

issue 60 mar 2017

Inclusiveness in School and Society



Big Idea

issn 2010-1031

Inclusiveness Within and the Inclusion of Persons with Special Needs

An editorial by the Guest Editor of this issue, Levan Lim, Associate Professor and Head of the Early Childhood and Special Needs Education Academic Group at the National Institute of Education, Singapore.

A Home for Everyone

In 1964, a man named Jean Vanier invited two persons with intellectual disabilities from an institution to make their home with him in a stone-built house in Trosly-Breuil, a village north of Paris, France.

This was the beginning of *L'Arche* (the Ark in French), a community where persons with and without intellectual disabilities live together to create and experience a sense of acceptance and belonging.

Coming from a privileged background—his father was then Governor-General of Canada—Jean Vanier's intentional act of sharing his life with individuals considered to be vulnerable and marginalized by society has inspired many others to do likewise. Today, there are 147 *L'Arche* communities in 35 countries.

At *L'Arche*, people with disabilities are the core members around which community is intentionally built. This notion of community is guided by the belief that persons with disabilities have gifts to share which can be understood, appreciated and affirmed through being in relationship with them.

An often-mentioned significant “heartware” gift received by persons without disabilities (known as Assistants) at *L'Arche* is recognizing, accepting and

How can a person become more open and accepting of those who are more vulnerable?

- Levan Lim,
*Early Childhood and Special Needs
Education Academic Group, NIE*



An Institute of



In this issue



Supporting the Lonely in
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Levan hopes that Singapore will draw valuable lessons from L'Arche on how to create sustainable inclusive communities for individuals with special needs.

welcoming their own human vulnerability, thus becoming more human.

In 2015, Jean Vanier was featured in *The Straits Times* when he won the US\$1.7 million Templeton Prize for his “exceptional contribution to affirming life’s spiritual dimension, whether through insight, discovery, or practical works” (Lim, 2015).

The newspaper article stated that “Both the prize and its latest recipient are signs that point to people’s longing for progress beyond the material, the kind of progress that often finds expression in caring for others, especially the vulnerable. And that seems to be the journey Singapore has embarked on as it matures as a society and nation” (Lim, 2015).

Singapore as an Inclusive Society

Jean Vanier’s insights and work have particular relevance to Singapore as it seeks to become an inclusive society for all especially the vulnerable and those at risk of being marginalized and excluded.

A Lien Foundation survey conducted in 2016 found that while 7 out of 10 Singaporeans support the idea of inclusion, only 3 in 10 agree that Singapore is an inclusive society for children with special needs. On top of that, only 1 in 10 Singaporeans expressed confidence in interacting with children with special needs (Lien Foundation, 2016).

Among parents surveyed, only half (50%) are comfortable with having their own children placed next to a child with special needs in the classroom, and 64% believe Singaporeans are willing to share public spaces but not interact with the special needs community.

In a series of surveys conducted by the National Council of Social Service in 2015, 62% of the 1,000 people with disabilities surveyed do not feel they are socially included, accepted or given opportunities to achieve their potential. Only 36% of the public polled would be comfortable with being close friends with a person with a disability. To put it simply, people with disabilities feel the public sees their differences as limitations for which they need protection and different treatment (Tai, 2016).

These findings are disappointing considering the vast amount of unprecedented attention and effort Singapore has invested over the past decade through policies, education, infrastructural improvements (e.g., public transport), campaigns, greater supports to include students with disabilities within mainstream schools, and two consecutive Enabling Masterplans (at the time the Lien Foundation survey was released) to chart the roadmap towards an inclusive society for people with disabilities. In addition, Singapore ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in July, 2013 (MSF, 2013).

Building Heartware, Not Just Hardware

While Singapore has made great strides in building its systemic “hardware” through policy and resource developments to promote the inclusion and rights of persons with special needs within mainstream society over the past decade, how can we achieve greater progress in cultivating the “heartware” of inclusiveness within people? How can a person become more open and accepting of those who are more vulnerable?

The overriding message from L’Arche is that the best safeguards for persons with disabilities are relationships and community. There are valuable lessons to draw from L’Arche on how to create sustainable inclusive communities within Singapore for individuals with disabilities or special needs, whether they be classroom, school, work or home communities.

These lessons address both the “inner” or “interior” lives of individuals and the “outer” or “external” supports, structures, services and systems that can promote inclusiveness within self and

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inclusion within society respectively, and the interrelationship between these two modes of change.

Being Inclusive Within

This *SingTeach* issue features teaching, practice, research and life stories related to the “inner” work on becoming more inclusive within and the “outer” work of including persons with special needs through practical strategies and interventions, supports, pathways and systems.

In other words, inclusion in society needs to be upheld and supported by people who are inclusive within. The seeds of possibilities for genuine change lie within the individual and imply, at the core of such change to open and offer a hospitable space within for “the other”, personal growth and transformation.

Education, by virtue of its role in preparing the young to contribute to society and thereby shaping society itself, can be a mentoring community for the young to engage in the inner transformative work of deepening the meaning and purpose of their lives, their chosen professions and their work.

Such “inner work” has been referred to as the “heart” of higher education by Palmer, Zajonc and Schribner (2010) to understand, encourage and support the quest of young adults for deeper meaning, self-understanding and purpose in their lives.

Preparing Our Future Educators

In addition to acquiring the necessary knowledge and skills to work with students with special needs, such “inner work” is part of the education and training of trainees enrolled in the Diploma in Special Education (DISE) programme offered by the Early Childhood and Special Needs Education Academic Group at the National Institute of Education.

The DISE programme educates and trains both teachers working in special education schools and Allied Educators (Learning and Behavioural Support) who are support personnel for students with special needs at mainstream schools.

Trainees are intentionally engaged in clarifying their personal values, beliefs, assumptions, world views and meanings related to disability, and their chosen professional work within the “Introduction to Special Education” course offered in the first semester of the programme.

They are provided with the frameworks and tools to deconstruct their own implicit ideas, beliefs and assumptions about disability, and the sources of influence on how they have been “introduced” to disability in Singapore thus far in their lives.

As the trainees grow in their awareness and learn to interrogate deeper systemic and societal conditions that affect the opportunities and participation of Singaporeans with disabilities—such as negative stories, a focus on deficits and labels, and a separate education system that led to limited opportunities to interact with and develop relationships with peers with special needs during their school years—what resonates on a personal level is the impact of the larger social context on the construction of their own individual attitudes towards disability.

The Idea of Hope, Trust and Acceptance

At the core of such inner deconstruction work is a personal encounter with deeply held values, beliefs, assumptions, meanings and images about being human and how they affect the valuing of persons with disabilities.

Through a deepening of self-understanding especially in terms of their perspectives and values regarding human worth, the trainees also learn to accept their own human vulnerability and extend that acceptance to persons with disabilities.

Reconstructing new meanings, beliefs and values about being human, human vulnerability and human worth in relation to self and others is a path inward towards interior growth and personal transformation that can lead to greater inclusiveness and a greater capacity for love and care for others.

As a result, there is more “heartware” within, to include, share with, or give to others. As the adage goes, “one cannot give away what one does not possess within”.

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- **Levan** on one of the key takeaways by students of the *Diploma in Special Education (DISE)* programme.

Levan Lim is Associate Professor and Head of the Early Childhood and Special Needs Education Academic Group at NIE. He is interested in the transition and the post-school outcomes of students with disabilities, intentional communities and relationships for persons with disabilities, and the inclusion of persons with disabilities within society.

Supporting the Lonely in Schools

Research shows that a student's perception of loneliness is linked to delinquency and anti-social behaviours in school. Lonely children often feel the way they do because of a lack of social skills which results in behavioural problems. We speak to Lecturer Dr Carol Tan for her perspectives on loneliness among students and how teachers can better support them.



Carol feels that social skills should be explicitly taught in school so that the socially isolated child learns how to build and keep friendships.

"It is perfectly normal for people to sometimes want to be alone," says Dr Carol Tan. "There is nothing wrong with this sort of loneliness because time in solitude is often spent thinking and reflecting on ourselves."

However, depending on their attitude and perception of loneliness, students can respond differently to solitude. Peer rejection or difficulty with social interaction can lead to negative attitudes towards loneliness, including boredom and unhappiness that can manifest as anti-social behaviour.

This should raise concerns, and it is crucial that teachers are able to detect these problems so that they can be addressed as early as possible, says Carol.

The Relationship between Loneliness and Delinquency

Carol's research into at-risk children with behavioural problems shows a relationship between loneliness and delinquency. Non-loner delinquents were found to be less involved in anti-social behaviours such as school misdemeanours, physical aggression and property abuse as compared to loner delinquents.

"It is interesting to note that loner delinquents are more prone to anti-social behaviour than non-loner delinquents," says Carol. Their behavioural problems often stem from social skill deficits and interpersonal relationship problems, as is the case with many individuals with special needs.

Studies have found that students with special needs, particularly those with learning and behavioural difficulties, are more isolated. In addition to personal difficulties connecting with others, they may exhibit behaviour that others find "challenging" or "difficult".

"Other children may not understand why a child with autism acts a certain way—for instance, why the child has a certain rigidity and is only interested in one topic and nothing else," says Carol. This can cause the child to be ostracized by his or her peers.

Like other children with behavioural problems, learning social skills is one of the key areas children with special needs require support in.

Profiling Students for Targeted Intervention

To further identify the specific needs of these students and provide targeted intervention, student profiling is necessary.

In profiling, special assessments are tailored for teachers to accurately identify each student's needs and provide targeted support. For instance, extreme loners may prefer to be dealt with on a one-to-one basis, while a group intervention might work better for adolescents who tend to prize friendships.

However, there is currently a limited number of teachers who can support these students, especially those with special needs. Many teachers may want to be inclusive, but struggle with managing the disruptive behaviour of children with special needs and the peer issues they face, says Carol.

"Learning a student's needs is a demanding task in itself, but if you have a student with behavioural issues darting around in your class, teaching becomes even more challenging."

Teaching Social Skills

According to Carol, the teaching of social skills in schools has so far been limited since there is no subject that specifically covers it. Schools have allied educators who work with students with social skills deficits and who are experiencing loneliness, but this is not enough.

We need to explicitly teach our students behavioural expectations within our mainstream school setting.

- Carol Tan,
Early Childhood and Special
Needs Education Academic
Group, NIE

“We need to explicitly teach our students behavioural expectations and social skills within our mainstream school setting,” she says.

To equip more teachers with the skills to support these students, MOE’s Training in Special Needs (TSN) policy initiative was introduced in 2005, with an emphasis on teaching social needs. It presently trains 10–20% of teachers in all primary and secondary schools to support students with mild special educational needs.

After undergoing training, TSNs will be deployed as part of a case management team to support children with special needs and who exhibit loneliness and behavioural problems in the classroom.

Developing Strong Teacher-Student Relationships

Developing strong teacher-student relationships is another important aspect of supporting lonely and at-risk students. As targeted interventions require an in-depth understanding of each student, teachers can make a difference when there is a good relationship between teacher and student.

Teachers sometimes give feedback that they do not have enough time to build such close relationships, but Carol believes the effort made to know these students can pave the way for better learning and interaction in the classroom.

“Although teachers are always concerned about whether they will be able to finish the curriculum, I think the extra effort to support students will make their teaching much easier in the future,” she says.

The key is to show genuine interest and care in getting to know students better—and in doing so, affecting change in them. The process may take time and extra determination, but if effective in helping students overcome social difficulties and loneliness, is a significant step in the right direction towards their successful inclusion.

Carol Tan is Lecturer with the Early Childhood and Special Needs Academic Group at NIE. Her research interests lie in the areas of child and adolescent affective and interpersonal traits, developmental trajectories to anti-social behaviour for children and adolescence, and self-regulation processes of child and adolescent behaviour.

Classroom

Pathways to Work for Students with Special Needs

The Association for Persons with Special Needs (APSN) Delta Senior School is committed to placing its students in employment upon graduation. A teacher shares with us how the school equips its students to be work-ready through its various customized programmes.

A Swensen’s restaurant, Giant superstore and Uniqlo-like retail outlet—these are facilities that would not feature in a typical Singapore school. At APSN Delta Senior School (DSS), however, some classrooms are intentionally built to replicate real-life work environments.

This is part of the school’s on-going efforts to prepare its post-secondary school learners with mild intellectual disabilities to enter the workforce upon graduation.

Tailored Strokes for Different Learning Needs

“Every student with special needs is essentially a student with different learning needs,” says Gurvinder Kaur Gill, a numeracy teacher at APSN DSS. “The best way for educators to support such students is to understand their different needs and customize our pedagogical approaches accordingly.”

The school conducts training programmes in four vocational areas, namely, food and beverage operations,



Read more about the four-step learning model that APSN Delta School adopts in the online version of *SingTeach*.

We help students to relate the concepts of time, scheduling and measurement to their workplace. So it is not just math; it is about life skills.

- Gurvinder on the school's focus on cultivating mathematical life skills.

Gurvinder Kaur Gill is a teacher with the numeracy department at APSN Delta Senior School. She joined the school 7 years ago and has been working closely with colleagues from the school's job support unit over the past year to facilitate her students' transition from school to work.

landscape operations, hotel and accommodation services, and retail operations. Each training programme lasts up to 5 years including work attachment, and leads to a Workforce Skills Qualification (WSQ) Certification that validates students' competencies in their chosen vocation.

"Our curriculum is simplified and made bite-sized to address the learning needs of students in areas such as memory retention," explains Gurvinder. "We also incorporate a structured four-step model in our teaching approaches." (See box story online)

Facilitating the School-to-work Transition

While the school's foremost priority is to equip students with vocation-specific skills, its curriculum also emphasizes Standards of Work Performance (SWP), which consists of five areas: attendance and punctuality, grooming and hygiene, relating with others, work behaviours, and self-regulation.

"APSN DSS stresses on SWP because it concerns attitudes and soft skills for the workplace, which reflect students' work-readiness," explains Gurvinder. "Teachers will observe students in these areas during lessons. If we detect problems, we will devise and implement intervention strategies to address the issue."

The school also works closely with partner employers in setting up training facilities within its premises to enable students to adapt easily to an actual work environment.

There are mock-ups of actual restaurants, kitchens, retail outlets and hotel rooms on campus, which exemplify how the physical infrastructure of APSN DSS is designed to complement the school curriculum and foster continuity between school and work.

"As a vocational training school, the next step—after supporting our students—is placing them in open employment," Gurvinder shares. "We thus simulate real-life work environments for them to maximize their chances of securing employment and ease the transition from school to work."

Holistic Development of Students

To further supplement students' vocational training, APSN DSS's curriculum also features classes in literacy, numeracy, personal management, and fitness and health.

Gurvinder, who is with the numeracy department, designs lessons, activities and assessment tasks related to numeracy. Nevertheless, her lessons do not focus solely on mathematical concepts. In fact, they centre on mathematical life skills.

"We help students to relate the concepts of time, scheduling and measurement to their workplace," explains Gurvinder. "So it is not just math; it is about life skills."

Educators from different departments also work closely and share feedback with one another to highlight any difficulties that students are facing.

"For instance, the numeracy department may receive feedback from vocational trainers regarding students' difficulties in measurement, such as weighing items," explains Gurvinder. "We will then work on the feedback and come up with hands-on activities to clarify concepts and correct students' mistakes so that they will not face similar problems in the workplace."

Different Journey, Same Destination

The vast majority of APSN DSS students are successful in securing employment upon graduation, which shows that the institution's pedagogical approaches are effective in catering to its students' learning needs.

Besides employment, further training at higher education institutions is another pathway that students may take after graduation.

"We have had a few graduates each year who go on to pursue further education at the Institute of Technical Education, which is a mainstream educational path," Gurvinder shares. "This shows that while students with special needs may take different educational journeys, their outcomes in life can be the same as that of their mainstream counterparts."

Ultimately, Gurvinder hopes that as more individuals with special needs are employed, they will gain recognition for their ability to contribute to society and inclusion becomes more of an everyday reality in Singapore.

Towards Greater Inclusiveness: A Parent's Perspective

It is every parent's hope that their children grow up healthy and well-integrated into society—parents of children with special needs are no exception. Having experienced the challenges of raising a child with special needs in Singapore, Magdelene hopes her story will increase awareness of their needs and encourage parents, teachers and caregivers to soldier on and build a more caring and inclusive society.

Q: Can you tell us about Sebastian and his diagnosis?

Sebastian is my eldest boy. He is 26 this year. When he was in preschool, his teacher used to say, "Sebastian seems to learn something, but a while later he forgets and he acts as if he never learnt it before." They advised me to send him for a brain scan, which I did. That's when I found out he was born without a *corpus callosum* (find out what the corpus callosum is in the online version of *SingTeach*). We could not pinpoint the exact problem, but his is an intellectual disability diagnosed as Global Developmental Delay.

Q: What were some of the challenges you faced when Sebastian was growing up?

As a typical Singaporean parent with high expectations of my children, it was initially hard to accept Sebastian's condition. But even after I realized I needed to get over my denial and find out what I could do for him, I was groping in the dark due to a lack of resources.

Sebastian's developmental milestones were delayed, so when it was time for him to enter primary school, he was not ready. Mainstream primary schools I approached also lacked the necessary support to accept him.

It was fortunate that he eventually went to Dover Court Preparatory School, an international school that ran a special needs class alongside mainstream classes.

During his 4 years there, he was included in mainstream school activities; he acted in school dramas and participated in sports and school concerts. Since he was in a small class, he had all the attention he needed. Enrolling him there is probably one of the best things I've done for him.

After Dover Court, we registered him with one of MINDS' (Movement for the Intellectually Disabled of Singapore) Special Education schools. The real challenge began when he graduated from MINDS at 18. His focus and motor skills were not good enough for him to enter open employment, so he went to a sheltered workshop, Touch Centre for Independent Living, where he learnt basic life skills like how to clean himself and travel on his own. He spent a couple of years there in a school-like environment.

After a few years, I felt he needed to understand that he needs to work, so I sent him to Thye Hua Kwan Pan-Disability Centre where he does simple work like putting together Singapore Airlines luggage tags.

Q: Why is it important that Sebastian goes to work?

Work is important to keep him engaged. The moment those with special needs stay at home and stop engaging with the outside world is when they regress. Many of them develop mental issues because they are like any other human being—they need to be wanted and to have friends.



Magdelene shares that the availability of inclusive activities in the society has benefitted her son Sebastian in various ways.

Read the full version of this article online.

It is important to expose them to the world and give them opportunities so that they are accepted and can find a community and life of their own.

- Magdelene on what parents can do to help their children with special needs.

Magdelene Yip is a mother of three—Sebastian, 26, Sarah, 24 and Isaac, 19. A passionate advocate for those with special needs, she set up Mamre Oaks Ltd, a day activity centre for people with special needs who cannot work, in 2015 with a group of friends. She is also on the board of various other special needs initiatives, including Runninghour, and Faith and Light Community.

Having said that, Sebastian benefits a lot more now from the inclusive activities that we have in society. Besides his work, he is involved in other activities such as Runninghour every Saturday. Regular runners run alongside people with disabilities, mainly the blind and intellectually challenged. He is also with Special Olympics Singapore and bowls every Tuesday with his friends with special needs. These are valuable opportunities for him to mingle, make friends and achieve something.

Q: What are some of your concerns about Sebastian's future?

My greatest fear is what will happen to him when I am no longer around. I know his siblings will care for him, but more needs to be done to support adults and elders with special needs.

Working is definitely also a big challenge for adults with special needs because not many work environments can cope with them. This is not because employers are not compassionate, but because the demands of their work makes it difficult.

Those who are high-functioning can often find jobs in the service industry, but dealing with customers can be difficult for those like Sebastian who struggle with reading subtle social cues. They fare better in controlled environments like the sheltered workshop, but there is limited space. There is also a need for more day activity centres for those who cannot work at all.

Q: Do you think people have become more accepting of those with special needs?

I think we are generally more receptive. MOE is trying to educate those with special needs, and many workplaces are a lot more accommodating, sometimes changing their workflow for them. Government wage subsidies are also helpful in encouraging companies to hire workers with special needs.

It is only when people with special needs misbehave or have meltdowns that the public gets scared because they don't know what to do. I don't blame them. With more exposure, I believe people will become more accepting.

One natural way to foster social inclusion is by starting young. I hope that we will have more schools where special needs classes run alongside mainstream classes, where those with special needs get to do sports and eat in the same canteen as the rest of the children. Being in the same environment is very helpful in getting the other children to understand their unique conditions.

Q: Any advice for those raising or working with people with special needs?

Parents, don't be afraid to ask for help and love your child like any other child. It is important to expose them to the world and give them opportunities so that they are accepted and can find a community and life of their own.

You also need a sense of humour. Most of us parents have developed that, and we laugh, not at, but *with* our children. It helps with seeing their challenges in a less negative light. If I get stressed or embarrassed every time Sebastian acts up, it will be very tough. They also get very frustrated when they are not accepted.

As for those who work with them, try not to work with the mind-set that you are here to do things *for* them. Just be *with* them. Building that friendship and bond is more helpful than just doing things for them.

Online Exclusives



Transforming from the Heart



Meeting the Educational Needs of the Visually Impaired



Creating Equal Opportunity for Students with Visual Impairments



Students and Stress: What Can I Do as a Parent to Help My Child?



A Child with Dyspraxia