

# Attitudes of Mainstream Students towards Students with Special Needs

Nur Adillah Md Abdul Hamid, Suziyani Mohamed & Kamariah  
Abu Bakar

Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

Email: suziyani@ukm.edu.my

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## Abstract

All students should have relevant quality of knowledge discipline, appropriate attitude and mind setting, civilised behaviour to advance themselves and enable them to contribute to harmony and progress of family, community, country and global. Therefore, attitude and perception on peer highly depend on social engagement particularly on students with special needs. This study aimed to identify positive and negative attitudes of mainstream students towards students with special needs. A survey study was conducted and study sample consisted of 100 mainstream students, namely Forms 1, 2 and 4. Data collection was conducted through questionnaire with 25 items using Likert scale measurement. The results found that positive and negative attitudes of mainstream students towards students with special needs were at moderate level. Similar to student perception. It was revealed that there was no significant relationship between attitude and perception of mainstream students towards students with special needs. This proved that mainstream student perception did not affect their attitude towards students with special needs. This study is essential to various parties as the main support for the implementation of inclusive programs which may affect the mindset of students, teachers, parents dan community towards students with special needs, thus strengthening the education system in Malaysia.

**Keywords:** Attitude, Perception, Mainstream Students, Students with Special Needs.

## Introduction

Globalisation is moving rapidly at present. Passage of time presents new challenges in the school system among students particularly students with special needs which are often associated with social and interpersonal relationship with peers. They have to encounter various challenges are encountered to keep pace with learning together with other mainstream students. Apart from teachers, mainstream students or peers become motivators for students with special needs to obtain good and perfect education. The attitude of mainstream students towards students with special needs is a key field for creating a positive environment. Negative attitudes among mainstream students become a barrier in increasing social engagement along with students with special needs (Anuar, 2013). If mainstream

students are negative towards students with special needs, they experience less self-confident, isolated and excluded.

Previous studies have shown a great deal about society's attitude towards individuals with special needs. Gonen and Grinberg (2016) in their study stated about the need to strengthen the student image and encourage students to befriend and socialise with students with learning difficulties. Janet A. Levey in the study "Attitudes of Nursing Faculty Students Towards Special Needs Nursing Students" showed that the medical faculty students have a more positive attitude towards nursing students with special needs compared to other faculties who have less exposure to individuals with special needs and indicated significant negative attitudes. A similar study was conducted by Jessica et al (2015) and discovered that although college and university students had positive attitudes towards students with special needs, they tended to exhibit more negative attitudes towards students with mental and learning difficulties compared to those with physical disabilities.

Individuals' feelings, beliefs and attitudes towards people with disabilities influence their readiness in social involvement such as making friends at work and establishing special relationships with individuals with special needs (Anuar, 2013). Loan (2013) stated that one of the main reasons for increasing the rights of individuals with special needs is the existence of stigma against them resulting in negative attitude exhibited by the surrounding community. For example, the unemployment problem is higher for women special needs compared to men as most families are not willing to give them the opportunity to work (Rousso, 2003).

The findings of a study conducted by Blacman (2016) showed that social relationships with peers with special needs play an important role in demonstrating attitudes towards them. Out of 16 teachers interviewed, 10 of them stated that they easily accepted students with learning difficulties and the rest are difficult in accepting students with special needs in their classes (Avcioglu, 2016).

Moreover, Raquel Suria-Martinez (2011) found that students' attitudes towards students with special needs depend on their course and formative level. University students showed a more positive attitude than high school students. This is because students who interact more with students with special needs showed high awareness level about the disabilities experienced by their peers.

Previous studies have clearly shown that this matter needs to be seriously considered in addressing attitudes towards students with special needs. The government should emphasise efforts in PPPM 2015-2025 (Higher Education) to transform the education system to produce students who are balanced in terms of knowledge and morals. Besides, previous studies mostly have focused on the attitudes of teacher and college or university students but are still poorly conducted among mainstream students. Therefore, the objectives of this study are:

- to identify the positive attitudes of mainstream students towards students with special needs.
- to identify the negative attitudes of mainstream students towards students with special needs.
- to examine the perception of mainstream students towards student with special needs.
- to examine the relationship between positive attitudes and perception of mainstream students towards student with special needs.

## Literature Review

There are several previous studies that have been conducted by researchers on the attitudes and perceptions of mainstream students towards students with special needs. They highlighted the category of students with learning, vision and hearing disabilities. Furthermore, previous studies also encompassed the context of school and university students, and colleagues at work.

Numerous studies have reported on the acceptance of children in the school system to examine social interaction of this group with other typical students. Larrivee and Home (1991) stated that the lack of acceptance of mainstream students towards students with special needs is not due to physical problems alone but low academic achievement.

Westwood (1987) supported this opinion by stating that children with mild disabilities are more receptive than children with severe disabilities. Children have a tendency to learn or imitate behaviors by observing adults around them (Diamond and Hong, 2010). Children's opinions about individuals with special needs are associated with emotional responses that influence their behavior. Innes and Diamond (1999) examined the opinions of preschool children about disabilities and their interactions with peers with disabilities. The results showed that the social interaction of preschool children with friends with special needs was at a positive level.

Juvonen and Bear (1992) reported their study on social adjustment of children with and without learning disabilities in integrated classroom. The study involved 199 special education learning children included in mainstream classrooms full time. The results of this study found that children were more easily integrated socially and they can accept peers in the class. Girls with learning difficulties received negative reactions and are less liked. The study also found that if children with special needs had close friends, they would have the opportunity to train interpersonal skills and would have the ability to socialise. These social skills and abilities will increase the chances of children with special needs to make friends and socialise.

A study conducted by Norhayati (1996) showed about the opportunities to socialise between students with hearing and learning disabilities in regular day schools. The study involved mainstream students, and special education students of hearing and learning. The results showed that learning special education students have higher chance of socialising compared to hearing special education students. The main problem affecting the lack of opportunities for students to socialise with mainstream students was due to communication problems as they are unable to communicate well. Moreover, the mainstream students hardly understand their situation or needs.

Moreover, Zulkarnaian (2002) revealed that the level of typical student acceptance towards special education students was low. However, typical students can still accept the situation of special education students in their school. In the study, 41.7% disagreed and 20% strongly disagree' with the statement 'You like special students attending this school'. Only 10% of respondents agreed, while the rest strongly agreed. This lack of acceptance was seen to have a negative impact on students' self-concept and their overall academic achievement.

According to Kamariah (1995), typical students benefit through their efforts in supporting and interacting with their special needs peers in the classroom. They can learn to understand their special needs friends regardless of their age differences, disadvantages and disabilities. If this situation occurs, indirectly it will help those with special needs in increasing their level of self-concept and socialisation in the environment. Robert et al. (1996) explained that students with special needs would encourage more positive interaction and acceptance of typical students in the classroom and on the playground.

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Individuals' feelings, beliefs and attitudes towards people with disabilities influence their readiness in social involvement such as making friends at work and establishing special relationships with individuals with special needs (Anuar, 2013). Amira Van Loan (2013) stated that one of the main reasons for increasing the rights of individuals with special needs is the existence of stigma against them resulting in negative attitude exhibited by the surrounding community. For example, the unemployment problem is higher for women special needs compared to men as most families are not willing to give them the opportunity to work (Rousso, 2003).

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Moreover, Raquel Suria-Martinez (2011) found that students' attitudes towards students with special needs depend on their course and formative level. University students showed a more positive attitude than high school students. This is because students who interact more with students with special needs showed high awareness level about the disabilities experienced by their peers.

In addition, Smart (2002) also noted that self-esteem and psychological well-being of individuals with special needs are affected by the perceptions of others. Chen et al. (2002) stated that one of the focuses in studying individuals with special needs is their relationship with the outside community.

Stacey (2016) in her study on Barbadian Students 'Attitudes Towards Including Peers with Disabilities in Regular Education' showed similar results to that of Vignes et al. (2009) who stated that women showed more positive attitude towards individuals with special needs compared to men depending on their midsent. In the study, age did not significantly affect their attitudes towards peers with special needs. However, they also discovered that adults aged >18 years showed better attitudes toward peers with special needs compared to those aged between 7 to 12 years.

A study on faculty attitudes towards students with disabilities in a Public University in Jordan conducted by Bashir (2013) identified the attitudes of faculty members in the admission of students with disabilities in public universities in Jordan using a survey study. It was found that 82.9% of the participants had no knowledge of the law of the rights of persons with disabilities and 17.1% had the knowledge. This indicated that the relationship between legal knowledge and participants' attitudes towards people with disabilities was insignificant.

**Methodology**

This study used a survey study design and was conducted in a secondary school with PPKI program in Jasin district, Melaka. The sample size in this study was 100 mainstream students randomly selected from each class of Forms 1, 2 and 4. The main instrument used in this study was a questionnaire to obtain information on the attitudes and perceptions of mainstream students towards students with special needs. The questionnaire consisted of three main parts, namely Part A: Respondent Demographics, Part B: Attitudes of Mainstream Students Towards Students with Special Needs and Part C: Perceptions of Mainstream Students Towards Students with Special Needs. The information obtained from the questionnaire was analysed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) program.

**Instrument**

The questionnaire used was adopted from Olaleye et al (2012) based on their study on attitudes of students towards peers with disability in an inclusive school in Nigeria. According to Majid (1994), more practical and effective questionnaires are used especially in large populations. Creswell (2005) stated that a questionnaire is a form used in the design of a survey study that involves participants to complete and return the form to the researcher. The participants of this study selected answers to the questions related to demographic information.

**Data Collection Procedures**

According to Mohamed (2001), each study has its own way and process of administration. The data collection procedures included selection of study tools, subjects, sample size, place to conduct the study and most appropriate timelines to conduct the study.

This study was conducted after obtaining permission from the Planning and Research Division, Ministry of Education Malaysia, Melaka State Education Department, Jasin District Education Office and School Principals.

The first step taken was to identify the target population which was the mainstream students. The researcher explained the purpose and objectives of this study and expressed the anticipation that the respondents can provide good cooperation in this study. The next step was to identify the location of the respondents and conduct the distribution of the questionnaire. Questionnaires in print were distributed and answered during school hours. Descriptions for each item were conducted and respondents were asked not to discuss while answering the questionnaire to ensure that the findings of the questionnaire have high reliability. This is also implemented to ensure that the researcher gets a good and complete return of the questionnaire.

**Data Analysis Procedures**

The information obtained from the questionnaire was analysed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) program. The results were used to identify positive attitudes, negative attitudes and perceptions of mainstream students towards students with special needs. SPSS is one of the computer software programs used to process and analyse research data, especially for social and educational research.

Two forms of data analysis were used, namely descriptive statistical analysis and inferential statistical analysis. Descriptive statistical analysis processes raw data based on research objectives (Syazwani, 2014). In this study, descriptive statistics covering the total score,

percentage and frequency were used to describe the background of the respondents in terms of gender, age and class of mainstream students.

The descriptive statistics were summarised in frequency, percentage, mean score index and standard deviation, and the results were displayed in graphs and histograms to determine students' attitudes and perceptions of mainstream students towards students with special needs.

Inferential statistics is a population-related analysis. Chua (2006) stated that inferential statistics analyse data taken from a sample to provide statistical information to make inferences to a population. In this study, the inferential statistic used was Pearson correlation which determined the significance of the relationship between perceptions and positive and negative attitudes of mainstream students towards students with special needs. Therefore, the researcher could determine the difference between the dependent and independent variables.

### Results and Discussion

Attitude is a complex mental state that is closely related to beliefs and emotions as well as values and tendencies to act (WordNet, 2006). This section presents the analysis of measurement based on assessment scale of positive attitudes of mainstream students towards students with special needs.

Table 1.0 shows the items for the positive attitudes of mainstream students towards students with special needs. About 41.0% of respondents strongly agreed that they do not mind if students with special needs sit next to them with a mean of 3.92. High mean of 3.91 was also obtained by the statement 'I am happy if a student with special needs invites me to his house' as agreed by 45.0% respondents. Based on these two statements, it was evidenced that the respondents strongly agreed to mix and accept invitations of students with special needs. Subsequently, the statement 'I will tell my secrets to students with special needs' recorded the lowest mean of 2.59 as 39.0% of respondents were unsure. Similarly, the statement 'I will invite students with special needs to sleep in my house' also recorded a low mean score of 2.74 as 50.0% of respondents were unsure. The overall mean for the items of positive attitude of mainstream students towards students with special needs was 3.54. According to Ahmad (2000), the score indicates a moderate level. In this study, the overall mean indicated that the mainstream students agreed with the positive attitude items and met each of their actions and behaviors towards students with special needs.



Table 1.0

*Items of Positive Attitudes of Mainstream Students Towards Students with Special Needs*

Item	Scale					Mean	SD	Mean score
	1	2	3	4	5			
I do not mind if students with special needs sit next to me.	3 (3.0%)	3 (3.0%)	34 (34.0%)	19 (19.0%)	41 (41.0%)	3.92	1.07	High
I sided with students with special needs who were ridiculed.	4 (4.0%)	8 (8.0%)	26 (26.0%)	31 (31.0%)	31 (31.0%)	3.77	1.10	High
I invited students with special needs to my birthday party.	3 (3.0%)	5 (5.0%)	29 (29.0%)	40 (40.0%)	23 (23.0%)	3.75	0.97	High
I spoke to an unfamiliar student with special needs.	9 (9.0%)	11 (11.0%)	37 (37.0%)	29 (29.0%)	14 (14.0%)	3.28	1.12	Moderate
I like it if students with special needs live next door to my house.	4 (4.0%)	3 (3.0%)	28 (28.0%)	34 (34.0%)	31 (31.0%)	3.85	1.03	High
I am happy to befriend with student with special needs.	0 (0.0%)	8 (8.0%)	31 (31.0%)	31 (31.0%)	30 (30.0%)	3.83	0.95	High
I would be happy if a student with special needs invited me to his house.	3 (3.0%)	2 (2.0%)	23 (23.0%)	45 (45.0%)	27 (27.0%)	3.91	0.92	High
I feel happy to be able to do activities with students with special needs.	2 (2.0%)	5 (5.0%)	33 (33.0%)	32 (32.0%)	28 (28.0%)	3.79	0.98	High
I will invite students with special needs to sleep at my house.	16 (16.0%)	17 (17.0%)	50 (50.0%)	11 (11.0%)	6 (6.0%)	2.74	1.05	Moderate
I will tell my secrets to students with special needs.	23 (23.0%)	20 (20.0%)	39 (39.0%)	11 (11.0%)	7 (7.0%)	2.59	1.16	Moderate
I enjoy spending time with students with special needs.	3 (3.0%)	9 (9.0%)	41 (41.0%)	27 (27.0%)	20 (20.0%)	3.52	1.01	Moderate
<b>Overall mean</b>						<b>3.54</b>		

To answer the second question, namely the negative attitude of mainstream students towards students with special needs, an analysis of the items of negative attitudes was conducted. The statement that recorded the highest mean score of 1.80 was 'I feel sorry for students with special needs', indicating 44.0% of respondents strongly agreed. The highest mean score was 1.81 for the statement 'students with special needs desire more attention than others', strongly agreed by 44% of respondents. From the mean scores obtained, it

proved that the respondents were strongly agreed with the negative attitudes exhibited towards students with special needs. Furthermore, the lowest mean score was indicated by the 10th negative attitude of 'I am afraid to be close to students with special needs' with a mean score of 3.96 (44.0% of respondents strongly disagreed). This mean score was considered to be at a low level as respondents did not agree that students with special needs were fearful. The overall mean score for this negative attitude was 3.30 and considered at a moderate level. It can be concluded that the respondents agreed with the negative attitudes presented. The analysis of these negative items is summarised in Table 2.0.

Table 2.0

*Items of Negative Attitudes of Mainstream Students Towards Students with Special Needs*

Item	Scale					Mean	SD	Mean score
	1	2	3	4	5			
I will not introduce students with special needs to my friends.	25 (25.0%)	23 (23.0%)	29 (29.0%)	14 (14.0%)	9 (9.0%)	3.41	1.26	Moderate
I do not know how to talk to students with special needs.	17 (17.0%)	15 (15.0%)	36 (36.0%)	24 (24.0%)	8 (8.0%)	3.09	1.18	Moderate
I sympathise with students with special needs.	3 (3.0%)	1 (1.0%)	13 (13.0%)	39 (39.0%)	44 (44.0%)	1.80	0.92	Low
Students with special needs desire more attention than others.	3 (3.0%)	1 (1.0%)	14 (14.0%)	38 (38.0%)	44 (44.0%)	1.81	0.93	Low
I am afraid with students with special needs.	37 (37.0%)	19 (19.0%)	35 (35.0%)	4 (4.0%)	5 (5.0%)	3.79	1.14	High
I try to evade students with special needs.	37 (37.0%)	22 (22.0%)	31 (31.0%)	8 (8.0%)	2 (2.0%)	3.84	1.08	High
I do not like making friends with students with special needs.	40 (40.0%)	19 (19.0%)	33 (33.0%)	6 (6.0%)	2 (2.0%)	3.89	1.07	High
I will not sit next to students with special needs in class.	39 (39.0%)	20 (20.0%)	36 (36.0%)	2 (2.0%)	3 (3.0%)	3.90	1.05	High
I try not to look towards individuals with special needs.	34 (34.0%)	18 (18.0%)	29 (29.0%)	16 (16.0%)	3 (3.0%)	3.64	1.19	Moderate
I am afraid to be close to students with special needs.	44 (44.0%)	19 (19.0%)	28 (28.0%)	7 (7.0%)	2 (2.0%)	3.96	1.09	High



I feel embarrassed if a student with special needs invites me to his or her birthday party.	36 (36.0%)	19 (19.0%)	31 (31.0%)	8 (8.0%)	6 (6.0%)	3.71	1.21	High
I would not go to the home of a special needs student to play.	31 (31.0%)	20 (20.0%)	37 (37.0%)	7 (7.0%)	5 (5.0%)	3.65	1.14	High
I feel sad when I see students with special needs.	10 (10.0%)	7 (7.0%)	23 (23.0%)	34 (34.0%)	26 (26.0%)	2.41	1.23	Moderate
I will miss my break time to take care of students with special needs.	14 (14.0%)	22 (22.0%)	44 (44.0%)	16 (16.0%)	4 (4.0%)	3.26	1.02	Moderate
<b>Overall mean</b>						<b>3.30</b>		

The findings found that as many as 44.0% of respondents strongly agreed that students with special needs behaved well. The mean score for this statement was the highest at 4.05 (high level). Similarly, the perception that students with special needs need a lot of help to do something had a mean score of 3.98 as strongly agreed by 38.0% respondents. Furthermore, 48.0% of mainstream students were not sure whether students with special needs are often in despair or not. The mean for this statement was 2.45. Meanwhile, 40% of respondents (mean value of 2.66) were also unsure that special needs students often feel inferior. This statement recorded a low mean score. A total of 39.0% of respondents strongly disagreed that students with special needs do not like making friends and 36.0% of respondents strongly disagreed with the statement that students with special needs do not have fun with mean values of 2.13 and 2.18, respectively. Both values indicated low levels. Overall, the mean score for the perception of mainstream students towards students with special needs was 3.31 at a moderate level.

Table 3.0

*Items of Perceptions of Mainstream Students towards Students with Special Needs*

Item	Scale					Mean	SD	Mean score
	1	2	3	4	5			
Students with special needs are independent.	2 (2.0%)	10 (10.0%)	33 (33.0%)	38 (38.0%)	17 (17.0%)	3.58	0.96	Moderate
Students with special needs love to play.	5 (5.0%)	4 (4.0%)	18 (18.0%)	39 (39.0%)	34 (34.0%)	3.93	1.07	High
Students with special needs do not like making friends.	39 (39.0%)	18 (18.0%)	36 (36.0%)	5 (5.0%)	2 (2.0%)	2.13	1.06	Low

Students with special needs often feel inferior.	24 (24.0%)	14 (14.0%)	40 (40.0%)	16 (16.0%)	6 (6.0%)	2.66	1.18	Moderate
Students with special needs are as happy as I am.	2 (2.0%)	4 (4.0%)	37 (37.0%)	33 (33.0%)	24 (24.0%)	3.73	0.94	High
Students with special needs know to behave well.	3 (3.0%)	3 (3.0%)	24 (24.0%)	26 (26.0%)	44 (44.0%)	4.05	1.04	High
Students with special needs have no fun.	36 (36.0%)	23 (23.0%)	31 (31.0%)	7 (7.0%)	3 (3.0%)	2.18	1.10	Low
Students with special needs are interested in many things.	3 (3.0%)	1 (1.0%)	33 (33.0%)	32 (32.0%)	31 (31.0%)	3.87	0.97	High
Students with special needs are often in despair.	28 (28.0%)	14 (14.0%)	48 (48.0%)	5 (5.0%)	5 (5.0%)	2.45	1.10	Moderate
Students with special needs are easy to get along with new friends.	2 (2.0%)	6 (6.0%)	34 (34.0%)	25 (25.0%)	33 (33.0%)	3.81	1.03	High
Students with special needs need a lot of help to do something.	3 (3.0%)	6 (6.0%)	19 (19.0%)	34 (34.0%)	38 (38.0%)	3.98	1.04	High
<b>Overall mean</b>						<b>3.31</b>		

Furthermore, the relationship between the correlation coefficient values of positive attitude and negative attitude with the perceptions of mainstream students towards students with special needs was used to test the following null hypothesis:

**H<sub>0</sub> There is no significant difference between the perceptions and positive attitudes of mainstream students towards students with special needs.**

For the relationship between perceptions and positive and negative attitudes of mainstream students towards students with special needs, Pearson correlation coefficient for positive attitude was  $r = 0.031$ . This indicated the presence of a very weak negative relationship between the two variables. As for significant value,  $p = 0.762$  was greater than the set significance level of  $p = 0.05$ . Similarly, the correlation coefficient for negative attitudes was  $r$

= -0.131, demonstrating a very weak negative relationship between these two variables. The significant value for this negative attitude was  $p = 0.192$ , greater than the set significance level of  $p = 0.05$ .

Thus, it can be inferred that there was no significant relationship between perceptions with positive and negative attitudes of mainstream students towards students with special needs. The null hypothesis for this study was accepted.

### Conclusion

This descriptive study was conducted in detail to answer four research questions. The results of the study found that the positive attitudes, negative attitudes and perceptions of mainstream students towards students with special needs were at moderate levels. In this regard, it is imperative that all parties work together to overcome these weaknesses towards a better education system in the future. Various parties will receive benefits through the findings of this study. Students, parents, teachers, schools, the State Education Department and the MOE will continue to plan and implement all programs that can increase the level of togetherness of students. This is because the school is the main institution where the process of psychological and social development of children takes place. This study also leads to a good Malaysian education system where it can contribute to the quality of knowledge discipline, good morals, behavior and civility not only for mainstream students but also for students with special needs.

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