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Special Education in Singapore: Celebrating the Past, Envisioning the Future

Marilyn Quah, Levan Lim, & Kim Fong Poon-McBrayer

Introduction

It has been 15 years since the landmark *Report of the Advisory Council on the Disabled: Opportunities for the Disabled* was released to the public in 1988. Since this major report, many changes and achievements have occurred in special education in Singapore. There is much to celebrate in retrospect over the past 15 years, but there is also much to do to further improve conditions and quality-of-life outcomes for people with disabilities. It is with caution that we would like to emphasize in the minds of readers that besides the various developments we have selected to include in this article, there are many successes and milestones achieved at the individual as well as on a collective level in Singaporean society over the past 15 years.

It was in February 1988, the then Minister of Education, Dr. Tony Tan, chaired the Advisory Council for the Disabled which looked into the problems and needs of people with disabilities in Singapore with the purpose of helping them integrate into society. The Council submitted their recommendations in the *Report of the Advisory Council on the Disabled: Opportunities for the Disabled* in November 1988. The recommendations proposed in the report were very well received by the government which took immediate action to begin implementing them (Quah, 1990).

This article looks back at the specific recommendations of this landmark report which has impacted upon the improvement of special education provision during the past 15 years. The past 15 years have witnessed a number of significant developments in supporting the needs of children with disabilities within mainstream education through various preschool and primary school programmes. These programmes and their achievements are

described in this article. In addition, key developments in teacher training to prepare teachers to better support students with disabilities in special schools as well as mainstream schools are also discussed. We conclude this article with a number of considerations that are aligned with envisioning a more inclusive future for individuals with disabilities in Singapore.

Report's Recommendations for Special Education

Of the recommendations proposed by the Report of the Advisory Council on the Disabled (1988), three of them pertained to the improvement of special education provisions. These were:

- To coordinate special education schools, the Ministry of Education (MOE) should consider setting up a Coordinating Body for Special Education (this was later called "Coordinating Committee for Special Education" or CCSE).



- The special education programmes should be upgraded. The cost of such upgraded programmes works out to about 4 times that of primary education. This cost of special education should be borne equally by the Government and the voluntary welfare organizations/Community Chest of Singapore.
- The development of special education schools is hampered by short-term leases. Government should urgently consider converting, wherever possible, short-term leases to long-term leases of about 30 years. Where lease conversion is not possible, Government should provide purpose-built special education schools for affected voluntary welfare organizations. (p.11)

Until 1988, special education in Singapore was provided by seven voluntary welfare organizations (VWOs) in 11 special schools (Quah, 1990). There is a strong belief, by the government, that special schools are best run by VWOs, for they have a strong sense of mission and their autonomy allows them greater flexibility to respond quickly to new needs and demands. Prior to 1988, special education was fully funded by the Singapore Council of Social Service (later renamed National Council of Social Service or NCSS). This was viewed by the VWOs as an abdication of responsibility by the Ministry of Education (MOE), as special education should be an 'education' matter.

In the early 1980s, the Ministry of Social Affairs conducted national surveys to gather data to facilitate the planning of services for the disabled. In 1988, the Advisory Council for the Disabled was established by the then Minister for Education, Dr Tony Tan, to bring about better coordination amongst services and agencies. One of the major milestones achieved by this council was that it became an equal partner with NCSS in the funding and management of special education.

Through this partnership, the Singapore Government allowed unused school buildings to be leased out on short three-year leases to special schools. Land was also set aside for the construction of purpose-built special schools. In

addition, the Government agreed to provide financial support to special schools of up to a maximum of twice the cost of educating a primary school student in Singapore. This would be matched by a similar contribution from the Community Chest of Singapore. The maximum per capita cost per child being 4,700 Singapore dollars from the MOE and 4,000 dollars from the Community Chest (Quah, 1993). Thus, from 1988, a special child would receive up to four times the amount that would be spent to educate a primary school child.

One of the recommendations from the Report of the Advisory Council for the Disabled (1988) was that the teacher-pupil ratio for special education should be 1:8. It also recognized that for children with more severe disabilities, the teacher-pupil ratio could be as low as 1:2, and that for others it could be up to 1:12. This is consistent with the teacher-pupil ratios in special schools as contained in the Report of the Advisory Council for the Disabled published in 1988. Fifteen years later, statistics available from the NCSS show that these teacher-pupil ratios are still being applied, and within each school, adjustments are made to ensure a good fit in the teacher-pupil ratio depending on the programme and needs of the children served (Quah, 2004a).

Towards Integration

Concerning the integration of children with disabilities, the Report of the Advisory Council for the Disabled: Opportunities for the Disabled (1988) stated, "whenever appropriate and feasible, special education should be provided within the regular education system. A child should only be placed in a special school if he cannot be well educated in a regular school" (pp. 37-38). The report also recommended that "integration should fit the disabled child to the most suitable educational environment" (p. 38).

In reality, however, special education services are generally provided outside the mainstream (Quah, 1993). Special education services are organized along a continuum ranging from total segregation to partial integration to total integration. Placement of a child with a disability at any point of this continuum is dependent on

his or her abilities and needs. Children with moderate, severe, and profound disabilities are taught in special schools, and children with milder learning, emotional, behavioural, sensory, and physical disabilities are found in all levels of the mainstream education system.

During the past 15 years, some progress has been made in integrating and supporting children with disabilities or learning difficulties within regular schools. A pilot project on integrating young preschool children, called Project ASSIST, was conducted by NCSS for 40 preschoolers with mild disabilities aged 3-5 years (Quah, 1998). Its main objective was to ascertain the feasibility of integrating these children into mainstream preschool centres in Singapore. Professional staff including psychologists, occupational-, speech- and physio-therapists intervened through the provision of services and consultations to the teachers and parents of these children. Results of the evaluation conducted after only nine months of implementation found positive effects for the children (with and without disabilities), their parents and teachers. Project ASSIST paved the way for children with disabilities who were previously denied admission into mainstream nurseries and kindergartens, access into quality preschool education programmes.

Later, some of these children joined the TEACH ME (Therapy and Education Assistance for Children in Mainstream Education) Services and were integrated within mainstream primary and secondary schools. This integration demonstrated the feasibility and desirability of mainstreaming children with mild disabilities into general education schools in Singapore. In January 2003, the Ministry of Community Development and Sports (MCDS) implemented a project similar to the ASSIST programme but this time, for preschoolers attending childcare centres. This project, known as the Integrated Childcare Programme (ICP), aims to maximize the potential of children with special needs aged 2-6 years who can benefit from a mainstream education (MCDS, 2003) by providing an inclusion programme with their non-disabled peers in a natural setting. As with Project ASSIST, it also aims at providing a

smoother transition for preschoolers with disabilities into general education schools when it is time for their primary schooling. In 2003, the project was implemented in six "pioneer centres", each putting aside 10 places for children with special needs (Quah, 2004a).

In the 1980s, it was also becoming increasingly obvious that a substantial proportion of primary school students were experiencing learning difficulties. One problem faced by primary school teachers was the growing number of students who were underachieving in schools due mainly to their students' poor proficiency in English. To address this problem, the MOE, in 1989, requested the Institute of Education (IE) to conduct short in-service courses of 30 hours duration to help teachers identify and teach underachievers who were experiencing learning difficulties from Primary One (P1) to Primary Three (P3) more effectively. The "Helping Underachievers" course was offered to all teachers teaching in P1 to P3 classes. Meanwhile, the MOE launched the Helping Underachievers Project (HUP) in all primary schools to provide early intervention for students with average and above average abilities to maximize their learning. It focused on helping students improve their English and Mathematics and teaching was carried out in small groups. The programme used a diagnostic-remedial approach and was carried out outside curriculum time. In recent years, the programme was reorganized and is now known as the Encouraging Achievement and Better (ENABLE) programme, catering to students from P2 to P3 (Quah, 2004b).

In 1991, the MOE set up the School Psychological Service (SPS) with the principal objective to:

"ensure that students with latent problems, be these personal, family, intellectual, behavioural or emotional, that are likely to adversely affect them in their learning are identified early so that the necessary assistance, remediation or treatment can be given to enable them to remain in the mainstream of education and to benefit from their schooling".

[Hogg, 1993, p. 47]

The target population served by the SPS were school-aged students in mainstream schools with special educational needs. The overall framework of the SPS consisted of four zonal teams, each led by a senior educational psychologist and comprising five educational psychologists, four social workers, a reading specialist, counselors and a learning support coordinator in every primary school. The Learning Support Coordinator (LSC) has a very important role within the structure of the service and is expected to be a qualified and experienced teacher with a particular interest in children who experience difficulties in school. Suitably qualified teachers are usually nominated by their school principals as LSCs to be in the Learning Support Programme (LSP). The duties of the LSC include:

- identification and assessment of students with problems
- teaching such students in withdrawal groups and using materials devised in consultation with the SPS
- providing within-class support in negotiation with the class teacher
- assisting the SPS in developing appropriate curriculum and teaching materials.
- assisting the SPS in providing in-service on-the-job training for class teachers.

The setting up of the Learning Support Programme in 1992 was another milestone achieved for serving the needs of children with learning difficulties at the primary mainstream school level.

Teacher Training for Mainstream and Special Schools

A critical aspect of improving special education services, whether within mainstream or special school settings, is teacher training. This section describes key developments in the past 15 years regarding the training of learning support coordinators for mainstream schools and the training of special education teachers for the special schools.

To more effectively launch the Learning Support Programme (LSP) in primary schools, the MOE requested the National Institute of Education (NIE) to conduct a training programme to

prepare LSCs to undertake their roles more professionally. The Division of Specialised Education (renamed in 2000 as the Specialised Education Academic Group, and renamed again in June 2004 as the Early Childhood and Special Needs Education Academic Group) in NIE, thus designed and mounted the two-year part-time Inservice Diploma for Learning Support Coordinators programme with a full-day release from teaching duties for LSCs on Fridays to attend classes at NIE. Prior to attending this programme, LSCs were attached to primary schools for about a year to ascertain their suitability for the post of LSC. Since the first intake in 1993, NIE has produced a total of 101 LSCs in four intakes up to 2001. To expand this training to include more primary school teachers (other than LSCs appointed by the MOE), the Inservice Diploma for LSCs was restructured in 2001 into the Advanced Diploma in Teaching Students with Special Needs in Primary Schools. This programme is now offered to all qualified teachers in primary schools who wish to upgrade themselves with an Advanced Diploma, while at the same time, learn to teach students with special learning problems more confidently and effectively. Although the Advanced Diploma would take two years to complete, school teachers are also encouraged to take stand-alone modules within the Advanced Diploma programme for self improvement. In this way, teachers can accumulate credits toward the Advanced Diploma at their own pace.

In addition to the provision of in-service programmes for qualified teachers, the NIE also revamped its pre-service programmes from 1991 to include pedagogy in special needs education in both the Core and Elective Education components of its teacher training programmes. At this initial stage of their teaching career when they have to learn many urgent 'survival' skills to cope with classroom teaching and management, the NIE believes it is important to provide at least an awareness of the needs of students with special educational needs. These courses include, for example, the identification and characteristics of students with a variety of learning and behavioral problems encountered in mainstream education classroom, as well as coping and teaching

strategies which will enable them to deal more effectively with these students. Trainees are also informed of resources in their school and community from where help with more difficult students may be referred (Quah, 2004b).

Prior to 1984, before the Institute of Education conducted training for special school teachers, teachers teaching in these schools were either trained overseas, were trained teachers in general mainstream education seconded by the MOE to these schools or were untrained young men and women recruited by the VWOs and given on-the-job training provided by the individual special schools. The IE, the sole teacher training institute in Singapore, launched its first teacher education programme for special teachers in 1984.

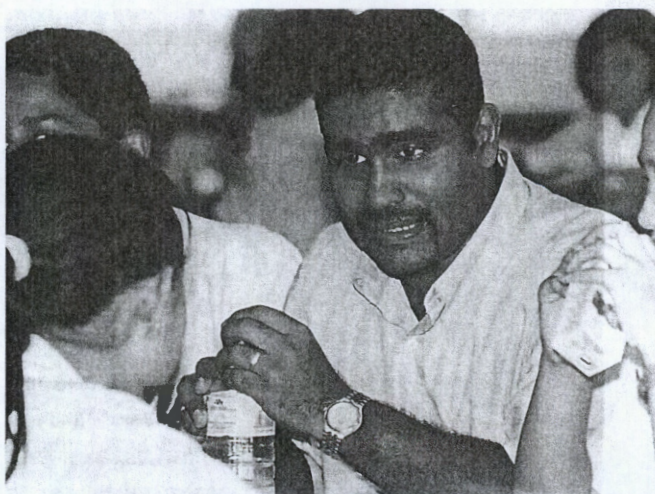
This programme, the Certificate in Special Education (CISE), was a three-year inservice programme for special school teachers. Admission requirements were pitched at three credit passes in the Cambridge-Singapore General Certificate in Education Ordinary Level (GCE-O in English) and six months' teaching experience in a special school. Teachers attending this programme taught in their special schools for half a day for five days of the week, and then attended the CISE on three half days (Quah & Chalmers, 1990). The quality of the intake of trainees improved each year, and by 1992, when 169 teachers had already graduated with the CISE, it was observed that at least 60 percent of the trainees had either "A" level passes, were Polytechnic Diploma holders or university graduates.

In 1991, when the IE became the National Institute of Education (NIE) and part of the Nanyang Technological University (NTU), it was decided that those candidates with better entry qualifications could undertake a shortened and upgraded programme of teacher training pitched at the diploma level. So, from 1991, in addition to the CISE, the NIE conducted a two-year, part-time Diploma in Special Education (DISE) programme for candidates with either 'A' levels, Polytechnic diplomas, or degrees from recognized universities. Applicants to this new programme were required to have minimum entry requirements of two 'As', two 'AOs' and a

Pass in the General Paper in the Cambridge-Singapore General Certificate in Education – Advanced Level (GCE-A), or for Polytechnic graduates, the requirements were 5 'Os' (including EL1), and at least six months teaching or related experience in a special school setting for both groups.

The first intake in 1991 attracted 61 candidates, of which 35 were successful in gaining admission to the programme. Since then, the DISE programme has been a very popular training programme which is offered each year. For the July 2003 intake, the NIE received a bumper crop of more than 40 eligible applicants. By June 2003, the NIE had graduated 230 DISE trained special teachers. Together with the 308 CISE trained special education teachers since its first intake in 1984, the NIE has produced a total of 538 qualified teachers in special education for the special schools over a 20-year period.

With 4,385 students in 19 special schools, there should be sufficient suitably qualified teachers (not including another 31 who are expected to graduate in June 2004 and another 43 currently undergoing training, making an additional 74 qualified teachers who will be teaching in special schools by June 2005, assuming no attrition) to ensure a good teacher-pupil ratio. However, special schools still report a shortage of teachers. According to several special schools, qualified teachers (especially those with DISE qualifications) leave the profession shortly after graduation. This is a concern in the field of special education because teacher attrition can affect the overall quality of service provision.



In the past, some special schools have blamed attrition rates on the demands of concurrent training and teaching. If that were the case, qualified teachers should not be leaving the profession soon after graduating from training at the NIE, and yet, there are enough resignations to warrant sizeable intakes of trainees into the NIE's training programmes to replace those who leave each year. Whatever may be the reasons for this, these resignations should be viewed as an expensive wastage of resources. To arrest this trend, a concerted effort from all parties involved in special education, especially the employers, is needed to explore ways to improve service conditions to stem the attrition rate and retain good, qualified teachers in the profession. It is the quality of teaching and professional staff that will make an excellent school, not the up-to-date and purpose-built school buildings.

At the request of the Canossian School, the NIE recently mounted the Advanced Diploma in the Natural Oral Approach to the Management and Education of Children with a Hearing Loss for 12 qualified teachers in 2003. Students who can benefit from integration/inclusion receive mainstream education from preschool up to secondary levels and are prepared for the national examinations. This Advanced Diploma programme is aimed at providing qualified primary school teachers who are engaged in working with children with hearing impairments and who use the Natural Auditory Oral Approach. This approach emphasizes the need to maximize the use of children's residual hearing through proper amplification using suitable devices during all waking hours. Through the optimum use of hearing aids

including cochlear implants and other supporting hearing devices, the children are enabled to acquire speech and language in the same way as normal hearing children, although often at a slower rate.



To further upgrade the quality of special education through the provision of better qualified staff, the NIE launched a new postgraduate programme at the Master's Degree level in Special Education in January 2003 to help the special schools in their recruitment of suitably qualified teachers who can provide leadership in special schools in the years to come. To enable teachers to attend the programme, it was especially designed as a two-year part-time programme which is partly conducted through coursework and partly through a dissertation. The first intake attracted 14 applicants and 10 of these were selected for admission into the Masters in Special Education Programme (Quah, 2004a).

Envisioning the Future

The developments in special education described above over the past 15 years testify to the progress achieved to better serve individuals with disabilities and their families. The developments described on actions taken to follow up on the recommendations of the advisory council report in 1988, the establishment of integration and support programmes for children in mainstream preschool and school settings, and the expansion of teacher education programmes represents part of the advancement of the field of special education in Singapore, albeit key achievements for greater integration of individuals with disabilities within society over the past 15 years. There is much to celebrate of past efforts contributed by individuals, families and organizations to enhance services, supports and conditions for people with disabilities, but there is still much more to do to achieve an equitable status and greater community membership for persons with disabilities in Singapore.

As more students with various disabilities are enrolled in mainstream schools following international trends and due to a more educated parent populace who are more exposed to and knowledgeable of the global inclusion movement, it is important for mainstream classrooms to be places where these students' learning needs are supported and teachers' concerns are adequately

addressed. The extension of existing support services such as the LSP beyond current primary grade levels appears to be a logical step towards providing more longitudinal support across the school years. Regular evaluation of existing support programmes such as the LSP or TEACHME are important to determining the efficacy of such programmes and improving current models and practices.

The direction of service development for the future is one area which can be contentious in terms of how special education is evolving in Singapore. On one hand, special education as part of the mainstream education is slowly gaining momentum as more children with disabilities are found in mainstream schools and therefore require greater support in terms of various areas such as teacher training (both at the pre-service and in-service levels) and teacher support for managing more diverse classrooms are required. There are already encouraging signs at the teacher training level where there is a concerted effort on the part of the NIE and the MOE to train teachers to be more adequately prepared to handle diverse abilities in the classroom.


On the other hand, special education in Singapore is still heavily associated with a separate system of education consisting of special schools which have grown from 11 in 1988 to 19 at present. Although the building of more special schools truly meets the school needs of a growing population of individuals with disabilities and their families, what has been inadvertently created and further reinforced is a separate system where students with disabilities are seen as belonging to special schools.


If the role of special education services in Singapore is primarily perceived as separate from or outside of mainstream education, resulting in many children with special needs being educated and growing up outside mainstream education and apart from their mainstream peers, their prospects of being accepted and welcomed by mainstream society will be limited. In such an arrangement, efforts to integrate individuals with disabilities to fit in better into the mainstream society will always face resistance from a public that remains alien


to them and their needs. In short, the prospects for many people with disabilities in Singapore for inclusion into the mainstream community will be limited because they were never really part of the mainstream school communities (Lim & Quah, 2004). Thus it is very important for key stakeholders in the education of students with disabilities to think and plan very carefully on how present developments in special education will affect inclusion opportunities. Perhaps, it is timely to carry out a review and report of the magnitude and stature similar to the Report of the Advisory Council for the Disabled completed 15 years ago.

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