

Attitudes among Vietnamese Educators Towards Students with Disabilities and Their Implications Relative to Inclusive Practices: The Findings of a Preliminary Investigation

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Abstract

This article presents the findings of a short-term quantitative/qualitative study concerning the attitudes of Vietnamese educators towards individuals with disabilities and its possible implications relative to the development of inclusion and special education in Vietnam. The current conditions regarding the education of students with and without disabilities in Vietnam are compared with that of other South Asian countries as well as the United States.

The purpose of this study was to identify prevailing attitudes of both school teachers and college teacher educators towards students with disabilities. This was seen as a preliminary step in identifying their predisposition towards the practical implementation of inclusion, which is currently a key national initiative. The implications of this cursory investigation presents a challenge for researchers to find a way to bridge the gap between well-established traditions and best practices in special education in emerging post-modern industrialized countries like Vietnam.

Introduction

The teacher preparation programs as well as the educational system in Vietnam, represented nationally in the policies of the Ministry of Education and Training, are eager to assimilate and administer an adaptation of the U.S. model, especially as described in the Individual's with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Impediments to that adoption are represented in disparities in attitudes among educators and family members towards the inclusion of students with disabilities in public education. Nevertheless, despite these challenges, Vietnam is strategically and ideologically positioned to develop the most advanced special education system in South Asia for reasons that will be discussed later.

Attitudes in South Asia towards Students with Disabilities and Inclusion

The author reviewed data regarding the education of students with disabilities from several countries and constituents to provide a point of comparison with policies employed in Vietnam. These data included the perspectives of parents and teachers from Malaysia, Korea, Japan, Singapore, Taiwan, and China (Hong Kong). These countries were selected for both their regional and cultural similarity with Vietnam and the fact that, in several cases, their governments had embraced the tenets of inclusion. In addition, the South Asian countries identified are considered among the more economically viable

and socially progressive of all the countries in this region of the world. Finally, there were few other relevant studies that examined attitudes about disability or the inclusion of students with disabilities in public general education schools and classrooms.

Whereas the new Malaysian Education Act (1998) reflects a philosophical adoption of the tenets of full inclusion, results from a recent study conducted in Malaysia revealed a more “traditional” approach to the education of students with special needs. That is to say, teachers were given the option to either accept or reject a child with disabilities. Furthermore, due to a severe teacher shortage in Malaysian schools, those teachers who agreed to “include” a student with disabilities did so without a teacher’s aide or assistant: co-teaching or team teaching is simply not feasible (Jelas, 2000).

Similarly, in Singapore, where children with disabilities have been accommodated traditionally within their families and communities, new national initiatives such as “Singapore 21” are encouraging citizens to embrace new developments in education. However, there are impediments that need to be overcome before there is widespread acceptance and inclusion of disability. Some of these obstacles are as rudimentary as the systematic preparation of teachers to work with students with disabilities. Currently in Singapore, there are no teacher preparation programs to certify educators as competent to work with special needs children (Lim & Nam, 2000). Furthermore, the educational system is dichotomous, with separate schools for students with moderate to severe disabilities. School administrators perpetuate this tradition by showing preference to better achieving student cohorts (Lim & Tan, 1999).

In contrast, a recent study involving parents of young children with disabilities and directors of early childhood programs revealed a more optimistic appraisal of special education services in Taiwan. The results indicated that 85% of parents surveyed believed their children with disabilities should have the same opportunities to learn as children without disabilities. This represents a paradigm shift from the more traditional view that disability in a child was a matter of fate and therefore a “family” problem. Moreover, the high value placed on academic achievement within the Taiwanese culture virtually assured the disenfranchisement of the child with disabilities whose academic performance was typically sub-par. Thanks, in part, to recent legislation that has helped to improve the quality of services for children with disabilities as well as initiatives to include students with disabilities in general education classes, 87% of new parents surveyed indicated that they were “able to accept and feel good about their children with disabilities” (Kang, Lovett, & Haring, 2002, p. 15). An additional examination of “transition services,” required components of a student’s individualized education plan as mandated by IDEA (2004) in the United States, revealed a significant discrepancy between services needed and services received. These results are consistent with those of efficacy studies conducted in the United States (Chen & Zhang, 2003).

In a recent study of attitudes towards persons with intellectual disability (ID) conducted among stakeholders in Japan, results showed that attitudes of family friends of persons with an ID as well as caregivers and teachers displayed favorable attitudes whereas family members and relatives did not show as favorable attitudes as expected. A possible

explanation for this unexpected disparity might be the stigma that has traditionally been associated with disability and difference in Japan and other East Asian cultures: a family member so affected was deemed a “loss of face” or a source of divine retribution for a former wrongdoing. Furthermore, the family, ultimately, would bear the burden of responsibility in caring for the ID family member, whereas the professional or voluntary caregiver (service provider or teacher) are relieved of such a responsibility and may be, by professional choice, predisposed to persons with ID (Tachibana & Watanabe, 2004).

A study comparing the effects of social support and culture on maternal stress between American and Korean mothers, revealed far higher levels of stress in the Korean mothers. The author posits several reasons for this finding. Chief among them are: (a) the Korean society’s negative attitudes toward disabilities that prevents open disclosure and the search for effective support and interventions, and (b) the loss of the traditional social support network due, in large part, to the industrialization of the country and increased mobility of the Korean population. In addition, while the same services for persons with disabilities exist in Korea as in the United States, they were less accessible to families in Korea. Moreover, those that were available were often substandard as compared with their U.S. counterparts (Shin, 2002).

Attitudes in the U.S. towards Students with Disabilities

While attitudes towards persons with disabilities are more positive in the U.S. than in many other regions of the world, there is much room for improvement (Yucher & Block, 1986). For example, one author has posited that, by assigning full-time aides to children with multiple disabilities rather than teaching them to become independent suggests that people with significant disabilities are incapable of self-determination and the achievement of self-efficacy. The author asserts that such an attitude represents an “ableist perspective” of disability, which reveals the real prejudice against persons with disability that exists in the U.S. despite all the legislative protections (Hehir, 2003).

In a study involving general education teachers who were predisposed to the inclusion of students with disabilities, 90 percent of the participants noted that there were occasions in which including these children with the general education population was inappropriate (Olsen & Chalmers, 1997). In another survey (Sack, 2000) involving 1,700 adults from across the U.S., 48 percent indicated they considered a “disability” label such as “learning disability” to be harmful to a child, 56 percent thought that “learning disabilities” are caused by environmental factors while 48% believed that laziness accounted for many of the cases. Similarly, in another relevant study (Cook, 2001), teachers who were surveyed about their attitudes towards their students with “hidden” and “obvious” disabilities, revealed an attitude of “rejection” towards 32 percent of those in the former category and 17 percent of those in the latter.

Furthermore, 61 percent of general educators polled in another study indicated that they disagreed with the inclusion of students with disabilities (deBettencourt, 1999). Kauffman, McGee, and Brigham (2004) observe that one of the unintended negative consequences of the disability rights movement in America is the credibility it lends to the notion that disability is a “social construct.” The authors further contend that many

persons in the U.S., influenced by the disability rights movement, see “disability” as either unimportant and therefore not worthy of remediation, or as a desirable qualification that does not need “fixing.” In either case, special education services are viewed as unnecessary (Kauffman et al., 2004).

Lastly, it must be noted that, while a dissonance exists between U.S. disability policy and social practice; nevertheless, the government has both authored and implemented laws that have been heralded and replicated worldwide (e.g., Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990; Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 1990, 1997, 2004; Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, 1973).

Special Education in Vietnam

Few South Asian countries enjoy the level of support for inclusive education as evidenced by the recent position statement of the Ministry of Education and Training in Vietnam. With a population of approximately 86 million, Vietnam boasts a very high literacy rate and has produced a well-educated middle-class. In concert with this statistic is the fact that Vietnam has invested research and logistical resources in the development of innovative pre-school and early intervention programs. Similarly, Vietnam has a very rigorous research agenda directed at identifying interventions for autism, specific physical disabilities, low vision and blindness, as well as hearing impairments.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify prevailing attitudes of both school teachers and college teacher educators towards students with disabilities. This was seen as a preliminary step in identifying their predisposition towards the implementation of inclusion, which is currently a key national initiative. Later, the researcher plans to return to Vietnam to participate in an international conference on inclusive education to be held in Hanoi in the summer of 2011 and will use this opportunity to further investigate the attitudes of conference participants towards the inclusion of students with disabilities. It is the author’s intention that the information gathered from these investigations will be used both to inform and guide the Ministry of Education and Training in its development of an effective and comprehensive policy regarding the education of students with disabilities in Vietnam.

Methodology

Participants

The author used the opportunity provided during a brief stay in Hanoi in August of 2004 to survey and interview educators attending a national workshop at which he was asked to speak. In addition, he was invited to tour some local special education schools, which also presented a unique opportunity to investigate the state of special education services for children as well as the prevailing attitudes of stakeholders such as teachers, professors, and administrators towards persons with disabilities. Four-hundred and thirty-five teachers and teacher educators representing all regions and most of the 58 provinces of Vietnam were surveyed. These participants were volunteers who were attending the week-long workshop for credit sponsored by the Ministry of Education and Training at which the writer was a key presenter. It is important to note that approximately 95

percent of the participants in this survey were women and the education levels of the participants ranged from a four year baccalaureate to a PhD.

Furthermore, Vietnamese colleagues who were faculty members at the National Teacher Training College in Hanoi distributed and collected the surveys, once completed, from attendees who agreed to participate. The researcher used this convenience sample to generate data that would inform a preliminary investigation of the attitudes of Vietnamese educators towards students with disabilities.

Procedures

The investigator employed the Attitudes Towards Disabled Persons Scales (ATDP-O, 1986), a survey that has demonstrated good reliability based on the consistency evident in the outcomes of many studies (see Appendix A). The ATDP-O was constructed in an attempt to provide an objective, reliable, and valid measure of attitudes towards persons with disabilities and was designed to measure the attitudes of both disabled and non disabled persons. In order to facilitate the administration of this survey instrument, the researcher selected the original scale form O (Yuker, Block, & Campbell, 1960) that consisted of 20 items. This form was also preferable since it has fewer items and takes less time to complete and score. The ADPTO-O may be administered as either an individual or group test.

The researcher hypothesized that respondents who revealed a negative predisposition would, likewise, be reticent towards the inclusion of students with disabilities. Since the researcher has been enlisted by teacher preparation institutions in Vietnam as well as, peripherally, by the Ministry of Education and Training, to provide instruction in effective inclusive educational techniques, it seemed important to determine preexisting attitudes towards the public education of students with disabilities. Such awareness, ostensibly, would enable the researcher to suggest ways to more effectively educate teachers and professors about the nature of disability and, consequently, to positively affect their attitudes regarding inclusion. In addition to the survey, the researcher conducted observations and engaged in conversations with several participants from various institutions of higher learning and a few of the provincial school districts in Vietnam.

Process

The author spent eight days in Hanoi, and, in addition to distributing the ATDPO survey to voluntary participants, interviewed several representatives from both the special education department of the University of Hanoi as well as the National Teacher Training College for Early Childhood Educators No. 1 in Hanoi. In addition, the author visited several schools in the Hanoi municipality and recorded details of these observations. Also, the researcher presented a series of workshops to select representatives from the Ministry of Education and Training as well as several regional universities on the topic of effective inclusive education practices and early intervention strategies. The final day of the conferences consisted of a question and answer period that was videotaped, which enabled the researcher to assess the participants' understanding of the topics presented.

Results

Survey Results

An analysis of the survey data shows that the respondents in this study (N = 435) achieved a total mean score of 58.7. This score correlates most closely with that produced in a study conducted by Evans (1974) with a sample of twenty respondents, which resulted in a total mean score of 58.4. The respondents in that study were high school students. The only study evincing a lower mean score produced in reported investigations between 1960 and 2004 was in a similar study also conducted by Evans (1974) involving adolescent offenders for which the total mean score was 52.0. As a point of comparison with similar respondents in America, i.e., faculty members and teachers, the survey results of a study conducted by Conine (1968) involving teachers, produced a total mean score of 75.1. Similarly, a study involving 324 faculty members from a university in the United States resulted in a total mean score of 83.0. According to Yunker and Block (1986), a higher score on the ADPT-O correlates with greater tolerance and understanding of persons with disabilities (see Figure 1 below).

An examination of responses item by item will provide the reader with a more accurate understanding of the attitudes of the Vietnamese participants relative to specific indicators. In response to the statement, "Parents of children with disabilities should be less strict than other parents," 88 percent of the respondents agreed. Yunker and Block (1986) suggest that disagreement with this item reflects a more positive predisposition towards persons with disabilities. In response to the second item, "Persons with disabilities are just as intelligent as persons without such disabilities," a majority of the survey participants disagreed (89 percent); the implications of a negative response to this item are self-evident. Similarly in response to item 3, "Persons with disabilities are usually easier to get along with than other people," a majority of respondents agreed "a little" or "pretty much" (59.1 percent). Once again Yunker and Block (1986) suggest that the preferred response to this item would be some level of disagreement.

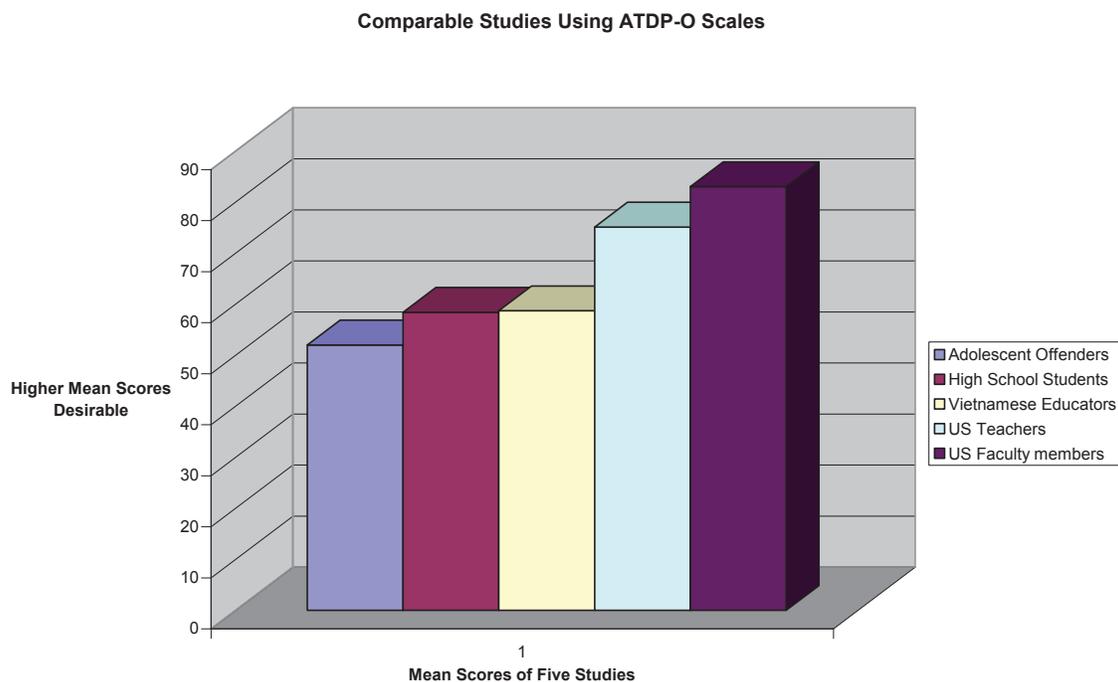
The next item relates to an attitude that *might* reflect latent prejudice or misunderstanding of disability. The item states, "Most persons with disabilities feel sorry for themselves." In consideration of this item, 83 percent of the respondents indicated that they agreed "a little," "pretty much," or "very much." In addition, in response to item number 6, "There should be no special schools for children with disabilities," 60 percent of the participants answered in the affirmative. (Note: without further elaboration, these affirmative responses to item # 6 might be interpreted as supporting the inclusion of children with disabilities in the general education classroom or, conversely, might reflect a belief that is in opposition to the provision of a continuum of special education services.

Item number 7 states, "It would be best for persons with disabilities to live and work in special communities." In contrast with their responses to the first six items, the majority of respondents *disagreed* with the statement, which correlates with the desired response, one that is representative of an inclusive or integrative predisposition relative to persons (students) with disabilities.

Participants' responses to the item 10, "Persons with disabilities should not be expected to meet the same standards as persons without disabilities," revealed a general *disagreement* (66 percent). In examining the results for item 13, "It is almost impossible for a person with a disability to lead a normal life," and comparing it with a similar item, # 17, which states, "Persons with disabilities cannot have a normal social life," showed that 58 percent of the respondents *disagreed* with the former statement, whereas 75 percent *disagreed* with the latter. Similarly, 64 percent of the respondents *disagreed* with the statement, "You should not expect too much from persons with disabilities." These findings reflect a positive and desirable attitude towards students with disabilities in the majority of respondents.

In contrast with these positive dispositions, the respondents revealed a negative trend in their answers to items 16, 19, and 20. These items reflected an opinion about the sensitivities and temperament of persons with disabilities. The majority of respondents surveyed indicated that they agreed that persons with disabilities are more easily upset and sensitive about negative comments. In addition, 67 percent of the respondents agreed that persons with disabilities are often grouchy. Lastly, in response to the statement, "Most persons with disabilities feel that they are not as good as other people," 68 percent of respondents stated that they agreed.

Figure 1.
Comparison of total mean scores of five studies using ATDP-O Scales.



Interview and Field Observation Results

In conversations with key representatives from the Ministry of Education and Training in Vietnam as well as the directors of teacher preparation institutions in Hanoi, DaNang,

and Ho Chi Minh City, the investigator noted generally optimistic and proactive support for inclusive education practices. However, in speaking less formally with public school teachers and faculty within teacher preparation institutions, this writer sensed some skepticism about the feasibility of instituting inclusive practices within the more rural provinces of Vietnam. This reluctance, they explained, was due to deep cultural beliefs about the negative stigma associated with any type of disability. Thus, family members as well as teachers in these areas often associated disability with a “loss of face.”

An example of one such conversation between the principal researcher and the director of a school for children with autism supports this assertion. In the course of the conversation, the director despaired of providing her students with minimal material support and outdated intervention techniques. In addition, the director expressed concern over the resistance of the community members in Hanoi to the education of students with severe disabilities. When asked about her impression of the successful implementation of inclusion, she expressed a guarded optimism, again noting the resistance of the communities in Hanoi to the education of students with severe disabilities, especially within the general education schools and classrooms. She noted that although most community members were receptive to some aspects of rehabilitation, some did not see the benefit of formal education for these students.

In addition to the director of the school for children with autism, the author also interviewed a director of an early childhood program in Hanoi. This individual expressed concern in the short term about the inclusion of children with any type of disability in the general education classroom. In support of this, she cited the concerns expressed by the parents of several of her students without disabilities when they were told that students with multiple disabilities would be admitted to the school. She further speculated that, based on her experience with the school systems of Hanoi and the surrounding northern provinces, these concerns were typical of parents of non-disabled children. Thus, she did not think that inclusion as it is practiced in the United States would be successful at this time in, at least, the rural and more remote provinces of Vietnam.

The investigator was able to travel to two special schools within Hanoi province and observed a *significant* number of students with autistic spectrum disorders, various cognitive impairments, and severe and multiple disabilities. The facilities themselves appeared understaffed and marginally supplied, and were generally lacking in effective remedial practices. At the conclusion of each visit, the author was repeatedly asked by the directors of these schools for monetary as well as technical support and assistance. This experience was most compelling and provided valuable insights into the actual day-to-day functioning of many special education schools and self contained programs in this region of Vietnam.

Discussion

The survey results revealed a few positive and negative attitudinal trends. First, and perhaps the most noteworthy is that a solid majority (89 %) of the respondents did not

think persons with disabilities to be as intelligent as persons without disabilities. This belief might result in lower expectations for students with disabilities and the provision of programs that provide less challenging curricula and limited postsecondary options. The other negative attitudinal responses involve stereotypical predispositions regarding the temperaments of individuals with disabilities; specifically, that they are inherently grouchy, more easily upset, and have lower self-esteem than their non-disabled counterparts. Such beliefs might act as “self-fulfilling prophecies,” misconceptions that help to foster and perpetuate these undesirable characteristics in students with disabilities.

In contrast, the majority of respondents indicated that they believed that persons (students) with disabilities could lead normal lives with expectations of a normal social life and should not be relegated to life in “special” communities. These responses seem paradoxical to the more negative perceptions of persons with disabilities reflected by the respondents; however, a closer look reveals a consistency with the traditional Vietnamese sense of community and the responsibility of that community for the welfare of its constituents.

The only ambiguous findings were the responses to item number 6, “There should be no special schools for children with disabilities,” to which 60 percent of the participants answered in the affirmative. These responses might be interpreted as supporting the inclusion of children with disabilities in the general education classroom or, conversely, might reflect a belief that is in opposition to the provision of a continuum of special education services.

The interviews and field observations provided several insights relative to the attitudes of educators and the Ha Noi community regarding students with disabilities and their inclusion in general education classrooms. In general, based on several conversations with educators and disability program directors, it seems that an impediment to the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education programs and schools, at least in the more rural provinces, might be the traditional view of “disability” as an undesirable, a stigma that reflects poorly on an affected family and community. Also, historically, among the Vietnamese, the community takes care of the needs and training of individuals regarded as “disabled.” It is not customary to yield these responsibilities to the others. Another impediment to inclusion described by at least one administrator of a school was the reticence on the part of some parents to allow their pre-school age children to attend classes with students with various disabilities. This reluctance on the part of some parents to support inclusive education is not restricted to South Asian societies; similar findings were reflected in studies conducted in the U.S. (Austin, 2001). Finally, many special -programs in the Ha Noi region appeared under-funded and in dire need of basic, remedial supplies as well as the provision of training for staff in current, best practices.

In reviewing the findings of this study, several conclusions may be inferred. The first is that, currently, there exists a dissonance between what appears to be government policy respecting inclusion and the implementation of it. This schism exists for several reasons; principally, because historical cultural beliefs persist in Vietnam today and chief among

these is the belief that children with disabilities of any type represent an undesirable state and reflect poorly upon the parents and families. Also, because Vietnam is a country in which the good of the community predominates, the primary efforts of the community should be towards the improvement of itself. Thus, children who are gifted or show some predilection towards higher learning should receive the preponderance of resources. Children with disabilities, while the responsibility of the community, nevertheless represent a “loss of face” for the family and community. It is difficult for these communities to justify the commitment of resources needed to provide adequate remedial assistance or support the inclusion of these children in the regular education population. The results of the survey clearly support this in as much as the majority of the responses to the survey items reflect a slightly negative perception of disability and, consequently, an apparent reluctance towards the integration of students with disabilities. An analysis of the interview data reveals some resistance on the part of several representatives within the Hanoi district and other provinces, towards the inclusion of children with disabilities; especially those with multiple and severe disabilities. It is very tempting to extrapolate from these preliminary observations and interviews more generalized conclusions about the state of special education nationwide in Vietnam. However, since this was a nascent study that was limited in scope as well as in knowledge of Vietnamese culture, any conclusions or generalizations drawn from its findings would be speculative. Thus, to make sweeping generalizations about the state of special education and the inclusion of students with disabilities in public schools is ill-advised, based on these limitations. In conclusion, the attitudes reflected in this preliminary research project seem to be typical for this region of the world, where custom and tradition predominate and the educational practices of the West are slow to achieve acceptance. This observation is in no way intended as an indictment of the professionalism of Vietnamese educators. What it does indicate is a possible “disconnect” between government policy at the national level and educational practice at the local and regional levels, where custom and tradition are revered. The challenge for foreign educational consultants is to find a way to bridge the gap between these time-honored traditions and best practices in special education. This conundrum poses a daunting, but important task for future researchers.

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ATDP-O Scale
(Yuker & Block, 1986)

Mark each statement in the left margin according to how much you agree or disagree with it. Please mark every one. Write +1, +2, +3: or -1, -2, -3: depending on how much you feel in each case.

+3:	I AGREE VERY MUCH	-1:	I DISAGREE A LITTLE
+2:	I AGREE PRETTY MUCH	-2:	I DISAGREE PRETTY MUCH
+1:	I AGREE A LITTLE	-3:	I DISAGREE VERY MUCH

- ___ 1. Parents of children with disabilities should be less strict than other parents.
- ___ 2. Persons with physical disabilities are just as intelligent as persons without such disabilities.
- ___ 3. Persons with disabilities are usually easier to get along with than other people.
- ___ 4. Most persons with disabilities feel sorry for themselves.
- ___ 5. Persons with disabilities are the same as anyone else.

- ___ 6. There should be no special schools for children with disabilities.
- ___ 7. It would be best for persons with disabilities to live and work in special communities.
- ___ 8. It is up to the government to take care of persons with disabilities.
- ___ 9. Most persons with disabilities worry a great deal.
- ___ 10. Persons with disabilities should not be expected to meet the same standards as persons without disabilities.

- ___ 11. Persons with disabilities are as happy as persons without disabilities.
- ___ 12. Persons with severe and multiple disabilities are no harder to get along with than those with less severe disabilities.
- ___ 13. It is almost impossible for a person with a disability to lead a normal life.
- ___ 14. You should not expect too much from persons with disabilities.
- ___ 15. Persons with disabilities tend to keep to themselves much of the time.

- ___ 16. Persons with disabilities are more easily upset than persons without disabilities.
- ___ 17. Persons with disabilities cannot have a normal social life.
- ___ 18. Most persons with disabilities feel that they are not as good as other people.
- ___ 19. You have to be careful of what you say when you are with persons with disabilities.
- ___ 20. Persons with disabilities are often grouchy.