

SDEA Connections 2019: The (R)Evolution of Inclusivity in Education

16th February 2019 | 10 am to 12 pm | The Pod at NLB

In this panel discussion, we have [M] the moderator, [B], [E] and [C] as the panellists.

[M]:

So it was only in 2003 that we had the implementation of the compulsory education act. So, in 2016, the then Minister of Education announced that it would be expanded and extended to children with moderate-to-severe learning needs from this year.

So at that time, he also mentioned that this was going to be a significant milestone in Singapore continuing drive towards national inclusiveness. I think that is also someplace that we want to go to.

It's not just about inclusivity in the education sector, it's also what it means for society at large. Yes, we are talking about the compulsory education act in terms of children with special needs in special schools, but we are also going to look at what's being done in mainstream schools.

At the same time, we are also trying to explore the different stakeholders. Because i think it is not just about the students, it's also not about the educators. Maybe it is also about the family, maybe it's also about the other members of society. And what we can do in this area to be more aware. And maybe what are some concrete steps we might be able to take moving forward as well.

So, it will be an informal chat, I will be passing the mic around. We will see where the conversation flows. We will have at least half an hour for a Q&A at the end of the discussion. Let's invite our first panellist to start us off.

[E]:

Looking at the people who are out here, I think some of us are in the room may not understand what is the difference between special education schools and MOE schools. So I am going to start by explaining a bit more.

There are 19 special schools in Singapore. These are specialised schools. Although they come under the purview of the special education branch under MOE that oversees the schools, we are not under the ministry of education.

So these 19 schools are actually considered voluntary welfare organisations, and sort of owned by various voluntary welfare groups. They are not under MOE and hence, most of these staff are directly employed [by the groups], but we do get funding, and it is full funding from MOE as well as NCSS. There are reasons for this, but we do not have time today to discuss this in details, so we will leave it for another time.



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In terms of the compulsory education act, if you hear about it, you wonder why it only includes moderate-to-severe special needs. What it has done is to create opportunities for students who otherwise be kept at home, or not be placed in schools to receive an education.

So, interestingly, we were just discussing this observation because we are only two months into the school year. But I was just sharing with them that we were all ramping up especially for the MID schools, actually all special education schools were ramping up to make sure we have enough spaces for all students who are suppose receive education this year.

So we were increasing spaces. We were ensuring that this was going to happen. And I typically have enough students to fill a class for my seven years old. Every school year, I typically have at least one class of seven-year-olds.

This year, I only have 6 applicants. 4 of which were in my autism programme. And so that class for my MID group, which I typically have 1 class. A class size is about 10 students. I only have two applicants. And I thought this is very interesting because this is dragon year. So I should be having more applications.

And I was just talking to some other colleagues in other schools, and I did realise that other MID schools – so MID is for Mild Intellectual Disability Schools – were facing the same issue. We are actually have seen a reduction in the number of applicants to our schools this year.

And I am talking about the CE (Compulsory Education Act). When we talk about CE liable to children... Ok wait, I rewind. When they say the compulsory education act, it is only in place this year right. It means that only the seven years old coming to school this year is under the act.

I do not mean from now onwards every child. So this year, all the seven-year-old are expected to be in a school. So we do see a reduction. So that is something that will be interesting to see if it is a trend in the future. And what is the impact of compulsory education.

And I have some thoughts about it, and one reason could be that parents, may, because of the compulsory education act, realise that their child can be enrolled into a mainstream school, even with special needs.

And that is something we all should be aware of. That mainstream schools cannot actually turn a child away because they have special needs. So that is something. And they cannot also ask a child to leave because of a special need.



It is really the parents who have to make that decision. So it might be because of that, the group that is in the mild category are possibly trying out mainstream first and I might see an increase in numbers for the future in the other age groups.

Because on the other hand, my colleague who is in another school who takes in children with more severe needs, saw an increase in numbers for the seven-year-olds this year. So that is an interesting trend that we want to observe in the years to come as to the impact of compulsory education in Singapore.

But I just want to let you all know that context and the understand of.. because a lot of us may not know about special education and may assume certain things. So hopefully that will help us get a better understanding.

[M]:

Thank you [E].

Also just to point out the fact that.. I am not sure how many of us know this but the majority of children with special needs are in the mainstream. And the ratio is about up to 80%.

And of course these children with milder needs, they need lesser support, but they are children with dyslexia, with ADHD. So every cohort, about 20% or so will go to the special schools. So Esther said that now we have 19 of them (Special Schools).

Ok, so I am going to invite [C] now to say a few things.

[C]:

I think first and foremost, to me when it comes to compulsory education, I am not sure how many of you have actually read this. And earlier on we were also speaking about it. In actuality, the new compulsory education act is actually going to affect 40 additional kids with special needs per cohort.

So if you think about it, it is not gigantic. But to me at least, I think the deeper issue here isn't only about compulsory education as in ABCs and 123s, but also looking at the bigger picture on what are the support systems in place for all of these kids that [E] is talking about that are not going to these special needs schools.

That are in the mainstream schools, and who have disabilities of some form or other. What are the systems in place to help them, assist them.



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Personally my own experience growing own... I went to a regular school. I was diagnosed in primary 2 with vision impairment. Teachers didn't really know what they were doing at that point of time.

It is the 1980s at this point in time that I am talking about. And there isn't a lot of advancement in special education and knowing what to do. And all the teachers were able to do was to put me in front of the class and enlarge my test papers in A3 size.

But that does not mean I was able to read it. But there was a lot of other challenges when I was in the mainstream school as well, in terms of not being able to catch up with the curriculum, not being able to read what was on the board etc.

And later on, I did go to a special education school for a year where I did my PSLE before going on to a mainstream school, again for secondary education where there was a resource teacher attached to assist.

But with my experience, what I have come away learning and seeing and observing. It isn't only the academic part of education that is important because when children with disabilities go into the mainstream school, it is often that they are limited from participating fully in the entire curriculum.

For example, when I was in secondary school, I was representing the country as a swimmer. And as well as an athlete and I was given colours award. But I wasn't allowed to participate in PE because it was feared that I was going to fall down and hurt myself and something has to be responsible.

I wasn't also allowed to take part in home economics, nowadays it's called food and nutrition I think. And perhaps because they felt I never needed to cook or manage a kitchen on my own, household budget in my life. And it is not only the schools that think this.

My own dad, he's a chef all his life, his whole entire career, and he took a lot of convincing before he was willing to teach me how to cook. And the convincing consisting of me nearly burning down the kitchen.

Because I was trying to cook something without putting water. Frying vegetables without putting water into it. And I went on and on and on at it for 10 minutes because I didn't know any better because I was twelve at that time.

So I think, coming back to my point, compulsory education is an important thing. But the deeper question is inclusive education where kids that are going to the normal schools that are not



being turned away are given the opportunity to participate and take part in all parts of the curriculum such that they can flourish and grow to the best of their abilities, to the maximum of their abilities.

And the last part of course as well as the social needs of these kids when they go into the mainstream schools. Sometimes because society may not be understanding because they have no idea what is wrong with this child, this friend, that is just behaving differently. I remember when I was in school because I suffer from Stargardt, a condition that my central vision diminishes over time so when I was in school, I couldn't see anything in front of me but I could see things to the side.

So I walk around like this every day. So I basically look like a dead chicken with a twisted head. And a lot of people didn't understand. I was teased, I was joked at, called names etc. And I didn't have many friends growing up in school. And I think as a result, that some of the social skills were not built from an early age.

I am lucky in the sense that later on, and also because of my exposure as an athlete, being able to go to different countries, seeing how persons with disabilities function and are included in their communities over there. I have come back with a lot more knowledge and experience as well and being able to level up and pick up on those skills outside of the ABCs and 123s.

[M]:

Thank you. And one thing that I am hearing you say is that teachers back then in the 1980s are not so equipped and not so ready. And I am wondering also if that is the case for today and what have we done to help support these teachers.

I am going to give the time to [B] to share with us her work in Mayflower Primary School.

[B]:

Prior to Mayflower Primary school, I was in a special school and that was in primary and nursery children with hearing loss as well.

The point from here would be that, in the Deaf school, we've always taught the children following the mainstream curriculum. But they were secluded from the mainstream schools because of communications.

Now the only reason why we went into mainstream was because some of you may have known, the school for the deaf had to close down two years ago, not because there were any less



children being born with deafness, but because many parents decided or wanted their children to go into mainstream schools having had implants or better hearing aids.

So that was the trend that was happening since 2001 when baby screenings was first introduced into Singapore. And parents could find out day 1 that their child had a hearing loss.

They could decide about having a cochlear implant and so on. So when the school was closing down, we looked for options. Go to another special school that could be one way, but our take at this school was these children was doing mainstream. The only difference was that they sign and they do not use voice or that they need to use sign language to access the curriculum. So back then, MOE started working on this programme and we started the programme in Mayflower Primary last year 2018 with our first cohort with 6 children with hearing loss. These children are in a mainstream classroom there about 28 to 30 children in the primary one class. Out of the 28, 6 have hearing loss and the other 22 do not.

What happens is, there's a co-teaching approach that is implemented in this program where the mainstream form teacher is teaching the lesson, and I will be teaching the same lesson but using sign with the 6 (students).

To prepare the school for this program, the principal, we had to train--primary 5 students buddy with P1 child for the first few days of the school term because the P1 child may not know where the library is or where to buy food at the canteen. So they have a primary 5 child buddy.

For Mayflower, in 2016, the principal announce to the whole school that there will be children with hearing loss joining us, I need buddies from the P5, whoever would like to be one of the buddies, sign up with the VP. We needed 12 buddies, each child was given 2 buddies. I was told, before recess, 80 students had signed up. The school and I were amazed that so many students wanted to be part of the program.

So that started the programme running. We also trained the store vendors in basic sign language -money, how much, hot, cold. Simple sign language. They came up with ideas of putting up signs with pictures, food, and one vendor came up with calculation, buy this and this, there was less, barriers to these children buying food.

The buddy system lasted for one sem, not one month, 2 terms. The buddies didn't want to leave the young ones. The young ones were like "you can go" but every day, they were talking to them, it's good.

We had programs for the whole school, I gave talks at assembly to talk about what hearing loss is and how similar they are to hearing children.



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We had 30 teachers sign up for sign language course offered to teachers, they had to pay, stay back after school, not a free program, and is voluntarily. These teachers, you only have one class, maybe only 3 teachers took that class but the other 27 teachers were thinking, “what if I got the children next year?” they were preparing themselves mentally too. We have enrichment classes for P1 and P2 children. The school opened up sign language classes. Children signed up for that as well. That was a big indication the school was ready and prepared, that the school climate, the environment was welcoming to these children.

The parents [of children with special needs] were like “will my child be bullied? Will their aids be pulled out?”

Our answer was, we will try and educate the school, children being children, things will happen. It's a learning point for your child to advocacy for himself or herself, to stand up for themselves as well

Today, there's been no incident and I see, I don't think...don't say there will never be but the incidents, if there's any will be very minute. I say, it only takes one to aggravate one another for an incident to happen.

In reality, many many children and the teachers around are learning to sign and our children feel very included.

If you come into the class, they're really happy and working with the other children, and the main thing about this whole program, inclusion can happen if there's support. Support in pedagogy, support in personnel , not only in teachers, but in paraprofessionals, counsellors, in any aspect the child needs.

In Infrastructure, many people always think of ramps or access to walking. But, if you think about children with hearing loss, their infrastructure would be lighting system instead of the bell to indicate that the period is over, emergency lights, visual announcements, etc. These things are put into place when we go back to Mayflower school renovated right now.

We hope to see all these in place. With the support given by teachers, with the infrastructure ready for the children, to be independent, and know what's happening around them, and not have someone to tap them and go “look there's a fire we got to go, or it's PE time let's go” then I will say inclusion is really happening.

[M]:

I want to pick up a few things.



It feels like your principal is buying into this. We talked about this earlier, they're [the children] in Mayflower, they are sent there, they are not attending primary school by location. It's a very specific case. These are students with hearing loss, but in the other schools meant to be open to other different needs, ADHD and dyslexia, how much support are there? Cause you can't quite tell how many are coming in.

We have statistics that in schools we have at least one allied educator for learning and behavioural needs in every primary school. In secondary schools, we have 92 schools with at least one allied educator. On top of that, we have 10% of teachers in primary schools and 20% in secondary schools to undergo special needs training to support these students.

The question is,

1. why only 10%? 20%? Is that enough?
2. What's this training, what does it involve? We're also thinking it's a matter of practice, you can attend a class or workshop but at the same time, if you are not working with these kids, you do tend to neglect and overlook certain things, any thoughts about this issue?

[E]:

There are very many good programs. I know MOE has put in place a lot of things to support special educational needs students in mainstream schools.

I give you 2 examples. One thing I realize and hear from B is really the importance of people. Programs are programs but people make it happen.

Though you have AEDs, LSMs. Learning support for maths, English. Every school in mainstream schools has these programs and teachers trained. But with...I have various opportunities to go to various schools and hear, see mainstream teachers who are my friends sharing with me--I realise differences in programs from school to school. Though the name and training that these people go through are similar, but how it's enacted is very very different. It is the person-, principal-, school leader-dependant in various ways.

Recently in January, I attended an EPIC--sharing of parents with children who are thinking to apply for schools next year.

A mainstream school principal was there as well. I was surprised at the amount of effort that the mainstream school is putting in. That she would have different resources put into place for this child so the child will be able to adapt and access the education he or she requires in a mainstream school setting. We know it's not easy. Mainstream school setting, primary 1 class



has 30 in a class, it's not easy, but this principal was willing to invest because she saw the need of it.

She meets up with parents of children with special needs at least once a year for at least for the first two years, and continually if they feels she needs to, to the point that this child almost has an individualised education plan in a mainstream school. It is followed through with a counsellor. I am very hearten by that.

Here comes the downside. We know P1 registration is by phases. I'm not exactly sure of the phases, but one question presented by the parent goes "I stay very very far from your school, how can I get a place?" The only solution is to move closer, right?

There are good schools like that, I am sure that it's but one of many others but how do we help these parents with children with special needs to access these schools who are doing well, who are doing great work in supporting the students?

There are also schools, with school leaders who can be very very for in wanting to help these children with special needs. But on the ground, this is what you hear from the teachers. "If you don't study well "you will go to the school like [E]'s". I shouldn't say that, but what's that messaging we're telling our students? What's the mindset of that teacher of special education? Those are challenges we do need to face and need to ask ourselves.

There is unevenness across mainstream schools. But from the ministry's perspective, I do have to say that they've really put in a lot of resources and I am very heartened by them. There are also programs where they try and--intentions are always good. And their intention was to merge mainstream schools with special education schools to promote inclusion between schools. Hence, there's a program called: Satellite partnership. It's a funded program that almost all special education schools is paired with a mainstream school to foster and to build practices to promote inclusion.

Some good practices, came out recently in the news, are that some school has started writing books, stories of inclusion, and reading program and this is a result of their children interacting with the primary school children next door. These were some things that came up from it.

But that is something we were discussing the last time. The need for this kind of stories. To dispel the other stories that we may ourselves growing up have heard. All our lives, ask yourself [now] quickly, what are your thoughts on people with special needs and where do they stem from. Most of the time, it's from stories we hear, or what we see and observe. And that helps us form the mental model of how we should even interact with people with disabilities.



For me, I was very privileged because I learned from a very young, from my brother who has special needs, what it meant to be different. But different needs does not mean that you are different. He enjoys music, he can show love in various way. My brother is non-verbal, he can still show love in different ways and he enjoys, and not enjoys certain things. He is still a person, and sometimes we forget that in light of the disability label that we often place.

[C]:

If I can jump in. You know, what [E] and [B] just shared kind of just made me think of the not too long ago survey done by the Lian Foundation which paints quite a different picture where it talks about.

The findings from the survey show a big segment of those surveyed did not want their kids to sit next to a child with special needs in school, did not feel that they knew how to interact or play with kids with special needs in the playground. And it appears based on these stories, I am hearing that when people know, understand the difference that children with a disability may have, they can warm up, they are very capable.

I think us Singaporeans are not different from anybody else throughout the world. And we are people first and foremost and we have a heart and we can be inclusive when we are made aware. But a lot of the times I think like what [E] has shared, the stories we hear from other parents, the stories we hear from the community.

When you see a blind guy at the hawker centre selling tissue paper, you automatically think he is not educated, his family is poor, he needs help, such a pity. And if this person were to come to you for an education, or for job, or this person was presented by your child, your adult child as a potential life partner, then what will your thoughts be about having this person included in your inner circle, your family, your employee, your colleague etc.

So it these stories we tell ourselves about disability. And it is not uncommon. I hear it very often that on the train, when kids are crying, the parents or mommies will tell their children “you better behave yourself or you will become like her” or “if you keep reading in the dark or you keep looking at the phone you will be blind too”.

That’s absolutely not true. I didn’t become blind because I was looking at my phone. Because back then in the early 80s, there were no phones to look at. So it is the stories that we tell ourselves or our family. And how can we change that narrative? How can we second point? How can we bring about more understanding in the wider community about disability, our differences, also our similarities?



[B]:

Yeah. Just to tap on what you said about knowledge. Knowledge is the key to inclusion. Like in Mayflower, for the 22 children who have no hearing loss in this class, in this P2 class now, they were given the understanding of what hearing loss is.

They were given lessons on signing. And they just picked it up. Within the second month, in early February, we have an assembly in the hall 3 times a week. The whole class started signing along with the hearing loss child. They use to do it during the class when we sign on Tuesdays or Thursdays. Suddenly they all sign and the VP, the school leaders and all looked at me and I looked at them like “we didn’t tell them to do it”. They naturally started signing in the hall as well. And it is still happening. They sign in class, they sign in the hall, they sign to their friends. They will also ask me when they are not sure how to sign certain vocabulary. We will also teach the hearing loss children how to write messages, use gestures, ways to communicate with children with no hearing loss, to use ways to communicate when they don’t understand. That knowledge is very important, that understanding of what a disability is.

Also, every year, some of the members of Singapore Association for the Deaf will give a talk to the whole school, about deafness, during International Week of the Deaf. Now, the whole school is primary 1 to 6, so we usually can’t tame the children, they will always be rowdy. But when the person who is giving the talk - he’s deaf - came up and started signing, with an interpreter in front voicing for him, the whole hall was quiet. And all the teachers looked around because no one was speaking and just looking at the man signing. To me and the teachers, the school wanted to understand and to learn what deafness is, who they are and what their abilities are. And that was a turning point for me. All these years of teaching, I never experience that, the whole school was quiet.

So the thing that [E] was saying about people saying things about children or people with disability, I believe it is because people don’t understand and when you don’t understand something, you are bound to make fun.

I mean when we think about the early 60s where races were not understood. You don’t think any less or different, because we learned to accept that through books and education. I think if there’s a section in social studies (text)book, about disabilities, then perhaps in later generations, people with disabilities won’t be excluded and be part of the society as well.

[E]:

To add on something, sometimes we have a dilemma. When we work with other schools, one of the things they want us to do is to prepare their children to understand our students. And the dilemma is that we don’t know how much to tell or prepare. There’s always that over-preparedness and also the tendency to box up when I’m describing someone with



disabilities which is not what we want. We also don't want them to have preconceived notions because when they truly interact [with people with a disability] they will realize it is really not so. There's always that dilemma of how much you say and I think it's true, there are certain things we don't talk about in Singapore, because intentionally we know that there's difference and it's not so different to us. In this room we see, using the example of race, that's something we don't always talk about, intentionally it's in place, we know about each other's race, we know and understand.

[C]:

and respect

[E]:

Yes, and respect. We learn to respect. And that's possibly something we need to do for disabilities. Imagine it is the same thing done but for different disability types in the schools, and I wouldn't need to go to schools before my students go in to tell the children, what my student's disability is like.

Because they have some idea of what it's going to be like. Hopefully, to me, inclusivity is seeing everyone without a certain lens when they look at someone with a disability, base on their preconceived notion to cause us to set limits and boundaries unknowingly, just like how [C] has shared, not being able to do PE. Those are limits that someone has set, which resulted in boundaries set for her.

[M]:

What I'm hearing, for us to be a truly inclusive society, starting in schools is a crucial step. I think the gap is then how do we better prepare the other stakeholders in the schools. For example, parents. I think part of the picture has to be creating that awareness. Not just teaching and support staff - behavioural support staff, but other support staff. Cleaners, security guards, just to have that awareness of what it means to be inclusive.

[C]:

I am going to jump in here on that point. My own experience, my daughter has just gone to secondary 1 this year. And over the last six years, there wasn't any problem when I went in and out of her primary school. The principal was extremely inclusive from Day 1, because the security guard didn't let me in with my guide dog, she informed all the staff including the security guard that I will be walking all over the school with my guide dog and there was no trouble since. I wasn't discriminated. I said it's about the culture and tonality we set, what's important and what's acceptable. We have implicitly, with our language, and stories we tell with our children, that it's okay to exclude children with disabilities. And when we can change that



narrative to that we are all the same and we are all human, then I think there will be less exclusion.

One more point I want to make, if we look at it, 10, 20 years ago, [we use terms like] the blind man, the guy on the wheelchair. But today, why do we use “persons with disabilities?”. Why do we put the personhood first? Because before I’m blind, I’m a mother, daughter, psychotherapist. Blindness just happens to be there, it’s no different from one of you out there wearing white, black shirt, or track shoes. It is just a part of us, it doesn’t sum the whole thing.

[M]:

Earlier when you [C] shared about your PE experience. You reminded me of something. The bigger point is, it’s not just in the classroom but also school context outside the classroom we have a lot of socialisation.

[C]:

Correct. Because without PE, you don’t make friends, you lose the whole social thing.

[M]:

And I can collectively understand what somebody is... What autism is. But to be in the same space and time with somebody with autism, that is when we really get to know that there are some commonalities with these persons.

But also what adaptation we have to make in our behaviour with this person. And I want to bring also to, for example, whether we are ready to have children with different needs join in the different CCAs, Activities, and perhaps maybe hear more how that is like from Mayflower or Grace Orchard. And I remember when in secondary school when I was diagnosed with profound hearing loss, when I was in NCC, I was not allowed to shoot the gun because it is a loud noise. But it is an air rifle.

[C]:

Did you get deaf?

[M]:

I don’t know. It is to protect what is left of the hearing. I get the point. But it is such an important part of being in the NCC because you get to shoot something.

I’m wondering whether schools in general, whether the mindset is also ready to accept people with different needs in the CCAs.



For example, if somebody is on the wheelchair and wanted to join the drama club. Is the vendor ready, do we need training for the vendor? If someone wants to join gymnastics? Are we thinking things beyond the curriculum and pedagogy.

[B]:

When I went to Mayflower. One of the main things was that we [two other teachers] said that the children will enjoy everything under the sun here. There will be no limitations. In terms of they can't join this because there's music and they can't hear.

That's something we set forth in the school, understood that if the children wanted to go into dance, we had 2 children who joined the Malay dance and one in Chinese Dance. We, teachers, acted as facilitators in the dance, interpreting the steps. But, just being there to convey anything the instructor had to say but we also thought of things like ordering bigger speakers so that the children with hearing loss can feel the vibrations rather than just rely on counting, they still can hear the music with whatever hearing they have. So that kind of accommodation is very important in any aspect in CCAs and after schools.

There's another girl who joined us this year, who on top of being deaf, she also has a very rare syndrome call antley bixler syndrome and it really encompasses a lot of physical limitations. She walks but with braces, she has limitations to her movement, but we never stop her from PE. She does PE but what we have done is that in the section which she has PE, the PE teacher will put cones there and the other children are not to go into the area she is, in case they knock into her or she knocks into them and falls. Not like her doctor says that she can't fall, of course, she can fall, but because she has a little trachea so the problem is that it might be dislodged and we teachers need to do an emergency.

The point is that she joins them for PE when there is no running around, and not when there is too much running around. When there is running, she goes into her section so that kind of accommodation is important with any disability. She has been given all those opportunities to take part. There was a fire drill yesterday, she took part, went into the hot sun, stood. And we said as long as she can take it and if she can't then she goes in. Mum says it is fine. Everything that can be accommodated, the school has already thought about it. We have a special room for her. She goes into that room instead of the big field. So, with that kind of accommodation, if people just think ahead, and like I said, probably because Mayflower already has this programme coming to them they started thinking. Every year, we think ahead, we think ahead.

Oral, they do oral as well, they do listening comprehension. And you think, Huh, listening? So we tweaked it to a visual comprehension, tweaking the rubrics, tweaking the way they do the oral and they stand in front, give a show and tell in sign language with a teacher interpreting for



them. So they experience everything that's happening, and that's not impossible if pedagogy or accommodation is given.

I do want to touch upon another point you brought up about teacher training. 10% in primary school, 20% in secondary schools. And I think the number of hours they are trained is only about 36 hours in all? 36 hours, you go into a classroom and learn about disability, and what I was told was that out of 4 disabilities, you choose 2? So, you pray that when you get a class, the disability you learned, the child comes to you and not from another disability? I mean that is what I hear.

Anyway, we were also talking about how teachers from mainstream schools can be seconded to the special needs schools that have been happening for years. So we have teachers from the deaf school who were from the mainstream schools coming into special schools. So the tables was turned. We were the experts and they were not. So we had to teach them. And the other day I was pointing out that why can't we have the reversal. Why can't special needs train teachers to go into mainstream schools and work for a few years? Helping the mainstream teachers to learn on the ground what it is like to work with these children with disability. Not just classroom knowledge but hands on. So, in that aspect, I think when we think about inclusion, then that dream might be a reality.

[E]:

This is also for that simple fact that special education teachers are actually not qualified teachers in mainstream schools. And it goes back to the main question of are SpEd schools being under VWOs versus MOE. This is a discussion for another day. I wanted to talk about beyond the classroom setting.

I think when I first came in to special education, to be honest, I have a brother with special needs, I never knew there was a school like mine existed, and so when I came back from overseas from my studies, I was looking for jobs. And I basically open the newspapers because my mum was chasing me "Aren't you going to find a job?".

Anyway, i open the newspapers to classified Ads and "Hey, there's this special education schools. Never ever thought I will do special education. I applied and was called for an interview for a weeks time. They were really desperate for teachers at that time (laughters).

Anyway, I was accepted very soon after and I started work at the school. And I realised, wow, the students that I was teaching, are really high functioning. Because this group have mild intellectual disability, they have in a sense, sometimes people call it a hidden disability, because you cannot see it visibly. And if I really were too dress them in any other school uniform, put them in another school. They will blend in right away.



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And I was saying at that time when I started way beyond, there were no interactions for them beyond our school settings. So one of the things we felt important, in my school, was to bring in the people. Since there aren't any other opportunities for them to interact, let create those.

Why? Because these students don't live in a special education school but in Singapore's society. And if only if the schools understand them, then that is a problem. Because they only spend a fraction of their time in school. They spend most of their time in society.

So we set out on an ambitious sort of thing, "Hey let us see whoever we interact with, give them that opportunity to know". Because one of the things that we are fighting is really that Asian mentality and it really has to do with face.

And I understand that because when we were younger, when I was younger, we never ever brought my brother out. Never. Because there will be way too many questions. Sometimes, as I was growing up, we will bring him out, and just because he look different, we will get stares. We will get a dirty stare, not a look. It's a stare.

[C]:

A dirty sneer

[E]:

Yeah, like why? And obviously, my brother has no inkling that they were staring, or maybe he does. He just doesn't communicate it. But as the person pushing the wheelchair, you see it right? And it is okay if they are children. But when it comes to parents and adults, and it is a stare for a very long time. Sometimes, I don't want to face this, so I keep the child at home.

Besides that of course, infrastructure was difficult. Everywhere you went, there was hardly any ramps or anything. So you had to physically carry the wheelchair and stroller up various flights of stairs. But we've improved significantly.

Back to the topic of wanting to create opportunities for the students with special needs and society to know one another.

One of the things we saw and started running is the "No Different Campaign". We used the arts and sports, as we saw that they were levelling platforms, it didn't matter whether you can read, or your maths is better than mine, but we can enjoy the arts together and we can play sports together and that's many years ago.



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At that time, there were very very few of these things happening but it's very exciting that now almost everywhere you see things like that happening. Although at that time it was just platforms, now you are seeing very intentional collaborations.

Example, for sports, you see inclusive sports festival happening. And to play a sport together, it requires you to train together, hence that programming forces you to have to build relationships, through a sport, and not just on a one time basis and you get to know the person.

There're many things like that happening whether in school or outside of school that we started to retire that program because there was no need for it anymore. There are so many things going on. So I think one of the biggest things is to tap on these platform, how can we deepen these relationships and how can we learn from them to think of how we can, in a sense, create a cycle and make this more commonplace, and eventually, even radically tear down the walls between special education and mainstream schools. I told [M] the other day that I still waiver.

Some days, I'm totally for inclusion but other days I do see, really specific needs for special education schools and for students to have that space

From that, I learn, we can't have cookie cutter solutions. There needs to be varieties. Everyone is different and their needs are to be met differently. We can't say one or another.

I think it's what's best for the child, we should provide those options.

[B]:

Just to touch on the point that she said that special needs teachers are not trained or rather, not qualified to go into mainstream. I don't know what qualifications she means but I was just telling her that when you talk about qualifications, I think about degrees, A levels and all that, many teachers who teach in special education schools have degrees, a few have masters, but they come under purview of VWOs that [E] has said, not because they have to, but they choose too.

My two colleagues from my school, one has a Masters in Deaf Education but she is not under MOE because she didn't get trained in the normal track but special needs track, that's the distinction, only in that sense are we not qualified.

That's something that again another day another panel to talk about why are we different when we all have the same academic qualification? We train differently? If you read a paper by Zachary Walker, you will know what I mean.

[M]:



I think part of it has to do with the mindset or misconception, I remember when I was in NIE. We had similar modules with allied educators and understood that after we graduated with different diplomas, if they want to work in special schools, they don't have to go into NIE again, but not the other way around (SpEd teachers cannot go to the mainstream).

I don't know if that is the case now, but back then it didn't seem number one fair, and number two it didn't seem logical, it seems more of a to be a misconception of the occupation or prejudice or bias, I don't know.

For another day.

[C]:

2 points before we move into Q&A, one is an extension of what [E] said. Whether an inclusive mainstream education is better or special ed is better. To me I think the important thing is that kids with disabilities are given the rehabilitative support to overcome their disability, whatever it may be. Whether it's learning sign language before going into P1, or learning Braille, the foundations of literacy, before going into primary 1. Or alongside, whether it's alongside if I can call it, compulsory rehabilitation. The kids are able to move on from their disability and be able to be a part in a cohesive, inclusive society without having their disability hamper them.

Of course, there will be situations where it is different. Where the needs are severe where no amount of rehabilitation is going to make a difference. In those situations, perhaps, a special needs school environment may be more appropriate.

The last point is the bit you talked about earlier, the other support people in the school, what do you call, the parents, right?

My own experience is when I first came back 8 years ago, everybody was screaming, running away from me and shouting for bringing a big dog into public places.

Over the last 8 years, with advocacy, and education with being in primary school workbooks explaining to kids what guide dogs are, and how they are permitted by legislation to enter into public places. Today when I go out, I hear children telling their parents "Mummy, don't say so much, that's a guide dog, it helps a blind person".

When parents learn from their kids what inclusivity is about, it is a very different story because parents do shut up when they hear their children telling them what's the reality.

That is what I wanted to end with.



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[M]:

I am going to end this particular part with a thought about, what might be a blind spot about inclusivity in terms of general society?

One example I have personally is that if you go from City Hall to Esplanade to watch a play. If you are on a wheelchair, it's quite inaccessible, there are quite a few stairs, quite a few steps, one particular part, there's a machine thing to lift the wheelchair up so you can carry on. To me, the weird thing is, you actually have to call for help to come and, switch on that machine before you can go up.

So, the accessibility is there but doesn't make the user in a wheelchair feel empowered or independent. In fact, it makes us feel like we still have to ask for help, still have to be dependent on somebody to get to the Esplanade. I feel that's a blind spot, infrastructure is there, but the mindset or thinking is flawed, would you have examples to share?

Or other thoughts to finish this segment before the Q&A?

[C]:

I'd say inclusivity isn't bringing people together and sit down, let's have a meal. Open your mouth, open your mouth wider, let me spoon this into your mouth.

That isn't inclusivity. That is unfortunately how inclusivity is practice right now.

We're inviting persons with disabilities for a meal, we are feeding them, but we're not giving them the means to help themselves, to be a part of the conversation, to have a stake in our own futures and direction. To me, that needs to happen for inclusivity to happen and tangible, and not to just a fancy concept to make a CSR report look pretty.

[B]:

Besides school, I think inclusion in the society has to be there, visible. For the deaf, for example, many of them are turned away from jobs because either the company wants someone to multitask, use the phone, be able to do this and that, that's one thing. Companies don't accept when an interpreter has to come in, using mobile phones or typing in our messages. That will slow work down.

So, work is one place where inclusion has yet to really happen, another thing would be infrastructure. We always think about physical infrastructure for people with physical needs, or for visual needs.

But for the deaf?



Very few realize that the deaf need to be independent too, but many many things are not visible for them. Warning signs, there's going to be an emergency.

In the first line? Red line [MRT]? There were no visual markers to say which stop they were at. That's implemented recently I think, the association push for it.

If you think about inclusion, think about visual needs for everybody. The deaf are still unable to watch all movie, can only watch certain movies at certain cinemas, because they're closed-captioned. English movies I'm talking about.

Many go for? Chinese movies, because they're subtitled right? Movies are not accessible to them. But now, you have MIO. my husband is happy with MIO because they always have closed caption for most shows.

Things like that, to remove barriers and then inclusion will really happen

[E]:

Just one thing. When we think about society, we think the government. But when I think of society, I think of each individual person.

While we wait, and we can always say "they should do this", "why doesn't this person do this?". I think it is asking ourselves as members of society, how can I make that difference?

Whether I as a person with special needs who should speak up if there's something there's lacking. Cause I don't think people intentionally not include. I just think they may not know how or not realize.

It's either speaking up and saying it, or those of us who have the heart, and I am sure the reason why is because you have these in your mind. It's in my individual capacity as a member of society, how can I help break down barriers, how can I do these things they have mentioned in helping others to be independent and to enjoy equal opportunities that I do have.

What kind of support do I need to put in place for them in order to enjoy these same opportunities independently?

When I think society, I think individual, each of us.



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[M]:

Thank you. The news in the last week has been about people with disabilities at work right? The stats, 5 out of a 100?

[C]:

4.88%

[M]:

4.88%, great. There's quite a lot out to be done It's a little bit out of context for this panel, I wish we have time to go there. Work is quite important to inclusion.

[C]:

I think it's very much an extension. Because when we think of the push for CE this year. It also pushes inclusive education. That means we will be seeing people with disabilities kids, we see them getting better and better educated over time. And in 10, 20 years, we're going to have PWD graduates with masters, and degrees with no jobs!

And it is scary you know. Because when we look at the numbers there are a 164,000 PWDs in Singapore without work. It's a big big issue that these people don't have work. I'm sure some of them cannot or don't want work - their families could be rich enough that they don't need to work. But many of us don't belong in that category.

[M]:

Thank you ladies, thank you.

