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# Supporting Special Needs

Big Idea

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## Special Education in Singapore

*Special needs used to be something new and foreign to teachers. But Singapore schools and teachers have made big strides in providing support for students with special needs in recent years.*

Dr Kenneth Poon worked with children with disabilities for several years before he left for his doctoral studies in the US. When he returned in 2005, he was met with a field that looked quite different.

A recent turning point in special education (SPED), Kenneth says, came in 2004. That was when Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong outlined his vision of Singapore as an inclusive society.

“Every society has some members with disabilities. How the society treats the disabled, takes care of them, and helps them integrate into the mainstream, reflects the kind of society it is. **We want ours to be a society that cares for all its members;** one that does not ignore the needs of those who are born or afflicted with disabilities.” (Lee, 2004)

PM Lee’s call heralded the accelerated transformation of special needs services. One significant development was the increased support for students with special needs in mainstream schools.

“There is recognition now that children with special needs do exist in mainstream school settings,” explains Kenneth. “They’ve always been there. What we’re trying to do now is to see how we can better support them.”

To that end, a percentage of teachers are now trained to support such students. All primary and some secondary schools also have an Allied Educator specially trained to look after the learning and behavioural needs of these students.

### A Closer Look at Special Needs

In the past, the focus was on supporting students with physical or sensory impairments.

There is recognition now that children with special needs do exist in mainstream school settings.

- Kenneth Poon,  
Centre for Research in  
Pedagogy and Practice



An Institute of



## In this issue



Listening to Every  
Child



No Child Left  
Unattended



Becoming an Inclusive  
Society

# RESEARCH within REACH



**A lot of what supports the child with special needs will support most of the students in the classroom.**

*- Kenneth on how inclusion helps everyone in the classroom*

## Reference

Lee, H. L. (2004). Speech by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at the opening of the Spastic Children's Association of Singapore's Cerebral Palsy Centre. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore website: <http://a2o.nas.sg/stars>

**Kenneth Poon** is the Guest Editor of this issue. A trained clinical psychologist, he is currently Deputy Head of the Centre for Research in Pedagogy and Practice at NIE. His chief research interests are in autism spectrum disorder and early intervention.

"Now, it's to see how we can further support those who have impairments that we do not see," says Kenneth. These include conditions such as dyslexia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), or autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

"There are many children who in the past would be called 'stupid', 'lazy', or 'unmotivated'. Now we understand why many of these children were previously unmotivated to learn. Sometimes, it's because they cannot access the learning."

Depending on how the disorders are defined, students with special needs may comprise 5–15% of a cohort. But they're not as different from other students as you might think.

"It's important to understand that special needs are part of the broader variation of human characteristics," adds Kenneth. "Many students might show some of these characteristics and it's OK! It's human variability."

But when your students experience difficulties that interfere with their learning, behaviour or social interactions in school, it warrants a closer look.

## Identifying Children with Special Needs

Teachers are the best persons to identify which students are not doing well because of such conditions, and they're usually very good at it, says Kenneth.

"Fresh teachers might take a while but experienced teachers, they don't need more than 2 weeks to know very clearly who are the ones that stand out in the class!"

However, he appeals to teachers to exercise care in such assessments. Terms such as ADHD or ASD can serve as shorthand for students' learning needs. But such labels can be hurtful to the children and their parents if used carelessly.

"What teachers very frequently mean when they use such terms is: 'Well, this child could be very active. This child is not staying at his seat. This child has difficulties getting along with other students in the class.'"

Instead of using such labels, teachers could describe the child's behaviour.

"It helps for teachers to be descriptive of how the child is having difficulty," Kenneth advises, "because teachers provide a lot of valuable information which parents and other professionals cannot observe in school."

## Providing Help in the Classroom

Once a child has been identified as having special needs, how can teachers support them in the classroom?

There's no need for drastic changes, says Kenneth. The first thing teachers can do is to be understanding. "It does require the patience of teachers who already have a very full plate."

The second thing they can do is to find out more about their students' condition. This will help them to customize their teaching and the curriculum, if necessary.

Thirdly, they can consider how the classroom is configured physically. They can also rally the class to be supportive of those who are different from them. In this way, a positive climate can be created in the classroom for all.

Last, but certainly not least, teachers can look to the child's parents for help. They know their child best. "Very frequently, the parents have a lot of good ideas," Kenneth notes.

Teachers will find that such measures usually benefit the whole class. "A lot of what supports the child with special needs will support most of the students in the classroom."

## A Question of Quality Support

Kenneth recalls the time when he first started training teachers, and "special needs was something very new to them".

Things are very different now. "Many teachers, from primary schools especially, now come in with stories about how their schools are supporting students with special needs," he observes.

"It's no longer us as teacher educators introducing something new to them," he adds. "It's reached this point where I'm able to facilitate their learning simply by helping schools to learn from what each other is doing."

The next lap, says Kenneth, is to answer the question of how well we are supporting students with special needs.

“What are the best conditions in which we can support these students? So it’s the question of quality, the question of outcomes, the question of what are the factors that bring more positive outcomes among our children with disabilities.”

These are important questions as we try to create the best environment for students with special needs to learn and grow in. After all, the development of an inclusive society, as envisioned by PM Lee, should begin in school.

## Research

### Listening to Every Child

*On the outside, one classroom may look no different from another. On the inside, it could be a different thing altogether. No two pupils are alike, nor do they share the same needs.*

#### A Chance to Speak

Every pupil is different, says Sarinajit Kaur, a Teaching Fellow at NIE. And just like all of us, they want to be heard too. She believes that acceptance and a sense of belonging is a core need that should be attended to in every classroom.

That is exactly what Sarina is doing for a group of primary school pupils. She is leading a research project she has fondly named *Children’s Voices*. “This project is anchored on the diversity in the classroom,” says Sarina, who has taught in primary schools for 18 years.

The term “special needs” usually makes one think of a child with a disability. But by “diversity”, she refers to a wide range of difficulties in children which may not be visible to the naked eye.

Sarina stresses: “One needs a larger lens to include and child who may be struggling in a regular classroom.”

“Have we ensured that that special needs child, or the one who may not be as conversant as the rest of his peers, or has issues reading, is really catered to?” she asks.

#### Meeting Simple Needs

To Sarina, ensuring that each child’s needs are met is key to their learning. A child with a particular need—no matter how simple—not met may start fidgeting in class, causing him or her to lose concentration.

One way to cater to all pupils is simply to listen to what they need.

When primary school children were asked how they would like their teacher to treat them, and how they wanted the classroom to be like, one said: “I want my teacher to talk to me nicely.”

Another said, “Allow everybody to take turns.” Yet another said: “I hope my teacher won’t say ‘wait’ when I ask to go to the toilet.”

The findings from her project made her realize that these children have very basic needs, and the solutions to them are actually very simple.

Take the boy who wished his teacher wouldn’t say “wait” when he needs the toilet. To him, the solution was simply, “The teacher should just let me go now so that I don’t need to go anymore later.”

For a boy who is asthmatic, having a dusty classroom may hinder his learning. Likewise, for a girl who is anxious, working in groups may not be the best way for her to learn if proper structures and support are not put in place.

#### Seeing Each Need

Bearing in mind the wide scope of special needs, Sarina reminds us that being in a mainstream school does not necessarily mean that the children don’t have diverse needs.

The child who is from a foreign land, the child who is a little bit more anxious, the child who has anger management issues, or the child who has violent tendencies: These are children with needs that may hinder learning.



**This is a very diverse education landscape. It is this whole thing about welcoming diversity rather than running away from them.**

**- Sarinajit Kaur,  
Early Childhood and  
Special Needs Education  
Academic Group**





“Breakfast with me is something the children look forward to.”

For Sarina, going the extra mile to understand her pupils inside out is something that works well for her as a teacher. And this is how she does it.

To get to know them better, spending time with them outside the classroom is important. For a class of 40, she breaks them up into five groups and has breakfast with each group consecutively for 5 days.

This is done during their recess while she has her cup of morning coffee. “By Friday, I would have met them all,” she says.

What’s on the menu? Anything and everything that’s non-academic. It could be about what the children

did over the weekend, what their favourite foods are, or even about their fears. To encourage more mutual interactions, Sarina also shares with her pupils about herself.

By the end of the week, she is able to identify which child will require more attention “either from their faces or their responses”.

If the child needs a little bit of “intensive care, or ICU”, as Sarina puts it, she will then proceed to have a one-to-one chat.

If one session is insufficient, Sarina will repeat the breakfast sessions the following week to ensure every child’s voice has been heard. And like her pupils, she also enjoys having breakfast and hearing their little voices every day.

A proactive approach is best, but with the diversity that abounds within the mainstream primary classroom, sometimes the best way to cater to the different needs is to watch out for signs. The teacher needs to be alert enough to know when a child starts to struggle and to respond to that need.

Sleeping during lesson time does not necessarily mean that the child is plain lazy or has no interest in studying. It could just mean that the child might be facing a problem at home or may have time management issues related to computer addiction. The only way to really know is to hear the voices of the children we are teaching.

“You cannot just look out for the special needs child who comes in with a clear diagnosis,” says Sarina. Having a broader definition of special needs can definitely help to cater to the class as a whole. Observing the child, or just asking how he is doing, is the first step a teacher can take to understand and meet his needs.

### Trained to Listen

For this project, Sarina found that conducting interviews in schools would create an unnatural setting for the children because they feel the need to say things that are politically correct. So all interviews were conducted in their homes.

At home, these children will not be pressurized to speak for the school. Instead, they can speak for themselves.

Sarina plays the video-recorded interviews to the student teachers in her course at NIE. Her heart is always warmed by the teachers’ responses. “Teachers respond by saying, ‘Hey, it is really just the simple things!’”

“This is a very diverse education landscape,” she says. “It is this whole thing about welcoming and embracing diversity rather than running away from it.”

**Sarinajit Kaur** is a Teaching Fellow from the Early Childhood and Special Needs Education Academic Group. Among the course she teaches at NIE is a core course on Teaching and Managing Learners in the Primary Classroom.

## Classroom

### No Child Left Unattended

*Going to school each day is exciting for Miss Lourdes Maria. As an Allied Educator (AED) for Learning and Behavioural Support, her role is to attend to the needs of her students with special needs, and this is something she thoroughly enjoys.*

Miss Maria believes it is important to help students with special needs to thrive within the school setting. This includes students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), visual impairments and, in rare cases, muscular dystrophy.

The teachers at Jurongville Secondary School also share the same passion. Backed by a committee of teachers trained in special needs, Jurongville is one of the 64 secondary schools resourced for special needs (Ministry of Education, 2013).

### Understanding the Students

Dealing with special needs students requires a tremendous amount of patience and commitment. "I work with the students one-to-one very closely," shares Miss Maria, who has been at Jurongville for 5 years.

For each student with special needs, she would gather as much background information as she can from various sources. She then formulates an intervention plan before sharing with the teachers how they can provide these students with continual support.

Veteran teacher Mrs Philip feels that to be able to provide the student with such care, one has to understand the child very well. For that to happen, the teacher has to be passionate about their job and what they do.

"We have to look at the teachers' willingness to take on the job, and then we give them the support," says Mrs Philip, who has been teaching for 25 years. To help teachers who are not trained in special needs, the school conducts training sessions for them.

During Autism Awareness month, the school also conduct awareness programmes for both teachers and students. Increasing awareness allows them to be more understanding towards those with special needs.

### Creating an Accommodating Environment

Other than increasing awareness, ensuring that these students settle right in at school is also a priority in Jurongville. As the school is seeing a rising number of students with special needs each year, the committee strives to accommodate the needs of these students.

A student with difficulty reading small print will receive exam papers with larger print in A3 size, rather than the usual A4. A student who has ADHD will be placed in a separate exam room to reduce possible sources of distraction. Many of the special needs students will sit closer to the teacher and have a "buddy" to help in the learning in class.

At times, students with ASD or ADHD may have a "meltdown", where they experience high anxiety and react by being difficult. They will be referred to Miss Maria.

She gets them to process the problem, express themselves, and then help them to calm down. She also teaches them various strategies, which may differ from student to student, as each student is unique and may require different ways to calm themselves down.

### Teaching Social Skills

Miss Maria sometimes has one-to-one sessions with the students in the special needs room, which she feels is like a sanctuary for them. There, she conducts lessons on social skills.

"We teach them skills like social communication, social interaction and classroom work habits," Miss Maria shares. These sessions are usually very detailed and structured, and require a lot of co-operation from the students.

Students are taught to submit their homework on time, pay attention during lessons and be less fidgety, so that they learn to manage daily routines without any problems. They are also taught to manage themselves so that they can learn together with the class.

Most of the students with special needs have difficulties interacting with others in a social setting. Miss Maria teaches them skills such as asking for help and talking to others, like the teachers and peers, in an appropriate manner.

She also coaches them on how to make friends and interact with them. This will often be the last goal to be achieved as the students must first want to make friends.

"To force it upon them is not fair," says Miss Maria. "I will only teach when the child is ready."

### Equal Opportunities for All

To ensure the well-being of the students, teachers work very closely with Miss Maria. She will inform the teachers of the students' special needs, and likewise, teachers will also keep her updated about the student.

Teachers of special needs students need to be alert at all times. They must be able to identify the student's behavioural patterns during lessons. They need to be aware of tell-tale

**We teach them skills like social communication, social interaction and classroom work habits.**

**- Miss Lourdes Maria,**  
*Jurongville Secondary School*



*(From left) Mrs Philip, Miss Han Hui Chin and Miss Lourdes Maria believe that creating an accommodating environment is important*

signs that the student is on the verge of a meltdown. In such situations, help is available and intervention is immediate.

At times, the students might use their special needs as an excuse to get their way. And though a certain leeway is given to such students due to their needs, the school makes it clear that they should be treated in the same manner as any other student as far as it is possible.

Math teacher Miss Han Hui Chin notes: “We must make it clear to them that despite their special needs, though the teachers will be more understanding, they should not expect special treatment and will be treated the same way as the rest of the students.”

This is because the school firmly believes one of its key roles is to prepare these students not just for life in school but also beyond, where they have to fend for themselves. They may not always have the luxury of being supported or being treated differently by others.

### A Story of Success



“There was this student who didn’t want to hand in his homework,” recalls Miss Maria.

After getting more information, she realized that this boy wasn’t studying or revising his work at home. To him, studying only takes place in school. At home, he was in a different world.

Things got so out of hand that the boy even threatened to injure himself during an exam because he was not able to answer the questions.

To help manage his anxiety and fears, Miss Maria worked very closely with him almost every day. Together, they created a timetable which included his play and work time. She also emailed a copy to his mother so that she could help keep tabs on his daily activities.

“This is not only between me and you. Your mum knows also,” she told him. Parental involvement, support and understanding play a huge role in determining the child’s outcome.

Even social skills that we often take for granted are a complex issue for him—he had difficulties making friends in school.

With strong support from the school, the boy eventually emerged a different person during his final year in Jurongville. He gradually became more extroverted and made friends with his classmates, who were pleasantly surprised by the change.

The boy who once caused panic during a difficult exam did very well in his O-levels. “When his mum saw the results, she cried. She really didn’t believe he would do that well, but he did!”

Miss Maria feels that it was the whole-school approach that helped the boy to see light at the end of the tunnel. And it is this kind of success story that keeps the teachers, especially Miss Maria, going.

“It really encourages us, and we just want to do more.”

### A Whole Community of Support

All the skills taught to them will enable these special needs students to be more independent and get them ready for post-secondary life outside of the school gates. At the end of their schooling years, they must learn to integrate into mainstream society.

To this end, the special needs students are given the same opportunities as their peers. The school treats them as any other student, albeit with customized support due to their needs. They go for all camps, learning journeys and other activities.

“We want the special needs students to have a sense of belonging to the school and for their peers to accept them,” says Miss Maria.

Another important factor is having good contact with the student’s previous school because that is one of the sources through which the AED can discover more information about the child’s history. This allows for appropriate follow-up by the AED.

Parental involvement is also key to their growth. Teachers’ efforts to help the students thrive in school may go to waste if parents are not well informed. They have to provide their children with continual support, especially during after-school hours.

“Their parents are very important because we need their support both here and at home,” Miss Han notes. “It is a whole group of us supporting that one child,” Miss Maria adds.

Every one in contact with the child plays a huge part in contributing to the child’s growth and learning. As Mrs Philip says, “We are all a community; we all sing the same song.”

### Reference

Ministry of Education. (2013). *Support for children with special needs*. Retrieved from MOE website: <http://www.moe.gov.sg/education/programmes/support-for-children-special-needs>

**Miss Lourdes Maria** has been an Allied Educator (Learning and Behavioural Support) at Jurongville Secondary School for 5 years. Both Math teacher **Miss Han Hui Chin** and Home Economics teacher **Mrs Philip** are trained in special needs.



# Becoming an Inclusive Society

*Inclusion isn't just about people with special needs—it's for everyone. Levan Lim believes that if we could all have personal experiences with people who are different from ourselves, we will become a more humane society.*

### Q: What does it mean to be an inclusive society?

In 2004, the Prime Minister announced a vision of an inclusive society. This vision explicitly includes people with special needs and disabilities.

In order to have an inclusive heart, an inclusive disposition, an inclusive attitude towards people with special needs, it's important for people in general to gain some kind of personal, practical knowledge and experience.

### Q: How do we begin to do that?

We've all grown up in a society where traditionally there's been a dual system of education—where people without disabilities go to mainstream schools and people with special needs go to special schools.

I think it's important for schools to promote the inclusion of kids with special needs within their settings. Once you have kids with special needs interacting with kids without special needs, what happens is those kids without special needs start gaining the personal, practical experience and knowledge.

And if we're going to have an inclusive community in the future, schools need to be microcosms of the kind of community that's envisioned in the future. The seeds of inclusion need to be planted in the young so that they will learn the values, skills and knowledge to include others who are different from them. That's the basis of our future society.

Now, to inculcate these in the students, the teachers themselves need to model and display those attitudes which we would like to see within the young. And for that to happen, teachers themselves need to be taught to become more inclusive.

### Q: What does it mean for teacher education?

It's really about looking at their own attitudes. What we try to do at NIE is create that space within our classes for them to go within and to look at those attitudes which may expose them to being maybe a bit prejudiced. We try to create a safe space for them to, in a way, expose their vulnerability.

It's not just about skills and knowledge; it's also linked to your own personhood, your own values as a human being. And that's an important part of their journeying at NIE. Because it's easy to build the hardware—the ramps, the lifts, the buildings—to make Singapore and Singaporean schools more inclusive. But the harder part is the software—the people—and that requires a lot of work, the “heartware”.

Our approach at NIE is never commanding; it's always invitational. We invite them to journey within and to journey with other people—their friends, their classmates—and to listen to each other's journeys, and to re-story it after they have heard it in a more positive way towards the future.

### Q: What is the most important part of this heartware that a teacher should have?

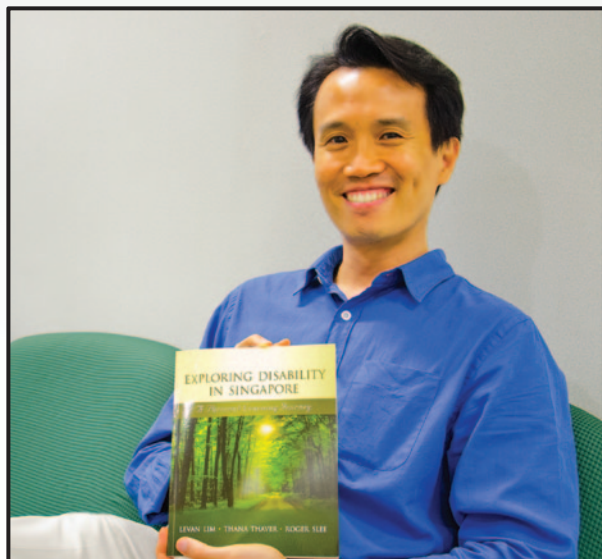
The first part is just to be real, be open, be honest with yourself. That's what we're asking of them in their classes—to be honest with yourself, to look at yourself, to look at your upbringing, to look at how the social context has socialized you to not have those experiences, and to slowly gain them through being open to children who are different. I think that honesty, that openness is extremely important. So, we start with that.

But that can leave the teacher a bit vulnerable, because you're actually sharing a part of you which you may not want to share, because it could expose prejudice. So we ask them to accept those feelings and thoughts about themselves. You really have to accept yourself first—all your vulnerabilities, your strengths, your weaknesses—and then from there move on. That requires a posture of openness, honesty, and acceptance of self.



To have an inclusive community in the future, schools need to be microcosms of the kind of community that's envisioned in the future.

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



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

### Q: On a more personal level, what led you to focus on this area of research?

When I was a doctoral student, I started asking: What are the best safeguards for people with disabilities in society? And if you think about it, the best safeguards for people with disabilities would probably be the same for all of us when we get weaker and older—it's really about circles of support and relationships with people who care.

The key is, really, how do we increase the community's capacity to look after people with special needs? Because ultimately, I think we believe that people with special needs belong within communities. It's not about getting professionals to look after them all the time. It's also getting regular people to care for them and be with them.

I guess it also goes back to my experiences. I grew up with my cousin who had special needs. Having that personal, practical knowledge as a child growing up, I know it's so natural for a child to just include someone who's different.

And that's something that should be an opportunity for many Singaporeans, rather than sending them away to live with other communities, or other institutions, other homes, or other schools. Why can't we include them within our regular communities?

Social cultural theory suggests that it is important to look at difference as something that you can make a difference about. Difference that makes a difference.

If we can just extend that whole notion also to special needs. Living, playing, like how I did with my cousin, it becomes part of your emotional, material, semiotic world. Because that's how you see life—it's coloured by the experiences. If you separate these kids and put them in special schools, and not bring them into the mainstream schools, then I think society is less the richer.

So, to me, inclusion is about life. Inclusion is not about people with special needs; inclusion is about everyone, including everyone. And caring! Because the ideas of caring, support, love and warmth—they're not just exclusive for people with special needs. They're for everyone, and we treat people everywhere that way—that's what inclusion's about. It's really for everyone.

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## Online Exclusives



A Culture of Care



Working for Students  
with Special Needs



Nurturing an Inclusive  
School Culture