



MARUAH's Contribution to the Study on the Right to Education of Persons with Disabilities for the Office of High Commissioner for Human Rights.

The Singapore government has made significant progress in accessibility to education for persons with disabilities, although there are still substantial areas for improvement. Major steps have been taken, particularly with Singapore ratifying the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and the launch of a national Enabling Masterplan for 2012-16. Both the CRPD and Enabling Masterplan move in the direction that persons with disabilities become empowered, independent and recognised as integral and contributing members of society.

The major issues facing persons with disabilities where education is concerned are:

- 1) Greater State involvement
- 2) Affordability
- 3) Physical accessibility.

1) State Involvement and Acceptance

One overall gap is that the government has not made it mandatory for every child with/out a disability to access an education. Currently, primary education under the Compulsory Education Act (2003) is only compulsory for children deemed to have no disabilities. This means the government is not obliged to ensure that they receive education, even though these children will need much more in resources to facilitate and support their dependent living if they are not given opportunities for training or learning to increase their level of independence. We and other civil society groups have recommended including children with disabilities under the Compulsory Education Act. Survey results too indicate that parents overwhelmingly support such an inclusion. Children with disabilities should not be excluded from State protection and support for their education. Though the government has stated that they fund a child with a disability up to four times that of a child from a mainstream (read: national or normal) school, we say that this is itself a limit when the children need more support. Children with disabilities are still not fully integrated into the education system and they should be given every opportunity to interact with other children on a regular basis. We have proposed with many others that more Special Education (SPED) schools be co-located with mainstream schools to broaden the scope of such

interaction between the children with disabilities and those without a form of disability. In fact integration of the child with special needs into a class is still the ideal and this calls for investment in a support structure. The objective is to enable children with disabilities to explore every opportunity to access independent living as much as possible, with the help of assistive technology, regular therapy sessions, self-esteem classes and to be part of the world. There can still be exemptions to the Compulsory Education Act a case-by-case basis for children who cannot attend school because of the severity of their condition and they ought then to receive a home-schooling programme.

The Education Ministry runs a partnership programme between mainstream schools and SPED schools. Governance over SPED schools is thus split between two Ministries – the Ministry of Education for curriculum and professional staff; and the Ministry of Social and Family Development for the support networks and rehabilitation therapy. So currently, the boards of Voluntary Welfare Organisations and the school management committees run SPED schools, leading to varied outcomes in the quality of education provided and lack of resources for manpower and curriculum development. Greater leadership by the government and coordination between ministries would reduce inconsistencies in standards. Fees for SPED schools can be significantly higher than for mainstream schools and according to press reports there is still a waiting list period to some SPED schools, ranging from six months to 1.5 years¹. The government has been increasing places, which we hope will eliminate the waiting time. In addition, teachers at SPED schools, who are not under the MOE scheme, do not enjoy the same remuneration or career prospects as teachers at mainstream schools and others in SPED schools that come under the Education Ministry. All teachers – under the Education Ministry or otherwise - working in SPED schools face challenging and often emotionally demanding situations in the school. This is a discriminatory practice when wages and career prospects are not applied uniformly to all teachers in SPED schools.

We have made calls on the government to take a greater role in special education, specifically in support to SPED schools for funding, service delivery and curriculum development. We also advocate giving the teachers in SPED schools the same opportunities as mainstream school teachers in remuneration, advancement, training and job rotation.

There is also room for improvement in acceptance of students with disabilities into mainstream schools. Currently it appears to be largely ad hoc and decided by individual institutions. In other words, the current enrolment of children with special needs in mainstream schools appears based on the individual discretion of the school's principal. There also needs to be greater flexibility within the education system to cater for the special needs of students with disabilities. For instance, students who need reasonable accommodation such as extra time during O- and A-level exams due to their disability have their exam certificates annotated to indicate this, which is potentially stigmatising. There have also been cases of secondary schools which do not accept

disabled students who are older than the other students only because they have taken a longer time to complete their prior primary education. In addition there have also been recent media reports of parents employing resource persons at considerable personal expense to help their children integrate into mainstream schools. On the positive side, the 2012 Budget increased the number of Allied Educators or resource persons as the current numbers are insufficient.

2) Affordability and accommodation

We believe more can be done for students with disabilities in both support and financial assistance. Now, financial assistance for students with disabilities studying in special education schools, which may charge higher fees than mainstream schools, is means-tested. We believe that fees for SPED schools should be made similar to mainstream schools.

Currently, there are no provisions for interpreters at post-secondary schools or at the universities / tertiary institutions. Hearing impaired students have to pay the same fees as everyone else and on top of this, pay for their own sign language interpreters as the universities are unwilling to do so. Community support groups do offer some financial assistance but they too have to raise funds. Feedback from the disabled community indicates that existing support systems are insufficient. For instance, at Nanyang Technological University (NTU), students from its Welfare Services' Club sign during lectures if needed. Having full-time staff available to sign would be a more comprehensive and dependable solution. We advocate that the government should support by providing and paying for sign language interpreters in all mainstream educational institutions if students require it. This is just an example where one community with disabilities is given inadequate support. It needs to be appreciated that similar gaps also exist for people with different disabilities.

3) Accessibility

Not all public buses, schools and sports facilities are fully accessible. Now there is only one wheelchair-accessible school per cluster of about eight primary/secondary schools. The public transport system is expected to be fully wheelchair-accessible only in 2020. The problem that students face is a shortage of affordable transport options. Most of the options available are costly. Commuters with disability also do not enjoy concessionary fares on public transport despite the greater difficulties they face in using public transport and finding employment. Those in wheelchairs need special taxis to ferry them to school – all proving to be more costly. There are subsidies offered by community support networks to offset the costs of transport but the common problem is that, these do not go far enough to support the family which has to find ways to fund the transport costs.

All schools from primary schools upwards need to become accessible to all students with disabilities. More can also be done in schools for “universal access”, for instance ensuring that laboratory tables, washbasins are of suitable height for students in wheelchairs. There is a lack of support for students who have mobility difficulties (whether in wheelchairs or otherwise) but who can academically attend mainstream schools. All buildings must comply with the universal design guidelines and schools have to go further to have an enabling environment for children with disabilities.

ⁱ Long waiting lists at schools for the autistic. Tan, Theresa. (Nov 5 2011). *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from http://www.autism.org.sg/press/2011/pr111105-long_waiting_lists_at_schools_for_the_autistic-ST.pdf.