round and said 'we go to a public beach and there's no problem, we go to a public park we have no problem, we go to a public concert we have no problem, we come to a public school—we have a problem'. Why is it, the only public place we have a problem getting in to, is a public school? (Brown 1991)

Inclusion is an issue that receives greater time in teacher education classes and in educational research and writing. There are many different hypotheses that suggest how inclusion should work and whether it is or is not good to have an inclusive classroom. Considering this issue in the different cultural settings and contexts can make the issue more complex. For example, inclusion of children with intellectual disabilities in their neighbourhood schools may seem to be unrealistic in some developing countries where some children are denied access to education altogether. However, that should not stop advocacy for the inclusion of all children in the mainstream. A major revision of the terms and conditions of admission to schools is needed in some cases to allow access for children to their neighbourhood schools with other 'non-disabled' children. Change can happen if pressure is applied to make it happen (Gaad 1998: 417). Thoughts and attitudes about inclusion vary due to disparate and divergent knowledge, needs, and experience.

Pressure groups and advocacy networks can be effective when it comes to placing children with intellectual disabilities in regular schools. Parents can contribute to bringing a change in attitudes. Many parents of children with intellectual disabilities try to do so. In the UK, Beverley Flitton and Caroline Frizzell, whose children with Down's syndrome attend mainstream schools in London, have organized a conference in Enfield, London, to give parents and teachers a better understanding of the arguments for inclusion. The two women are determined that their children will be seen for their gifts and not for their disabilities. According to Flitton:

One of their gifts is the way they bring out a nicer and more caring side in other children. We want to see them all together. It's the same issue as accepting people who are black. Children have to see what they have in common with children with disabilities, not the differences. (*Cheshunt Telegraph*, 1 June 1995)

In England, inclusion paid off when 17-year-old Mared Jones of Wrexham was hailed as a torchbearer for other children with intellectual disabilities after gaining eight GCSE passes in her chosen subjects. Dr Eric Nicholas, a member of the Down's Syndrome Association National Education Committee, said:

She has shown what is possible given the right conditions, a lot of hard work, support, a positive attitude from the school and the parents and a willingness to accept the child first and foremost as a child and not a child with Down's Syndrome. Mared is one of a cohort of children with Down's Syndrome who have come through mainstream schools, thanks to the 1981 Education Act, despite the opposition of some people who did not want them there. (*Daily Post, Liverpool* 1995)

Hall (1993) defines culture as 'a state or process of human perfection, a description of a particular way of life which expresses meaning and values not only in art and learning, but in institutions and ordinary behavior'. Schools are an embedded part of the culture. In fact, schools reflect and represent culture at its best and worst. Put simply, they are a microcosm of society transmitting predominant ideologies and practices. Therefore, it is very difficult to change a given school and get it to accept children with intellectual disabilities without changing the cultural contexts in which that school is embedded. It is critical to understand why this is not an easy task. Schools are cultural systems and what cultural systems do is stabilize and regulate human activities, providing blueprints for incoming social participants. Within the school cultural system, activities are elaborately organized, with built-in redundancies that maintain this way of doing things. That accounts for the pull one feels when trying another way of doing things.

Garnett (1994) argued that such a task could not be done on an individual basis if one was to work on tangible routines and deliberately build in one's own redundancies in collusion with other participants in the system. Cultural change is not a *solo activity* she argued.

The nature of the 'rules' defined by the indisputable acceptance of rationalism in everyday life and in all school relationships needs to be changed, especially those rules concerned with the insistence on similarity of behaviour and the tendency to categorize students according to common behaviour (bright ones, the lazy, etc.) (Koutselini 2002).

It is important that society develops attitudes that will permit people with intellectual disabilities to participate in community life. They should be offered a status that observes their rights and privileges as citizens, and in a real sense preserves their human dignity. When accorded their rights and treated with dignity, people with intellectual disabilities in turn will provide society with a most valuable humanizing influence. Inclusive education needs to be taken as essential for children with intellectual disabilities, especially now that dramatic improvements in medical care have greatly increased the life expectancy of such individuals (Eyrnan *et al.* 1991).

There is no doubt that what works in one culture may not work in another. We need to adopt the most relevant ways to reconstruct social

attitudes in each culture. In places where the media play a vital role, perhaps one can focus on using the media in getting the message through about the inclusion of children with intellectual disabilities in regular class settings. The UAE provides an interesting case study for media ecology and communication literacy. The present media-rich environment is a relatively new phenomenon in the region, having developed fast and very effectively alongside the oil economy over the past 40 years (Barwind and Piecowye 2002).

While the present paper was designed to look at how culture affects the levels of inclusion and exclusion of a certain group of individuals in regular schooling, it also tries to raise awareness about the need for urgent, effective and well-researched programmes of action for inclusion. However, that does not deny the fact that to date, there are those who question the very idea of placing children with any kind of special needs into regular classrooms. James Kaufman of the University of Virginia views inclusion as a policy driven by an unrealistic expectation that money will be saved. Furthermore, he argues that trying to force all students into the inclusion mould can be just as coercive as trying to force all the students into special education classes or institutions (Kaufman 1989: 3). Kaufman's critique of inclusion has been cogently challenged as manifesting flaws according to its own research criteria and protocols by Brantlinger (1997) and Slee (2000). Cost is often advanced as a major problem when considering including all children in regular classrooms. Piuma (1989) published a summary of the long-term inclusion of children with severe learning disabilities into regular public schools programmes, referring to the whole process as 'money well spent'. Segregation or the provision of multiple sites is an often-ignored duplication of cost.

To enforce the idea of educating children with intellectual disabilities in their neighbourhood mainstream schools with other 'ordinary' children can be a difficult task for everyone involved. That process will require dramatic change. Authentic inclusion involves restructuring of a school's programme and requires constant assessment of practices and results. Some educators warned about the process of moving from regular/traditional special educational programming to a more inclusive approach and called for a thoughtful, carefully researched transition (York-Barr 1996).

In order for inclusion to be successful, regular education teachers need to develop positive attitudes towards students with disabilities (Chow and Winzer 1992). Interestingly, recent research addressing teacher adaptations for diverse student needs in inclusive settings has found that teachers vary significantly in their ability or willingness to make adaptations (McLeskey and Waldron 2002). Teachers with included children can communicate with their colleagues in other countries, exchange ideas, course materials and texts (Rodney and Fellenius 2001). It might be helpful when they see how other teachers are dealing with social and professional pressure.

It is the present author's view that children with intellectual disabilities are no different from any other child when it comes to their right to have educational needs and rights for inclusion met. However, there are some extra considerations for the issue of social inclusion as a path to educational inclusion. Wherever children with intellectual disabilities are, there is an

urgent need to change society's attitudes towards them as a starting point towards social inclusion. That will hopefully help in making educational inclusion more palatable.

Changing society's attitudes towards a group of people is not an easy matter. It needs many people to feel that they need that change. The old ways will not be transformed easily, unless the old ways are clearly inadequate for a majority of people (Lieberman 1990: 132). It is unfair only to ask schools to solve this problem, as schools are part of the social order in society. No society can claim a good record for solving this problem. House (1974) makes the point by describing schools as frozen institutions driven by strong cultural influence.

In the present author's view, one should educate people about inclusion first before calling for a change in policy, or legislations, or even attitudes. One also needs also to educate people about intellectual disabilities. It seems that in many places people continue to confuse intellectual disability and mental illness. One must not forget, while calling for equality, however, the importance of appreciating diversity in every way as York-Barr (1996) argues: 'We must also decide that diversity (ability, racial, etc.) is valuable. It is not just reality to be tolerated, accepted, and accommodated. It is a reality to be valued'. On the other hand, one needs to understand why people hold this negative attitude towards individuals, particularly children with intellectual disabilities in various cultures, if such attitudes are to change. Cultural understanding can be a step on the road to cultural change. That cultural change that will hopefully lead to their inclusion in regular schools. To the present author, it is like a puzzle that could not be completed unless all the right pieces are found then placed accordingly. Further research is needed in the area of cultural values and beliefs about inclusion for children with intellectual disabilities in regular schools. It is only through conducting much additional research that a much better, although not necessarily complete, understanding will be achieved. It is hoped that such understanding, which is essential for the appreciation of how culture affects inclusion of children with intellectual disabilities in regular schools, can help when their inclusion is adopted, developed and implemented.

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Notes

1. The Olmec was a tribe living around the Gulf of Mexico (1500 BC-300 AD) (Stratford and Gunn 1996: 4).
2. <http://tejunior.thinkquest.org/3880/> (accessed February 2001).

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