

# EXCEPTIONAL PERSONS IN THE COMMUNITY

*Edited by:*

**IKECHUKWU A. NWAZUOKE  
IBRAHIM A. KOLO**

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# Society's Attitude Towards The Mentally Retarded/Learning Disabled Child: Need for Attitude Change

Queen I. Obinaju (Ph.D)  
University of Uyo, Uyo

## Introduction

Exceptional children have enjoyed some degree of attention in the Nigerian educational set up. These have mainly been as subjects of research and continuous debate. The government has also contributed in several ways towards the well being of exceptional children. These government does through the provision of schools and other educational facilities such as the College of Education (Special) to train teachers/resource persons who would provide adequate diagnostic and remedial attention to exceptional children. Not much has however been done about the individual child's home situation and his disposition in his immediate society. This situation persuades parents to confine their mentally retarded/learning disabled children at home. This occurrence perhaps arises from their attitude towards this nature of exceptionality. There arises therefore the need for societal attitude towards exceptional children to be investigated as these attitudes affect to a large extent many self actualization potentials of the exceptional children could grow up to exhibit some measure of independence and have adequate capability to contribute substantially to the socio-political and economic life of the society to which he belongs (Abang, 1992).

Attitude, according to Ozoji (1991) comprises beliefs, emotions, behaviours which characterise human beings in intra-personal and inter-personal interactions. As such, they have capability to determine care and provision for the exceptional person. Attitude as well as care oscillate on a continuum between acceptance and rejection. On both extremes, Farrant (1976) notes that the attitude could be unfavourable towards the development of a wholesome personality. Attitude could change depending on a desensitization process. By this it is assumed that if situation forces one to be close to an exceptional person either as a parent, brother or sister, that by this association, ones attitude towards that aspect of exceptionality may change.

Against this background, the problem of hiding the mentally retarded/learning disabled children at home is socio-attitudinal based rather than political-economic in nature. Thus it is pertinent to examine the societal attitude towards the learning disabled/mentally retarded child, rank in order of preference the different areas of exceptionality and examine whether there is any difference in attitude between family members of exceptional children and other members of the society.

## Research Questions:

This study was designed to answer the following questions:

1. What is the attitude of the society towards the mentally retarded/learning disabled child?
2. What is the rank in order of preference of the mentally retarded/learning disabled child among other areas of exceptionality?
3. Is there any basic difference between the attitude of close associates i.e. the family members of mentally retarded/learning disabled persons and other members of the society?

## Population and Sample

The population for the study was made up of Akwa Ibom State indigenes living within Uyo Local Government Area. The idea was to control for diverse cultural differences on the attitude exhibited. Moreover the result obtained would be more generalisable among the population from where the sample was drawn. This research could also be taken as an attitude indication case study of a particular group of people.

A sample size of 250 was randomly selected. During an indigenous organisation meeting, 125 members were randomly selected. Each was served with a questionnaire to which he would respond and another one which he would administer to a non-literate person in his home village as an interview schedule. This measure was adopted to check for the effect of literacy and education on the result of the study while providing for adequate representation of samples.

## Instrumentation

The instrument was made up of two parts. Section A, provides a list of 6 grouped aspects of exceptionality as A—F for the respondents to award marks 1—6 depending on their degree of preference. In section B, a modified ATBS—L for the learning disabled (Ozoji, 1991) constituted the instrument.

The instrument was validated by experts in the field, and a reliability coefficient of 0.84 in a test-retest reliability measure indicated that the instrument was highly reliable for the study.

## Procedure

The instrument was administered to the respondents after an indigenous meeting. Respondents were given enough time to respond to the items on the instrument. When copies of the questionnaire were returned, another copy was given to each respondent for him to use as an interview schedule on a non-literate member of his village and return duly completed questionnaire to the researcher on the next meeting day.

## Scoring and Data Presentation

For Section A, the scores for each group of exceptionality were added up and the total score recorded. On the basis of this, a rank in order of preference was established (see table 3).

In Section B, a score of 5, 4, 3, 2 and 1 was awarded each for strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree and undecided respectively for every posi-



tive item on the questionnaire. For negative items, 5 points were awarded for strongly disagree, 4 for disagree, 3 for agree, 2 for strongly agree and 1 for undecided. This scoring method makes for an upper limit of 100 points and a lower limit of 20. At the end of the scoring, the total points scored by each individual represented the individual's relative position on the attitude scale used.

Data obtained were presented in frequency counts, percentages. To determine the difference in attitude between close associates and others, a t-test was worked out between scores of close associates to mentally retarded/learning disabled children and the scores of non-close associates of such children.

#### Findings

Out of 250 copies of questionnaire distributed, only 234 were returned. These comprised 153 males, 81 females. 52 were close associates of learning disabled/mentally retarded children and 152 were not closely related to these children. Below is a table summarizing attitude scores obtained.

Table 1- Ranging in Attitude Scores between Male and Female Respondents

	30—39	40—49	50—59	60—69	70—79	Total
M	5	15	40	68	25	153
F	1	9	4	19	8	81
Total	6	24	84	87	33	234

Findings are presented in this section in the order in which research questions were arranged.

#### Research Question 1

What is the attitude of society towards the mentally retarded/learning disabled children? To this research question, a table presenting a summary view of societal attitude is presented.

#### Societal attitude Towards The Mentally Retarded/learning Disabled Child shown in Frequency Count (N = 234)

	STRONGLY DISAGREE	AGREE	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE	UNDECIDED	TOTAL
1. I share the feeling that impaired persons should be given opportunity to work and earn a living on their own.	141	60	15	15	3	234
2. I feel happy whenever I help an impaired person.	141	84	3	6		234
3. I like the idea to seclude an impaired person in the house	9	30	75	114	6	234
4. I shall be happy to see impaired people in my social club.	42	117	51	18	6	234
5. I feel impaired persons suffer their predicaments because of their past bad behaviour.	36	3	48	138	9	234
6. I feel uncomfortable to live in the same house with an impaired person	33	66	69	54	12	234
7. If my son/daughter wishes to marry an impaired, I may wish to stop that marriage	63	60	57	30	24	234
8. I share the feeling that impaired persons should be educated.	162	45	9	15	3	234
9. I would rather have no child than have an impaired child as my only child.	60	63	48	57	6	234
10. I feel an impaired person can advise me just as I can advise him.	75	81	18	57	3	234
11. I tend to feel that impaired person are not normal human beings	6	12	42	162	12	234
12. I feel that impaired persons beg because they cannot help themselves in any other way	39	48	72	72	3	234
13. I naturally like to buy goods produced by impaired persons	24	93	66	42	8	234
14. My feeling about impaired person is that they are unfriendly	9	27	14	78	6	234
15. I feel that impaired persons have some contributions to make towards national development	114	78	27	15	0	234
16. I dislike impaired persons because they carry bad luck	9	18	87	111	9	234
17. I share the feelings that society should develop kind feelings towards impaired persons	156	63	3	6	6	234
18. If I am an employer, I would love to employ qualified impaired persons	108	84	30	9	3	234
19. I don't mind working under an impaired head of department	54	90	45	39	6	234
20. I feel God dislikes me if he gives me an impaired person for a child	3	12	63	141	15	234



### Research Question 2

What is the rank in order of preference of the mentally retarded and learning disabled child among other areas of exceptionality.

Among the 6 areas of exceptionality identified and investigated with the mentally retarded/learning disabled child as a category, the following scores were obtained.

**Table 3- Ranked Scores of exceptionality**

S/N	Description of Exceptionality	Total Score	Average Rank In preference
A	The physically impaired	384	1.58 4
B	Visually impaired	306	1.31 6
C	Auditory impaired	480	2.05 2
D	Speech impaired	474	2.03 3
E	Mentally retarded/learning disabled	324	1.38 5
F	Intellectually gifted	1164	4.97 1

The result presented in Table 3 above shows that the mentally retarded and the learning disabled ranks 5th out of 6 categories of exceptionality tested.

### Research Question 3

Is there any basic difference between the attitude of family members of mentally retarded/learning disabled child and those of other members of the society?

**Table 4- Two-tail t-test of difference between attitude scores of family members of Mentally Retarded/learning Disabled Children and other Members of the Society**

	N	X	Mean ( $\bar{x}$ )	$\chi^2$	Standard deviation	df	tcal	t & 0.05 Critical
Family members	52	30.39	58.42	194730	18.15	232	0.33	1.96
Others	182	10787	59.27	655396	9.39			

This result means that there is no significant difference between the attitude scores of family members and others towards the mentally retarded and the learning disabled child.

### Discussion

From the mean scores of respondents, it was observed that both men and women in the sample have positive attitude towards the learning disabled and the mentally retarded child. This is judged positive as the mean score of the attitude of both close associates and non-close associates are higher than 50% of the total scores attainable. It was further observed that although there is an indication of a positive attitude, that the mean scores of these two categories of people did not rise above the 50-60 range of scores. On table 2, a total of 123 representing 52.56% of the respondents would wish to stop the marriage of their children with a mentally retarded/learning disabled person. The same number/percentage too would prefer to have no child than have this exceptional child as their only child.

It is obvious that the positive attitude observed may have been influenced by sympathy and ethics and may not be strong enough to act as a drive towards according the mentally retarded/learning disabled child an optimum condition for a wholesome personality.

This finding is further reinforced by the fact of the exceptional condition ranking 5th on table 3. This means that people would rather have an intellectually gifted, an auditory impaired, a speech impaired and a physically impaired child (in this order) than have a mentally retarded/learning disabled child. The table also reveals that this category of exceptionality is preferred to visual impairment.

One could have expected a difference in attitude as a result of the desensitization process between close associates and non close associates of the mentally retarded/the learning disabled child. Table 4 shows a non-significant difference between these two categories of people in the society. What this means is that both close associates and non-close associates and non-close associates to this category of children have identical attitude towards them. Neither desensitization nor proximity seems to have influence on societal attitude towards the mentally retarded/learning disabled child. The society can therefore be taken as a single block for attitude change, remedial measure instead of wanting to separate on the basis of closeness.

### Conclusion

On the basis of the above findings, the following conclusions are drawn.

1. The society has a positive attitude towards a mentally retarded/learning disabled child.
2. This attitude is not high enough to provide impetus for optimal development of the child's potentials.
3. Mentally retarded/learning disabled children are ranked low in preference to other exceptional conditions.
4. There is no significant difference between the attitude of close associ-



ates (family members) and non-close associates to mentally retarded/learning disabled children.

#### **Recommendations**

From the findings of this study, it was observed that although there is a positive attitude exhibited towards the mentally retarded/learning disabled child, the degree is not high enough for this attitude to persuade those that matters to accord the child optimal opportunity for development. A remedy must therefore be sought to improve societal attitude towards this group of children. The National Policy on Education (1981) provides for free and compulsory primary education for all as well as free education for exceptional children. The child also has a right to education and adequate care (Obinaju, 1995). But these do not guarantee that all these children including the mentally retarded/learning disabled children will be in school. What remains to be done is the enforcement of these provisions, that is, that parents should send these children to school especially as school is likely to provide a more conducive environment for development than most homes.

Moreover, through marriage seminars, workshops, public enlightenment campaigns, the government as well as church organisations and indeed any other arm of the society which has an opportunity of bringing together adults/parents should use such forum to emphasize that these children are normal children and as such they have the potentials which requires favourable conditions from members of the society to enable them to develop.

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