

Early Childhood Administrators' Admission Decision Making Process in Including Children with Special Needs in Singapore¹⁾

Chen-Chen Cheng

SEED Institute

Abstract

In Singapore, many parents find it difficult to locate early childhood services for their children with special needs. As Singapore does not have laws protecting the right to education for children with special needs, early childhood center administrators (managers and principals) make admission decisions at their own discretion on a case-by-case basis. This qualitative interview study examines the individual, varied patterns of early childhood center administrators' admission decision making process in relation to children with special needs in Singapore. The results revealed an on-going, dynamic decision making process jointly participated in by both administrators and parents. The researcher investigated and documented the steps and efforts these administrators took to make the inclusion of children with special needs possible in regular early childhood education settings. The implications of this unique Singapore inclusion model are focused on the moral and professional aspects of inclusion and administrators' sense of ownership in inclusion without the presence of the law.

Keywords : inclusion, early childhood, children with special needs, admission decision making process

1) This research is funded by Center for Research and Best Practices, SEED Institute, Singapore
Corresponding author, chengcc@seedinstitute.edu.sg

Introduction

In Singapore, early childhood centers consist of kindergartens and childcare centers. Kindergartens offer half-day programs for children aged four to six while childcare centers admit children aged two months to under seven years. These centers can be categorized into three groups. The first group of centers are established by for-profit individual or private corporations. The fees, teacher qualifications, and curricula of these private centers vary widely. The second group include centers run by voluntary welfare organizations (charity foundations) or individuals. Their goal is to serve children from low-income or at-risk families. They charge minimum or nominal fees and receive government funding and referrals. They also depend on donations through fund raising activities. The families these centers serve mostly are eligible to receive government financial assistance. The third group of centers are run by what is known as Anchor Operators. Although all early childhood centers are private (non-governmental) in nature, the Singapore government does provide recurring funds and preferential treatment (discount in rent for centers located in public housing buildings) to early childhood education operators. Under the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF)'s Anchor Operator Scheme 2009, two organizations are granted Anchor Operator status. Currently, the two Anchor Operators are the largest two childcare center operators in Singapore with a total of approximately 200 centers (Aware Singapore, 2012).

Halimah Yacob, former Minister of State for MSF, explained the government's expectations for Anchor Operators. In addition to "committing to delivering their childcare programmes at affordable fees levels," Anchor Operators "need to be inclusive and secular, not catering to any one ethnic or religious group" (Aware Singapore, 2012). The "inclusiveness" mentioned here applies to children of all ethnicities and religions. Children with special needs are not explicitly identified as part of this scheme.

In Singapore, the majority of children with special needs are served by special education schools rather than in the public school system. In early childhood education settings, center administrators (managers and principals) decide whether the centers are capable of working with young children with special needs. Parents of young children with special needs often find it difficult to find centers that are willing to admit their children (Tan, 2010; Yeo, Neihart,

Tang, Chong, & Huan, 2011).

In other parts of the world, however, including children with special needs in the mainstream education settings has been an education trend for decades because children with and without special needs have the right to learn together in an inclusive society (Ministry of Social and Family Development, 2006, 2008; UNESCO, 1994). Regional governments in Asia, China, Hong Kong, South Korea, and Taiwan for example, have made inclusion mandatory in public education system (Becher & Rao, 2012; Chung, 2004; Yeo et al., 2011) to safeguard the education right of children with special needs. Another reason for countries to mandate inclusion is because inclusion has many benefits for children with and without special needs. Research has shown that all children can benefit from an inclusive early childhood education setting in the United States (U.S.) (Odom, et al., 2004). Odom, Byesse, and Soukakou (2011) reviewed U.S. research on early childhood inclusion over the last 25 years and summarized the essential elements for successful inclusion in early childhood settings. These elements include collaboration of adults involved, resources and support at both center and systemic levels, and specialized, individualized instruction. With these elements in place, inclusion benefits all children. Children with disabilities will be able to form a sense of belonging and positive social relationships with other children. At the same time, typically developing children acquired positive knowledge and attitudes towards their peers with disabilities. Results of this study confirm these synthesized points about early childhood inclusion and provide detailed collaboration steps taken by adults at the administrative levels.

Early childhood centers can also play an important role in the early identification of children who are at risk. Branson, Vigil, and Bingham (2008) documented childcare providers' application of developmental monitoring to make informed referrals for early identification. Early identification of young children who are at risk can lead to early intervention and better treatment outcomes (Bandau & Pretis, 2004; Yoshinaga-Itano, 2003).

Although Singapore has not yet made inclusion of children with special needs in the mainstream education system a legal mandate, the government has been making efforts, if sporadic, in encouraging early childhood centers to include children with special needs. In 2008, the government published the *Guidelines for Childcare Centers Providing Care Services for Children with Special Needs (other than centers with integrated child care*

programme) in 2008. The aim is to “maximise the potential of children with special needs in an inclusive learning environment” (MSF, 2008, p. 2). The guidelines specify the eligibility criteria for children to be included in regular childcare centers. Childcare centers can only admit children aged 18 months to six years and 11 months with mild to moderate disabilities and the number of children with special needs cannot surpass 15% of the total children at the center.

Other eligibility criteria include the centers philosophy, staff qualifications, staff-child ratio, space, and collaboration with parents via an Individual Educational Plan. These requirements are meant to ensure centers have adequate capacity in serving children with special needs. Inadvertently, they also act as stringent requirements that disqualified most, if not all, early childhood centers for serving children with special needs. For example, the staff-child ratio specified in the Guidelines is 1:3 while the majority of early childhood centers’ staff-child ratio is 1:20 or higher for children aged five and six years (K1 and K2 years). The maximum staff-child ratio allowed by the government in centers at K2 is 1:25 (MFS, 2013).

One inclusive childcare initiative devised by the government is the Integrated Childcare Program (ICCP). Currently, some 17 ICCP centers (out of 931 childcare centers nationwide) set aside “only a few places” for children with mild to moderate disabilities after the children pass the assessment of “suitability for integration in the mainstream childcare setting” (Center for Enabled Living, 2011).

In contrast to the minimum direct involvement of the government in including children with special needs in early education centers, voluntary welfare organizations in Singapore are strong forces behind promoting inclusion. Asian Women’s Welfare Association (AWWA) Integration Services, for example, has been working consistently on supporting integration of children with autism in the mainstream schools (AWWA, 2011). The three-year Mission I’mPossible program is another example. It is a community-based early intervention program funded by the Lien Foundation and implemented in childcare centers. It was piloted in 2009 by KK Women’s and Children’s Hospital early intervention professionals. Together with center principals and teachers, these professionals have worked with 92 children identified as having mild special needs at 22 People’s Action Party Community Foundation childcare centers (Lien Foundation, 2010).

The combined efforts made by the government and non-government organizations appear

inadequate as most children with special needs in Singapore attend special schools or early intervention centers in Singapore (Yeo et al., 2011) and do not receive regular early childhood education. Many parents find it difficult to locate an early childhood center for their children with special needs. Manager Maureen, one participant of this study and a vocal advocate for inclusion, has a child with Down syndrome. As she was looking for childcare services for her child, she realized “the struggles of the family of concerns with, with special needs and challenges that there isn’t a support structure, there is but which I feel could be a lot better. When we started looking at education, I’m sure you speak to many parents with special needs, you can knock on many doors and most of them are closed.”

New policy development in relation to people with disabilities may create an indirect impact on the current situation. The Singapore government signed the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability on 30 November 2012 (MSF, 2012) to demonstrate its determination and commitment to including people with disabilities into the mainstream society and confirmed its support for inclusive education. The Government’s Enabling Masterplan 2012-2016 also stresses the importance of providing early intervention services in early education settings (MSF, 2012). With these new moves, we can hopefully foresee that in the near future there should be an increase in the number of students with special needs in mainstream schools. This positive change of national policy also requires early childhood centers to review their philosophy, policies, and plans in working with children with special needs

Significance of the Study

Childcare center administrators are the most important figures in shaping the inclusive early childhood education landscape in Singapore because it is their responsibility to decide whom to include or exclude at their own discretion. It is necessary to examine their admission decision making process from the principals’ perspectives to understand their views of, concerns about, and expectations for making admission decisions and working with children with special needs and their parents. An in-depth, more nuanced understanding of administrators’ perspectives can help other practitioners, policy makers, and parents better work with center administrators in a collaborative manner.

Objectives

This study aimed to identify and document the tacit, highly individualized path early childhood center administrators take in determining whether an applicant, that is a child with special needs, is eligible for admission. Common patterns of the decision making process, if any, were examined and analyzed to help understand the elements that make inclusion possible in regular early childhood settings in Singapore.

Research Questions

How do early childhood center administrators make admission decisions in relation to children with special needs and what are the “best practices” elements that make inclusion possible in Singapore?

Methodology

This study is an interpretive qualitative study (King & Horrocks, 2010). The findings were drawn from the researcher’s interpretation and analysis of data gathered via in-depth semi-structured interviews with the participants. The researcher applied purposive and snowball sampling procedures and recruited participants who shared the widest range of differences possible in their age, years of experiences, qualifications, training background, gender, race, and types of centers they worked in.

Participants and Settings

The participants included one mid-level general manager and two principals from each Anchor Operator (total six), two founder/principals of two private childcare centers, and two social service childcare center principals. The participants were recruited via both purposive and snowball sampling methods. First, the researcher asked her colleagues (researcher assistant and lecturers at an early childhood education training institute in Singapore) to refer

principals and administrators who they had contact with. The researcher then chose administrators according to the types of center they worked in. As the Anchor Operator centers constitute the majority of the early childhood education centers in Singapore, the researcher decided to include three administrators from each Anchor Operator organization (six in total) and the remaining four participants were from private and social service early childhood education centers.

Interview process and protocol

The semi-structured interviews lasted from one hour to two and half hours at the participants' offices. Before the interview started, the participants were given the informed consent form and a summary of the study. After the participants read the documents, the researcher briefly explained to them their right to withdraw from the study at any time and all data collected from the interviews were confidential. A follow-up email took place when clarification was needed. Each participant received S\$20 gift certificate, a small token of appreciation for their time and willingness to participate in this study. Two participants declined the offer.

The open-ended interview questions included "Please describe a typical admission process at your center" and "Please describe the time when a parent of a child with special needs came to hopefully enroll his/her child in your center." These questions were designed to collect as much as possible information relevant to the research topic by providing the participants with ample opportunities to recall and examine their past experiences when reporting on the admission processes for children with special needs. To understand administrators' perspectives, the researcher decided to enter the interaction with an open mind with as few pre-existing assumptions as possible. These interview questions "outline the main topics the researcher would like to cover" and the researcher hoped "the participants will lead the interaction in unanticipated directions" (King & Horrocks, 2010, p. 35) and share their experiences and thoughts about working with children with special needs without feeling restricted by the specific and/or purposeful interview questions.

During the interview, when the researcher was not clear about what the participants were sharing, clarification prompts and questions such as "Please give me an example." "Is it fair to

say...?” and “Tell me more when ...” were used constantly to help both researcher and participants understand each other and increase the richness of the interview data.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis (King & Horrocks, 2010) was used to analyze the data as it provides a systematic structure for the analysis. Bearing in mind that data analysis is a cursive, non-linear process in which meaning of data and concepts evolve and morph as the researcher constantly compares the multiple perspectives and experiences, thematic analysis proposes a three-level coding process that starts with descriptive coding, moves on to interpretive coding and finally reaches the level of themes. This process forces and reminds the researcher to consciously raise the level of analysis and pay attention to levels of abstraction when it comes to understanding and conceptualizing ideas during the analysis. The researcher coded the raw data using Nvivo 10, a computer software that organizes and manages large quality of text data.

Results

Together with parents, early childhood center principals in Singapore make admission decisions in relation to children with special needs. This is an ongoing, jointly made decision with parents’ participation in each stage of this process. The decision making process began with initial contact made by parents but it did not end with the official admission of the child into the center. As long as the child with special needs attended the center, both parents and principals continued to watch carefully if and how the child’s needs were being met and if they should change their minds at any point about the child’s admission. When principals started to doubt the centers’ capabilities in meeting the child’s need, they always sought the parents’ understanding, cooperation, and agreement. There were three stages to this continuous joint decision making process: initial contact, trial period, and conditional admission.

Stage One: Initial contact

This stage included a center tour and principal's observation of the child. Principals in this study wanted to serve all children, including children with special needs. Principal Boon (all participant names are pseudonyms), a private childcare center principal, went further to stress that she took in children with special needs for their learning, not for charity. Principals Alicia and Stephie, both from Anchor Operators, added that it might hurt the center's image if they rejected children with special needs. Manager Racine from an Anchor Operator witnessed that the presence of a child with disabilities brought out "a different side of the children" because the children were "very caring when interacting with a child with a physical disability." As much as they want to work with all children, principals needed to decide if their centers were able to meet their learning needs and objectives.

Center tour. When parents revealed that their children had special needs, the principals would ask parents to bring their children for a center tour. The parents could see for themselves the physical environment of the centers and be informed of the resources the centers were capable of providing. When the parents visited Principal Lindsey's center and noted the absence of wheelchair ramps and the narrow door to the toilet, they decided to try some other centers. Besides the center's physical environment, teacher-child ratio was also parents' concern. Principal Lindsey and parents "will, you know, talk together. If it's like very very bad, the parents also will not come. Because they know, 20 children. They will ask you: How many children do you have? How many teachers do you have? Then you look at our classrooms. Parents might "need a smaller class" for their children.

Informal observation. The center tour allowed principals to observe the children's behaviors. The major issue the principals were concerned with was whether the children were being violent or disruptive in group settings. During the center tour, Principal Stephie "observes how the child is behaving and how receptive the child is to school" before she made the admission decision.

At this stage, parents were the ones who decided if they wanted to enroll their children. Principals in this study did not reject children for their special needs at this stage.

Stage Two: Trial period

When the principals deemed that the teachers at the center were able to work with the children with special needs, the trial period started. It ranged between two weeks to three months at the principals' discretion.

Finding teachers. Principals' decision making at this point was to find teachers who were willing to work with children with special needs. Manager Racine told me it was eventually a teacher's decision. "Actually for me to make decision is simple but it's actually more for the teachers. Because usually if I were to take in, if I know that there's a special needs child, I will usually talk to the teachers first." If the teacher was willing, she would do her "best to be visible in the classroom and then to help the teachers out but "it's ultimately the teachers that are actually facing the challenges."

Principal Boon expressed her leadership philosophy in letting her teachers decide because "they are the classroom teachers and the child is in their hands. If the teacher is not sure, why would you, a manager, force her to accept the child? Let me ask you, what would the child benefit from this? It all comes down to what we can do for the child."

Determining learning goals. The principals would work with the teachers and parents to discuss the learning objectives. Based on the child needs, they negotiated learning goals and ways for reaching those goals. The principals identified and prioritized three goals for the children: basic needs, social, and academic goals. For the principals, these goals appeared incompatible and mutually exclusive.

Principal Stephanie worked with a parent with financial problems and decided that caring for her children was the main objective. She explained "she (the mother) was telling me that she's working as a cleaner in primary school. So she needed to drop them off as early as 7 am. So I took in the two children and I did tell my teachers that I'm not very concerned about the academic side for them. Because I think the main objective for the mom is that they are well taken care of."

Manager Racine shared her thoughts about the objective that the child with special needs was "not so much of the academic. The focus should be more on the social skills and how

they can actually blend in the bigger society.” She admitted to the parents that they “really do not know how to actually go about working in terms of academic for the child.”

Extra support for teachers. Administrators worked with teachers to provide them with extra staff, strategies, and moral support. Principal Boon respected teachers’ decisions and left the decision making with them during this period of time. When her teacher asked for extra assistance from the teachers’ aide, she discussed this request at the center meeting and sought approval from other teachers.

Principal Doreen collaborated with an early intervention center nearby and sent teachers there for training. Principal Alicia promised her teachers she would be their strongest support and “at any point of time you think that you really can’t handle, you just have to tell me. We will see what we can do.” Together they looked up specific strategies for working with the children. Principal Lindsey worked with the teachers so they did not “feel that they are by themselves, they are alone.”

Principal Nur stepped in if there was no assistant teacher. “I will bring this child in for a while to calm him down. Because sometimes where the teacher really has so many children to look after and at the same time the child is acting up, then what are we supposed to do?” Manager Racine provided her teachers with her assistance and strategies as well as encouragement. “I always tell teachers to always look at things positively because if you don’t try you will never know.

Flexible scheduling. To meet the child’s learning goals, principals adjusted the child’s timetable to meet the needs of the children, their parents, and teachers.

Principal Doreen made changes to the children’s class schedule because children had their own early intervention programs to attend to besides the preschool classes. She said: “Some attend morning over there and come here concentrate in the afternoon. Some come in on alternate days. Monday, Wednesday, Friday here. Tuesday, Thursday there. That is how we work. And then along the way, we fine tune the (schedule).”

Manager Racine found children tended to be calmer in the afternoon. When a particular child was not able to cope with a full-day schedule, half day in the afternoon was a better option. “Usually we’ll get a special needs child to choose the afternoon session because by

afternoon they are more tamed. ... So they only start school at two and ends at five (o'clock). So they will get a chance to be dismissed, follow the routine and you know be dismissed and then you know they will feel very happy about it.”

Starting/continuing with early intervention. Principal Gretchen ran a private childcare center that reserved one or two places for children with special needs. However she made it clear that “children must not be violent and the parent have to send them for therapy.” She explained “the therapy is very important because we have seen in the past where they send for therapy, the improvement can be really fast you know.”

Principals, teachers, and parents at this stage worked together to make inclusion happen. However, some parents decided to quit during this time because they might not be able to fulfill conditions set by the centers including early intervention, hiring a shadow teacher, or attending for fewer hours. One major factor at this stage is parents’ willingness to seek professional help and have their children receive early intervention. Some parents might not be ready yet to admit that their children had special needs and needed early intervention.

Stage Three: Conditional admission

After principals and teachers worked with the parents and made necessary arrangements for the children with special needs, they were officially registered with the center.

Setting formal conditions for admission. Once the trial period is over, principals would negotiate with parents regarding the conditions in which children with special needs could be included. Manager Racine described how her center finalized the admission of the children.

“So if let’s say by two weeks right, able to identify the child is ok, then we will talk about money then we will settle the child, then we will work out of a program.” Conditions negotiated during the trial period were reiterated and continued after the formal admission. These included attendance of early intervention, program timetables, presence of helpers or shadow teachers, and particular learning goals.

Working with professionals. Once the children were admitted, principals and teachers

continued working with the children with special needs. Through their organizations, parents, or just by chance, they sought assistance from early intervention professionals. Via the specialist team of her organization, an Anchor Operator, Principal Alicia had specialists from the child's early intervention program come to work with the teachers on classroom strategies. Principal Doreen "went to approach" the early intervention center nearby asked "Can we tap some of your help? So that is where they came in."

Continued monitoring of both children and parents. The children continued to be closely monitored and measured for progress. In most cases, children did make progress because they attended early intervention and childcare at the same time. There were times when the parents changed their mind about the previously made arrangements and their children appeared to be regressing. Principal Boon has observed slow but steady progress in a child since he was three years old. For her, it meant the child's disability was not too severe to be making progress and it was right to include him in her center.

Principal Nur kept a close eye on the child with autism at her center. She realized "Oh, he's with me after all. And whatever I do, you know he's very curious, whatever I do on the board, he will do the same when he was doing his work. So he was with me even though he wasn't sitting down in front of (class). So in my heart I said, "I can work with this child."

Constant communication. The principals would discuss their concerns with the parents and urged them to abide by the conditions parents have agreed to. Some parents might quit at this juncture because they realized they were not able to fulfill the promises they made during the trial period.

Principal Boon never asked any children to withdraw from her center. With constant communication with parents, parents were aware of their children's needs. They realized the center might not be able to meet their children's needs and decided to quit. The child's own situations might change and warrant a change of early education settings. Principal Gretchen urged the parents to enroll their child in an early intervention program and the therapists there ended up recommending a different childcare center for this child.

Another reason Manager Racine attributed to parents' withdrawing their children was those parents who were in denial would continue to "hop around" to find a center that would take

their children without raising any concerns or questions. “There are also cases that you know not successful because the parents are at the denial stage. The parents just refuse to work with us.”

Parents Are Active Decision Makers

Although the centers appeared to have control in this matter and the principals were gatekeepers, parents also played a significant and active part. Parents initiated the search process for their children’s childcare and might have done some homework before they arrived at the center’s door. Principal Boon from a private childcare center had some parents who were extremely careful and requested multiple center visits before they made up their mind.

For parents who did not have many choices and might make a hasty decision without much information, Principal Lindsey, from an Anchor Operator center, invited parents to tour the center to see for themselves if this is the place for their children with special needs. She shared information about the student-staff ratio and its physical environment so the parents could make an informed decision. She explained “we try to let them make the decision. Then they will feel a bit better.”

Principal Boon and Principal Alicia had similar experiences with parents deciding to withdraw after their meetings to discuss how the centers could accommodate the children’s needs. “I know he is not ready,” one parent said to Principal Alicia. Principal Boon’s parents decided to withdraw their child because they felt they needed to find a place that could better meet their children’s needs once they were made aware of these needs in their meeting with Principal Boon.

Discussion

Early childhood center administrators, including managers and principals, understand that children with special needs have the right to education and want to work with them. They also are acutely aware of the limitations of their centers. Given their individual situations,

participants from different backgrounds and organizations made the admission decisions together with parents. It is a continuous, complex process of three stages: initial contact, trial period, and conditional admission. During each stage, parents and principals worked together making necessary adjustments and learning from each other about the children and themselves to make inclusion happen.

This study confirmed what Odom, et al. (2011) have concluded that successful inclusion in early childhood settings required collaboration of adults involved, resources and support at both center and systemic levels, and specialized, individualized instruction. This study also provided detailed steps and considerations for home-center collaboration to take place at early childhood education settings in Singapore. Furthermore, this Singapore study is unique and valuable for it highlights the dynamic nature of a joint decision making process on inclusion in a country where no laws governing the education right of children with special needs (Yeo et al., 2011).

Inclusion as Moral Mandate and Commitment to Professionalism

In countries such as the U.S. (Odom et al., 2011) and Taiwan (Ministry of Justice, 2012) where the right to education is a legal mandate for all children with and without disabilities, schools cannot reject children with disabilities. Early childhood administrators in Singapore, on the other hand, have the authority and freedom to decide whom they should admit into their centers. All administrators in this study acknowledged children's right to education and made necessary accommodations to admit children with special needs. Because participants experienced different levels of institutional constraints such as lack of resources and professional support, some might have done so with more trepidations than the others. However, it does not make them any less morally responsible for and professionally committed to education for all, a concept on which inclusion is based. In different ways, these participants, together with parents, developed a unique model of inclusive environment for young children in their centers.

The administrators in this study include because they believe it is a right thing to do as early childhood educators. It is a moral and professional decision made at the ground level, rather than being imposed from the top down by the government. This Singapore case of

inclusion provides insight to the moral and professional aspects of inclusion and the possibility of self-transformation. Lim (2009) called for Singaporeans to transform their beliefs and attitudes to make Singapore an inclusive society while the government was continuously devising policies in relation to people with disabilities. Singaporeans, according to Lim, are used to following and relying on the rules and boundaries set by the government in regulating and evaluating their behaviors. He maintained that an inclusive society depends on both a fundamental change in people's value systems and beliefs and the infrastructural change brought about by government policies. Administrators in this study represent a group of educators who do more than what Lim has hoped to see take place. On their own initiative, they have developed a unique inclusive model at the early education level absent government directives or organizational demands.

A Collaborative Inclusive Early Education Model in Singapore

The Singapore model of early childhood inclusion also illustrates a case of active and authentic collaboration among adults involved in the decision making process. Once the administrators made the decision to admit children with special needs, they were determined to make it work. They had frequent interactions with parents, engaged early intervention professionals, involved teachers in the decision making process, offered teachers with support and resources, and closely monitored the parents' commitment and children's progress. What stands out in this inclusion model is parents were made active participants in the process. They could not take their children's admission for granted. They had to demonstrate their willingness and efforts along the way to honor the agreed admission conditions.

Implications for Practice

Rather than the law, what underlies this Singapore style early childhood inclusion is a early childhood leader who is committed to education for all and who is a flexible, resourceful collaborator. In countries where the law mandates universal admission of children with special needs, it might do inclusion a disservice when there is a lack of support and resources. Chung (2004) discussed the teachers' predicaments in inclusive early education settings in

Taiwan where the “zero rejection” of children with disabilities is practiced. Early childhood teachers working for for-profit private centers in Taiwan were especially stressed because of the heavy workload and the lack of support and resources. However, they cannot reject children with special needs. As a result, teachers and administrators in those centers are less likely to experience success and develop self-efficacy in an inclusion setting, applying Bandura's (1982) self-efficacy theory which stresses the importance of prior success in increasing a person's confidence in his/her ability in performing the same task again.

Moreover, for practitioners with inadequate resources for inclusion in other countries where legal measures are present for including young children with special needs, they might see themselves as the passive recipients of legal edicts rather than active participants in the inclusion endeavor. They might lack the initiative to locate resources and support like what the participants in this study have done as resources and support are supposed to be provided by the government.

Administrators in this study were resourceful. As there were no official channels for them to bring in early intervention professionals, the administrators took matters in their own hands to develop informal networks with professionals via their organizations, parents, or short-term projects and in this way accumulated and expanded resources and support for their teachers and children. They demonstrated that without legal mandates inclusion can still take place. Without the law, administrators initiated inclusion at their centers based on their moral and professional commitment to young children with and without special needs. Without the law, they seemed empowered by their successful experiences collaborating with professionals and parents and determined to realize their promise to the children and parents they worked with.

Implications for Research

This qualitative interview study with participants recruited using purposive and snowball sampling methods does not and cannot fully capture the dynamic process of admission decision making process by the administrators in Singapore. In addition, in an interview situation, participants might choose to withhold information despite the researcher's efforts in establishing rapport and ensuring confidentiality. To gather more perspectives of participants and types of data that describe the admission decision making process, the researcher

recommends ethnographic research methods to include observations of and interviews with other stakeholders in the process such as parents, teachers, and children.

Acknowledgement

I want to thank all of the participants for their time and openness. I also want to thank Dr. Marjory Ebbeck, Dr. Audrey Trainor, Dr. Lucy Pou, Dr. Helen Bernstone and Yvonne Pek for their encouragement and comments.

References

- Asian Women's Welfare Association. (2011). *Integration Services*. Retrieved on 24 September 2011 from AWWA website.
- Aware Singapore. (2012). *Parliament primer: Can raising children here be less stressful? Excerpts of debates on childcare and pre-school education that took place during the Aug 13, Sept 10 & 11 sittings of Parliament*. Retrieved on February 19 2013 from AWARE website www.aware.org.sg/2012/10/parliament-primer-can-raising-children-in-singapore-be-less-stressful/#
- Bandau, H. & Pretis, M. (2004). Early identification and systemic educational intervention for young children with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD). *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 19, 17-31.
- Bandura, A. (1982). Self-efficacy mechanism in human agency. *American Psychologist*, 37, 122-147.
- Becher, Y. & Rao, N. (2012). Implementation challenges of inclusive education: a review of Hong Kong's local and international education sectors. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Research in Early Childhood Education*, 6, 101-114.
- Branson, D., Vigil, D. C., & Bingham, A. (2008). Community childcare providers' role in the early detection of autism spectrum disorders. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 35, 523-530.

- Center for Enabling Living. (Last updated May 2011). Pamphlet on the Integrated Childcare Program. Retrieved 24 September 2011 from CEL website.
- Chung, M-C. (2004). *A study of early childhood teachers' professional knowledge and their perceived problems of inclusive classes*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. National Changhua Normal University, Taiwan.
- King, N. & Horrocks, C. (2010). *Interviews in qualitative research*. London: Sage.
- Lien Foundation. (2010). *New "Mission: I'mPossible" programme enables preschoolers with developmental needs overcome learning hurdles*, retrieved on February 17, 2013 from http://www.lienfoundation.org/pdf/news/2010/MIP%20press%20release_Final_6July.pdf
- Lim, L. (2009). Possibilities for an inclusive society in Singapore: becoming inclusive within. *Journal of Policy and Practice in Intellectual Disabilities*, 6, 83-85.
- Ministry of Social and Family Development. (2006). *Enabling Masterplan 2007-2011*. Retrieved on 24 September 2011 from MSF website.
- Ministry of Social and Family Development. (2008). *Guidelines for Childcare Centres Providing Care Services for Children with Special Needs (other than centres with integrated child care programme)*. Retrieved on 24 September 2011 from MSF website.
- Ministry of Education. (2011). *What are kindergartens?* Retrieved on 24 September 2011, from MOE website.
- Ministry of Social and Family Development (2012). *Enabling Masterplan 2012-2016*. Retrieved on 24 January 2013 from MSF website.
- Ministry of Social and Family Development (2012). Singapore Signs the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Retrieved on 24 January 2013 from MSF website.
- Ministry of Social and Family Development (2013). *Guide to setting up a childcare centre*. Retrieved on April 11, 2013 from http://www.childcarelink.gov.sg/cccls/uploads/CCC_Guide.pdf
- Ministry of Justice, Taiwan. (2012). *People with Disabilities Right protection Act*, retrieved April 10, 2013 from <http://law.moj.gov.tw/Eng/LawClass/LawContent.aspx?PCODE=D0050046>.
- Odom, S. L., Buysse, V., & Soukakou, E. (2011). Inclusion for young children with disabilities: a quarter century of research perspectives. *Journal of Early Intervention*, 33, 344-356.

- Odom, S., Vitztum, J., Wolery, R., Lieber, J., Sandall, S., Hanson, M. J., Beckman, P., Schwartz, I., & Horn, E. (2004). Preschool inclusion in the United States: a review of research from an ecological systems perspective. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 4, 17-49.
- Tan, B. (2010). *Come into my world - 31 stories of Autism in Singapore*. Singapore: author.
- Yeo, L. S. Neihart, M. Tang, H. N. Chong, W. H. & Huan, V. S. (2011): An inclusion initiative in Singapore for preschool children with special needs. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 31, 143-158.
- United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (1994). *The Salamanca Statement and Framework on Action for Special Needs Education*. Retrieved on 24 September 2011 from UNESCO website.
- Yoshinaga-Itano, C. (2003). From screening to early identification and intervention: discovering predictors to successful outcomes for children with significant hearing loss. *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education*, 8, 11-30.