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Faculty of Arts  
& Social Sciences

## **Asia-Pacific Social Work Students Conference 2018 (Hong Kong)**

### **“Gate of SEN”**

Reflection Paper

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## **1. Introduction**

Hong Kong Social Workers Association invited NUS Social Work students to attend their biennial Asia-Pacific Social Work Students conference, with the theme being “Assessment and Intervention for Students with Special Education Needs - Gate of SEN”. The conference comprised of agency visits to local organizations which provide specialized services to children with special education needs, hands-on activities and presentations prepared by students from different countries to promote mutual learning and sharing about working with this specific target clientele population. Special Education Needs (SEN) is a rising trend in Hong Kong’s policy and social service sector, as they prioritize both education and the children of Hong Kong. In addition, they recognize that increasingly more children are facing challenges in the orthodox traditional education system, due to a myriad of reasons - one of which is the rising prevalence of SEN.

In this reflection paper, we will seek to consolidate our learning points about Hong Kong’s social services for children with SEN, then analyze its applicability to our Singapore’s society.

## **2. Learning Points**

### *2.1 Definitions of Special Education Needs*

Hong Kong’s definition of Special Education Needs (SEN) as a separate clientele sector within their social service landscape presents a differing perspective to the existing special needs services within Singapore. While the former placed an inordinate emphasis on serving children with Special Education Needs - commonly comprising of students diagnosed with Dyslexia, Autism, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and even gifted children as well. This was illustrated by the vast amount of available specialized services within the community that target the child (and family)’s special educational needs and strengths. As seen from the different agency visits, these services ranged from interest classes which provided many opportunities for these children to explore and pursue areas of interests such as barista, hair grooming, art, sports and music that stretches beyond mere academics; to educational workshops and parental support groups that inculcate parents of these children with SEN with the skills and values to nurture their children’s individualized learning methods beyond the conventional. Yet, despite the similarity shared between Singapore and Hong Kong in terms of both society’s high regard for the value in education where one’s future could be determined by his or her academic abilities -- the term SEN itself is not part of a vocabulary commonly employed amongst Singaporeans.

Hence, it is indeed laudable that the significant proportion of attention, resources and creativity invested towards this clientele population had helped normalized learning differences which then subsequently raised awareness of the existence of special educational needs amongst children, families, schools and communities alike within Hong Kong. This would be particularly applicable in

Singapore's context where many children's behaviours are misunderstood both at home and in school due to a general lack of awareness in such learning differences -- rendering them labelled and stereotyped as a problem child when in fact, their educational needs are merely unmet in the environments they inhabit. A very good example would be the fact that Hong Kong had included academically gifted children in the SEN categories (as exhibited by the STEM programme conducted by The Boys' & Girls' Clubs Association of Hong Kong) because they have behavioural problems that present similar symptoms to ADHD and teachers would not be able to handle such classroom behaviours due to a lack of training. The broad spectrum and specificity in defining SEN children had helped sharpen their focus when tailoring and designing programmes for this sector is something Singapore could emulate and mark the first step towards bringing awareness and increasingly specialized service to meet the educational needs of these children in our society. Yet, while it would be ideal for Singapore to adopt this model where SEN can be placed into increasing focus within the society, it might prove difficult and less feasible because each learning disability is handled by different organizations such as Dyslexia being under Dyslexia Association of Singapore (DAS); Autism by St Andrew's Autism Resource Centre and other centres and schools. To broaden the definition of Special Needs with an enhanced focus on special education needs would then require a central coordination agency that could only be realized when the society and government bodies recognize the need for such specialized agencies to aid these students with SEN in their academic journey.

Lastly, it must be noted that in a society where SEN is a prominent vocabulary used amongst communities, this might then unknowingly shape a culture which exhibited an inclination towards over-diagnosing and pathologizing children's learning behaviours. Upon noting their child's inattentiveness or poor academic results, most parents would then send them to receive a diagnosis to qualify for services catered towards children with SEN even though many behavioural symptoms might be a manifestation of other reasons beyond pathology. Therefore, it would seem that it is most crucial to educate the larger community (in particular, schools and families whose environments possess a great influence upon children) on the red flags, needs and also, necessary values and skills required to suit their learning methods at this stage Singapore is in presently.

## *2.2 Family-centered approach*

Zooming in directly to Hong Kong's social service sector, Hong Kong greatly emphasizes on support and care for the entire family system, rather than the child individually. As we have learnt from the Hong Kong practitioners, they reiterated that the children may have special education needs, but the needs of the family and caregivers are not to be neglected. There are programmes which use family-centered practice, for example, a programme called "Y-Flight" attempts to shift away from the current medical rehabilitation model surrounding SEN, and to transit into focusing on holistic needs.

Using the person-in-environment perspective, such programmes then aim to recognize the strengths and capabilities of the entire family system. “Y-Flight” uses a 4-tier model: the first tier is “acceptance and management”, which focuses primarily on the parents’ attitudes and acceptance towards their children with SEN. This is very different from the typical service provided to the families of SEN - which usually places the child in the center of the programme, instead such programmes place the emotional needs of the family members as priority as well. Second tier is then the assessment and training by professionals to develop the children with SEN’s executive functioning and multiple intelligence. However, instead of merely working with the child, caregivers are encouraged and invited to participate and join in on this process together. The third tier is to build mutual support network to facilitate parent-child relationship, and also among families with SEN children. Lastly, community education is also necessary to cultivate social acceptance and inclusion in the society. The Hong Kong social workers whom we interacted with strongly believe that family-based activities are a good means to create a positive family experience and to provide positive interaction for the families.

Besides family-based programmes, there are also services in Hong Kong that target specifically the siblings and caregivers of the children with SEN - not just the parents, but anyone who is the primary carer of the child, be it a grandparent or aunt. This is congruent with their focus on the systems perspective, as intervention with these individuals in the child’s microsystem will ideally create a greater change in the entire system as a whole. For example, Pak Tin Pre-school Centre is a centre for children with SEN below the age of six. Other than being an education centre for preschool children with SEN, Pak Tin Pre-school Centre also has specific services that cater to the caregivers of the child. For example, siblings of children with SEN can sit in the classes to have a better understanding of what their siblings are going through. Main caregivers of the child with SEN are also engaged in sessions to ensure that what is taught in the centre is constantly followed up in their homes, since that is ultimately where the child will spend most time at. We also saw support groups that are formed between not just the parents, but also the grandparents or domestic helpers that are also in contact with the child.

Such a family-centered and holistic approach is largely ideal and we should be adopting this in our practice in Singapore. Currently, we lack services that provide support to the entire family system of the child with SEN. Even so, they usually focus only on the parents and how they can better support the child’s education needs at home. Furthermore, in Singapore, it is rather common for domestic helpers or grandparents to take on the role of main carer for a child with special needs. As such, support for them should also be implemented as they too, play a vital role in a child’s development and growth. More services can be implemented for these important people in the child’s lives. For example, support programmes for the caregivers provide a platform to build informal

support networks with other fellow caregivers. Psychoeducation and training programmes for caregivers targeted at the specific needs of the child can help adults better understand and cope at home. One recommendation could possibly be for caregivers of children diagnosed with ADHD - as many adults may not be aware of the discipline techniques for the child and may resort to traditional parenting techniques, which can be counterproductive for the entire family system. There can be specific programmes to not only psychoeducate the caregivers how to have positive parenting for the child with ADHD, but also to attend to their personal emotions of possible burnout or stress. By having these services in place, we are strengthening the support network and safety net of the child as not only will professionals be able to handle the specific needs of the child with SEN, but caregivers are able to extend the holistic care back at home as well.

### *2.3 Importance of psychoeducation for the public and communities*

From our informal interactions with the Hong Kong Social Work students and professionals, we learnt that the social service sector in Hong Kong also actively raise public awareness about SEN through psychoeducation. As a result of the religious efforts put in place to psychoeducate the public about SEN, the public seems to have greater knowledge and understanding of the different types of disabilities. Additionally, the public has also shown greater acceptance towards people with SEN. Some examples of psychoeducation done in Hong Kong include their grassroots organisations, the equivalent of Residents' Committee (RC) in Singapore, conducting outreach and sharing about SEN through door-to-door visits within the community. Furthermore, some grassroots organisations also went a step further to collaborate with social service organisations to establish a referral system. Therefore, when a grassroot leader notices a child with SEN, he or she can refer the child to the social service organisation that is equipped to provide support to the child.

Therefore, firstly, we believe that Singapore should also consider increasing our efforts to psychoeducate the public about SEN. This way, we would also then be able to increase the public's awareness of the various disabilities, addressing misconceptions and helping them to better appreciate the strengths and uniqueness of people with SEN. Eventually, we also hope that this will combat the negative attitudes of the public against these people with SEN. Public awareness will contribute to the inclusion and integration of the children with SEN. As their needs are not merely confined within the family and school systems, their needs are better met when they recognised and understood by the larger community.

We noted that Singapore has conducted various islandwide campaigns. For example, "See the True Me" campaign, organised by National Council of Social Services (NCSS), aims to (a) recognise the strengths of people with disability, (b) educate the public on communication tips and strategies when interacting with people with disability and (c) encourage inclusion of people with disability in

society (NCSS, 2018). Another islandwide example is the pop-up art gallery displaying art pieces designed by children with Autism in selected trains and train stations (Seow, 2018). This initiative was organised by Pathlight school, and other SPED schools. Through the artworks displayed, it also hoped to dispel debilitating myths about Autism. Although these islandwide campaigns are relatively large in scale and should capture the attention of a larger group of people, others who do not commute via trains or notice the campaigns may not be reached. Hence, we feel that more programmes, outreach and campaigns to psychoeducate the public about special needs can be done in specific settings, such as schools, workplaces or communities. The various social service organisations can collaborate with NCSS to run roadshows in the different settings for children and adults of all ages to have an opportunity to learn more about special needs.

Secondly, it is recommended that the grassroots organisations in Singapore to develop close working relationships with the social service organisations, especially those working specifically with persons with disabilities (PWDs). As grassroots organisations, like the RCs, are located within the community where most reside in, they will be the most accessible contact point for the residents. Besides, grassroots leaders may also be more aware of the needs of the residents. Hence, the grassroots organisations can collaborate with social service organisations to provide any services that is more needed by the residents, particularly the ones who may have special needs. Some services include referral services and ad-hoc volunteer services.

Another recommendation is to implement psychoeducation for all children in mainstream schools through allied educators. As the school subsystem is a microsystem for children with SEN who attend mainstream schools, the level of awareness about SEN and the attitudes towards SEN in this subsystem will greatly affect the experiences and well-being of children with SEN studying in mainstream schools. Studies have shown that students with SEN tend to be more rejected and poorly accepted by their peers, and this puts them at increased risks of being victimised and bullied (Gresham and MacMillan, 1997; Nakken and Pijl, 2002; Carter and Spencer, 2006; de Monchy, Pijl and Zandberg, 2004). Hence, psychoeducation within the school subsystem is crucial. We suggest doing it through the allied educators of each school; with in-depth understanding of SEN and the skills to “provide structured and systematic support to students with mild [SEN] in mainstream schools, and enable them to integrate better in the mainstream schools” (MOE, 2018), allied educators are thus best-equipped with the knowledge to psychoeducate the school population. A priority will be to educate the students of mainstream schools about SEN, how to care for and relate to their peers with SEN, and to establish the fact that children with SEN are unique and special just as children without SEN are. With psychoeducation, children from mainstream schools will be better able to accept and appreciate their peers with SEN, develop empathy towards them, and also help build an inclusive and caring community in school for children with SEN studying in mainstream schools.

#### *2.4 Strengths-based and person-centered approach*

Through our agency visits to the various organisations in Hong Kong, we noted that inherent in their interventions was a strengths perspective and person-centered approach. Unlike the mainstream Hong Kong society that places high regard and emphasis on academics, some of these organizations for children with SEN use intervention methods revolving around identifying and tapping on to the child's strengths beyond the academics aspect. Strengths such as interest in the arts were instead heavily stressed upon - which was very refreshing to witness as it provided an unorthodox and unique attitude towards intervention methods for these children.

Particularly, one agency visit which comprised of a meaningful hands-on activity where we collaborated with their beneficiaries to paint a mural that will subsequently be sold, demonstrated this value of strengths-based approach. The agency, Caritas Hong Kong, aims to use art as an empowerment tool to build up the self-esteem and confidence of their target clientele group - children with dyslexia. The art pieces created will be a source of revenue for the children as they will be sold to various parties (e.g. businesses, individual consumers, schools and public). As they gain a sense of achievement from this process, it helps in developing their self-esteem which was previously absent in the school environment where they could not perform well academically. Apart from that, Caritas aspires to build a "society beyond label", where children are viewed as individuals with capabilities who can equally contribute to society rather than what their societal-imposed label defines them to be. Additionally, as part of their social movement, they hope to shift the definition of success from educational attainments to the intangibles such as personalities and characteristics of the child. Evidently, the strengths-based and person-centered approach is discernible in their work.

Similarly, another agency shared concordant views and approach in their work with children with SEN - The Salvation Army Tuen Mun Integrated Service for Young People. Instead of focusing on academics solely, this agency's objective is to develop the children's potentials in 8 domains - (i) musical-rhythmic intelligence, (ii) visual- spatial intelligence, (iii) bodily-kinesthetic intelligence, (iv) interpersonal intelligence, (v) intrapersonal intelligence, (vi) naturalistic intelligence, (vii) verbal-linguistic intelligence, and (viii) logical-mathematical intelligence (The Salvation Army, 2018). They highly encourage the children to explore the different domains, which helps to cultivate a willingness in them to try out new things. The aim is to aid them in overcoming their learned helplessness and fear of failures while simultaneously discovering their areas of interests or talent which they can then build upon, and thereafter develop confidence and positive self-perception. Examples of encouraging their clientele group to explore and expand on their interests include allowing the children to be exposed to the musical aspects while youths can take up the opportunity at being a coffee barista. A successful story involves a youth with dyslexia who previously participated in this and discovered his

interest in being a coffee barista. Presently, he is working as a coffee barista while pursuing his degree study.

Perhaps, this is something that Singapore can adopt as well. While Singapore does attempt to incorporate this into the current education system, our efforts are still relatively recent and will require more work and resources to be channelled into this reformative process. Perhaps, based on our nation's culture of meritocracy through placing emphasis on education, it has limited the possibilities to our intervention methods. As workers, we may face a dilemma of implementing a strengths perspective yet acknowledging the possible risks of not following the traditional education paths. Similarly, Hong Kong has a stressful and competitive education system, but is recently going through policy reforms to make education more meaningful and enriching for the children (Chiu, 2018). Hence, it will be a good learning ground for us to look to - as social workers, we should be as courageous as the practitioners in Hong Kong who took a leap of faith to design programmes and services that might be unpredictable because of the intrinsic novelty but are definitely needed by our clients.

A strengths-based and person-centred approach should also be adopted in vocational training for students with special needs. During our agency visits, one agency, Heep Hong Society, stood out for catering specifically to students with special education needs (e.g. autism) who have graduated from mainstream schools but were facing challenges entering tertiary institutions and finding jobs. We thought this particular group of students may also be neglected in Singapore and this service may respond to a possible service gap in Singapore - that there is little vocational support for students with special needs who are in mainstream schools. The lack of services may be because students with special needs in mainstream schools are assumed to remain in the education system upon graduation from secondary schools. Hence, they will still be equipped with vocational skills. For instance, they may enter Institute of Technical Education (ITE) College, which have a greater emphasis on vocational training. However, we felt that there are little information if students with special education needs are indeed remaining in the education system and are equipped with the necessary vocational skills. Therefore, there is a need for Singapore to further explore the needs of students with special needs in mainstream schools, especially upon graduation.

Other than providing a service that is unheard of in Singapore, we were impressed by the the approach Heep Hong Society adopts when working with young adults with special needs. The agency adopted a person-centred approach - considering the individual's interest and strengths when exploring vocations suitable for the individual rather than a cookie-cutter approach just to meet the employment needs of young adults with special needs. As such, unlike in Singapore where vocations available for students with special needs tend to be limited to certain sectors such as food and



beverages and retail, young adults with special needs in Hong Kong are exposed to a variety of vocations including interior design and balloon sculpting.

In Singapore, a holistic and person-centred approach was highlighted in our third Enabling Masterplan, which outlined the government aims of improving the quality of life (QOL) for Persons with Disabilities (PWD) through the following six aspects - personal beliefs, environment, physical health, psychological, social relationships and level of independence (NCSS, 2016). From our agency visits in Hong Kong, we learnt that a person-centred approach considers the PWD's interests and respect his/ her self-determination. We hope that Singapore too, will recognise the importance of individuals' aspirations and preferences in their employment as it will contribute to their quality of life.

However, we also recognise that there will be challenges when we adopt a person-centred approach in vocational training in Singapore. For example, there may be resource challenges. Employment opportunities are dependent on the willingness of employers to offer the job training and positions. Not many employers may be willing to provide these opportunities. This might also be why employment opportunities are limited to certain sectors in Singapore. A lot of effort is thus needed on the part of workers to look for employers and convince them to provide these opportunities. In Heep Hong Society, workers are extremely active in looking for opportunities for their young adults. For example, workers will go down to job fairs to speak to employers. Moreover, in order for the job coaches to be able to support the young adults in the different sectors, job coaches have at least five different job experiences. Recruiting job coaches for these young adults may thus be challenging. Catering to individuals may thus be labour intensive and may limit the feasibility and sustainability of such services. Nonetheless, Heep Hong Society has demonstrated that if the agency is truly committed to the welfare of the young adults with special needs, it is possible. As such, despite the possible difficulties, we believe that the person-centred approach in vocational training should be what Singapore should be working towards. It may be adopted by agencies working specifically with PWDs or with agencies working with the general workforce such as Workforce Singapore.

### **3. Additional suggestions**

Recommendations above were mainly based on our learning points which we recognize are largely applicable to micro social work practice. In retrospect, we can perhaps also apply our learning points to the macro landscape. We can first begin with advocating for more attention to be given to the specific clientele population of "children with special education needs" in terms of the policies and schemes. Currently, our policies have recently been more inclusive for individuals with disabilities. However, for children with SEN, they are still considered a subgroup under "Disabilities and Special Needs", which may possibly contribute to the "hidden-ness" and hence vulnerability of

the needs of these children. Many programmes that aim to psychoeducate the public or provide support to families will require the “many helping hands” approach to be successful in the long run. Agencies provide the frontline workers and communities provide on-the-ground support, but the state can do more than provide funding for programmes. We can begin by advocating for more specific recognition from the government for these children with SEN, just like how Hong Kong is paying particular attention to these children.

As Mr Desmond Lee, minister for Ministry for Social and Family development, has aptly pointed out, there is a need for services for children with SEN to be standardized across agencies (Tan, 2018). Therefore, Early Intervention Programme for Infants and Children (EIPIC) aims to do this by standardizing the support and intervention provided to children with SEN and their families. However, private organizations, agencies and schools who are already currently working with these families may be neglected. As seen in Hong Kong, although various agencies have differing practices, they still share the common belief system of strengthening families and empowering them. As Mr Lee emphasized, more should be done to “strengthen the ecosystem of support” for children with SEN. Perhaps this is the starting point all stakeholders should adopt when working with the families. Although most social workers are predisposed to already do so, we have to also recognize that social workers are not the only professionals working with the children and their families. Hence, social workers can begin by collaborating with other professionals and advocate for the importance of care and support for the entire family system, other than the child.

#### **4. Conclusion**

It has been a very meaningful and insightful trip, as we have not only learnt from the Hong Kong practitioners, but also from the students from Hong Kong, China, Taiwan and Macau. The visits to the agencies gave us a better understanding of Hong Kong’s social service landscape, specifically for children with SEN, and also helped us appreciate the culture of social work in their society. There were many learning points gained throughout the trip, both about the clientele group and about social work practices in general. We are very thankful to have had this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to step out of our comfort zones and grow as aspiring social workers.

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