



Disability Community Network Roundtable II: Education

By Andrew Lim

Are there any disabled teachers training teachers? Are there any disabled people making policy changes, designing policies? Where are they? We can't make positive change within this old charity model that has been shown not to work anymore, worldwide.

— Dr Dawn-joy Leong, autistic artist-researcher and
Board Member of the Disabled People's Association

On 21 August 2018, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and the Disabled People's Association (DPA) hosted the second roundtable of the [Disability Community Network \(DCN\)](#)¹ on **Education**.

The event was held at and supported by APSN Delta Senior School, and brought together members of voluntary organisations, allied educators, disability support officers in tertiary institutions, Special Education (SPED) school staff, parent support groups and disability advocates to discuss issues and new developments, share information and make requests of one another for assistance, collaboration or to fill in knowledge gaps.

¹ First mooted in October 2017, the Disability Community Network (DCN) comprises voluntary groups, social enterprises and relevant parties that aim to make sense of, represent, and act on, the needs and gaps in the disability sector. It is part of a broader open collaboration initiative known as [socialcollab.sg](#).

The DCN enables members to update one another on new developments and best practices, plug knowledge gaps collectively and collaborate on joint projects. Key deliverables include quarterly roundtables and closed-door discussions, and policy briefs as well as needs and gaps reports that represent members' views on disability policy or key issues.

The [first roundtable on Employment](#) was held earlier this May. Since then, a working group has been formed to study the feasibility of an employment quota for persons with disabilities in Singapore. DPA has also soft-launched its study on [Discrimination Faced by People with Disabilities at the Workplace](#), which drew interest from the media as well as the Ministry of Social and Family Development and Ministry of Manpower.

Taking Stock of Needs, Resources and Gaps

IPS Research Assistant Andrew Lim presented a working report of needs and gaps² in education for disabled people. Drawing from recent studies by the [National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre](#), [Lien Foundation](#) and [DPA](#), newspaper articles as well as inputs from community parties, six preliminary needs were identified:

- 1) Timely and effective early intervention
- 2) Accessible and quality pre-school options
- 3) Trained educators in both mainstream and SPED settings
- 4) Access to adequate education (e.g., mainstream school or alternative education)
- 5) Accommodations by schools to students with Special Education Needs (SEN)
- 6) For students with SEN to be prepared for work and life



Mr Andrew Lim (right), taking attendees through the Needs and Gaps Report on Education.

Participants engaged in a vigorous discussion on issues facing the SPED sector, including teacher salaries, adequacy of training and attrition rates.

Long waiting lists at SPED schools was also a concern felt by parents. While this seemed to suggest a lack of SPED school vacancies across the sector, school leaders pointed out that it might be due to parents who wanted to send their children to preferred schools, causing disproportionately long waiting lists in those schools. They felt that parents could be better advised on school selection as a means of addressing this imbalance.

² There are other reports centred on different issues of common interest such as employment and caregiving. These reports aim to coherently accumulate and represent views of the ground on needs and gaps in the disability sector. They will be produced annually based on online inputs on the [Disability wiki page](#), as well as offline consultations such as the DCN's roundtables.

Another debate centred on what “inclusion” means in the context of education. Two commonly documented, opposing arguments are: Mainstreaming students with SEN at all costs, or maintaining a highly-supported SPED system to provide specialised support for such students. Several participants questioned the relevance of this distinction, and felt that “inclusion” should be understood more broadly to mean students having the understanding, knowledge and know-how to interact and co-exist with one another regardless of needs and abilities.

Advancing Disability Services in Higher Education

Disability support offices “are that missing piece of the jigsaw puzzle,” said Nix Sang, Research Associate with the Singapore Management University’s Diversity, Inclusion and Integration Unit.

Pointing to the relative lack of support in tertiary education compared to the primary and secondary levels, Ms Sang presented a project to develop guidelines for disability services in Singapore’s Institutes of Higher Learning (IHLs) by contextualising and localising international best practices. It involves studying international standards and guidelines in this area, and conducting interviews with overseas experts and practitioners from IHLs in Singapore to talk about their challenges, success stories and wishes in providing disability support.

The data gathered will be validated and synthesised into a framework to raise standards and capabilities in disability services across all tertiary institutions in Singapore. The substantive findings and report will be published in early-2019.

Parents’ Views on Mainstream and Special Education

Representing Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) parent support groups (Hope for the Journey, and Care and Share Parents Ever Resilient, or CASPER), Nancy Foo presented parents’ thoughts on a number of issues:

- 1) When choosing a school for their child, parents feel caught between a socially desirable mainstream education system lacking in specialised support and accommodation, and a SPED system that while accommodating, is disaggregated and stigmatised by employers.
- 2) While mainstream teachers should be trained in accommodating, handling and including students with SEN into the classroom, this needs to be accompanied by hands-on learning experience in real life.
- 3) Inclusion and peer acceptance should be inculcated from young, both at home and in school. Educators should guide and set good examples for children to embrace the diversity of abilities among one another.
- 4) *Inclusion* should be distinguished from and preferred to *integration*. While inclusion is about accommodating the needs and abilities of students, integration guides students to conform to neuro-typical expectations.
- 5) The SPED curriculum can benefit from more choices in vocational training, and can help students achieve holistic and greater independence through the imparting of living, sports and social skills beyond work skills alone.

Virtual Reality in the Learning of Daily Living Skills

So Kah Lay, Principal of [Metta School](#), presented on the use of virtual reality in teaching daily living skills to students with mild intellectual disability and ASD.

[In collaboration with software developer EON Reality](#), Metta School co-developed three modules using EON Reality's Interactive Mirror to help students accomplish basic traveling skills such as road safety, taking transport, and shopping in a risk-free simulation based environment.

According to Ms So, the benefits of learning through virtual reality are manifold.

One, everyday scenarios are broken down step-by-step for students to comprehend. Second, gesture-based interactive experiences appeal to students who are kinaesthetic learners. Third, students are exposed to real-world scenarios and the “consequences” of their poor decision-making without compromising their safety. Aside, social skills are also taught such as choosing non-priority seats upon boarding the train, and queuing up before boarding a bus.



A screenshot of a YouTube video showing the module 'Taking the Bus'. A student would have to raise his or her hand to hail the bus. Photo credit: [EON Reality](#)

Digital Literacy and Movement-Based Learning Activities

Ryan Ng, Co-Founder of [Society Staples](#), shared two new initiatives targeted at persons with developmental disabilities.

The first is a course on basic digital skills such as sending an email, using online maps to find directions and using the internet in a safe manner. Supported by the [LearnSG Seed Fund](#), the course includes an 'Inclusive Local Guide' detailing inclusive features in local points of interest such as the National Gallery and the National Museum of Singapore.

The second is a programme comprising movement-based activities based on the principles of educational kinesiology. Piloted over nine months with clients of MINDS MeToo! Club, Mr Ng shared testimonials about how they have benefitted from the sessions, and that they are looking for feedback and volunteers towards another run in the fourth quarter of 2018.

Closing Remarks

Participants provided suggestions to improve future events, including:

- To invite professionals *with* disabilities to share their experiences and perspectives.
- To explore opportunities for the roundtable to accommodate key stakeholders (e.g., policymakers, Members of Parliament); this might mean allowing them to attend curated sessions after office hours and in their personal capacity.

Finally, Dr Lee thanked participants for their attendance and contributions, and announced that the next roundtable which would likely be themed around **Caregiving**.

If you wish to find out more about the Disability Community Network or contribute to the socialcollab.sg initiative, please email Dr Justin Lee justin.lee@nus.edu.sg or Andrew Lim andrew.lim@nus.edu.sg.

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If you have comments or feedback, please email ips.update@nus.edu.sg



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