

# EDUCATING

## the Special Ones

In a society where meritocracy is king, how do children with special needs cope? Much to its credit, the Singapore government has been taking steady steps to level the playing field for these children as **Lilian Wu** investigates further.



**O**n 18 September, 2004, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong put forth his vision for a more inclusive society in Singapore.

In his opening speech at the Spastic Children's Association of Singapore's Cerebral Palsy Centre, he said, "We want ours to be a society that cares for all its members; one that does not ignore the needs of those who are born or afflicted with disabilities." This, according to Dr Kenneth Poon, Deputy Head, Centre for Research in Pedagogy and Practice at the National Institute of Education (NIE), in an article in SingTeach e-magazine, was the turning point for the special needs community in Singapore.

### Special Initiatives by the MOE and the government

The Prime Minister's speech triggered a series of initiatives by the Ministry of Education (MOE) to support children with mild Special Educational Needs (SEN) in mainstream schools. Among the measures implemented was the deployment of Allied Educators (Learning and Behavioural Support) [AEDs (LBS)], previously known as Special Needs Officers, to support children with mild SEN in mainstream schools. These officers would provide an additional source of support to students with mild SEN like dyslexia, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), through methods such as in-class support, individual or small group intervention support (e.g. literacy skills), small group skills training (e.g. social, study, and organizational skills) and working with teachers and other school personnel like Allied Educators for Counselling.

Currently, all existing primary schools have at least one AED (LBS), and seven new primary schools will have the same by mid 2013. Among secondary schools, Balestier Hill Secondary School and 64 other schools are equipped to assist students with mild SEN. The MOE also plans to recruit more AEDs (LBS) to meet long term demand for SEN support in both primary and secondary schools. In addition, mainstream schools with AEDs (LBS) are given additional funding, and selected teachers are trained to

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### THE PRE-SCHOOL PERSPECTIVE

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**Mrs Stephenie Khoo**

Principal of WeCAN Early Intervention Programme

take on the role of Teachers Trained in Special Needs (TSNs) in their respective schools.

These are only some of the measures of improvement in the Singapore SEN scene, which has come a long way since the time when special education was mostly provided by Voluntary Welfare Organisations (VWOs). To keep up with the evolving demands of SEN students, the number of Special Education (SPED) schools has also increased over the years. From an initial number of 11, there are 20 such schools as of January 2010, according to the MOE website. These

are run by VWOs, but private SPED schools are also available to SEN children and their parents.

Singapore also signed the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and its Optional Protocol on 30 November last year, as a means to gain greater awareness and change attitudes towards persons with disabilities.

### But, is this enough?

There is no denying that the Singapore government has continually recognised the need to have a more comprehensive structure in place for special needs children. For instance,

Ms Denise Phua, Minister of Parliament (MP) for Moulmein-Kallang GRC, speaks out frequently on the problems faced by the special needs community. Speaking in Parliament in response to the Budget 2008, Ms Phua had noted that the disabled and others with special needs “have been forgotten”, and that there was a lack of measures to help them even though “the problems faced by an average citizen are magnified in the lives of those with disabilities.”

In early 2012, the Singapore government implemented the Special Needs Savings Scheme (SNSS) where, upon their parents’ death, CPF funds are regularly disbursed to special needs children. The disbursement continues until the savings are exhausted. Also, there is no need to set up a trust fund. Children who have attended a SPED school or need help in at least one activity of daily living such as dressing or going to the bathroom are eligible for the scheme.

The other long-term financial alternative for special needs individuals is the SNTC Trusteeship Scheme provided by the Special Needs Trust Company Limited (SNTC), where parents set up a trust fund for their children. However, the minimum sum of S\$5000 is one that many low to middle income families may not be able to afford.

Although lauded by many MPs as a constructive step towards a more inclusive society, Ms Phua has contended that the scheme should also be made available to special needs students who attend mainstream schools, as well as those who may not be physically disabled but still require help with financial needs like housing. Others, like Lucky Tan, owner of well-known blog *Diary of a Singaporean Mind*, are of the opinion that the government can do more than pay out parents’ CPF savings to their special needs children.

According to Mrs Stephenie Khoo, Principal of WeCAN Early Intervention Programme, “Overall, the government has definitely increased its support and provisions for the special needs community. From a pre-school perspective,

## PROGRESS FOR THE SPECIAL NEEDS COMMUNITY

Since 1996, the **Edusave Scheme** has been extended to children studying in Special Education (SPED) schools. Today, each eligible SPED student receives a yearly contribution of S\$200 into their Edusave account from the government, while SPED students in mainstream secondary schools and vocational certification programmes receive S\$240.

In 2012, a reading programme for students suffering from mild dyslexia was launched in 20 primary schools. Results have been so encouraging that the MOE has decided to extend it to 22 more primary schools this year. An educational guidance service to support students with special needs was also offered to parents last November, and will be extended to all primary schools by the end of this year. More support can be found in parent support groups which SPED schools are encouraged to set up, with the help of S\$2,500 per school in seed funding.

there is a significant increase in the number of early intervention provisions that have been made available, both government supported and privately run, for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Government funded Early Intervention Programme for Infants & Children (EIPIC) centres

have increased in number (currently around 17), and all of these centres serve children with ASD.” However, Mrs Khoo feels that there is still a need to provide appropriate and sufficient support so that the children with ASD can be more successful in mainstream settings. Forum letters written to the

## INTEGRATION & EDUCATION

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**Mrs June Tham**  
Executive Director  
Rainbow Centre Singapore





**Ms Lisa Barron (left), Principal of the Genesis School for Special Education: People tend to perceive special needs children as low functioning individuals, though they are often bright and talented.**



MOE support this observation. In one such letter written in 2011, Mrs Chang Siew Ngoh says, “as commonly experienced by hearing-impaired pupils in mainstream schools, my son had to contend later with classmates pulling off his hearing aids, and with acoustically poor classrooms and auditoriums. There was little peer support, although there was a particular

teacher (his Primary 1 form teacher) who cared enough to ensure the safekeeping of his hearing aids before swimming lessons.” Mrs Chang is just one of the many parents who have had to deal with this lack of understanding. Ms Lisa Barron, Principal of the Genesis School for Special Education, shared that people also tended to perceive special needs children as low functioning individuals, though they are often bright and talented, with many even making it to the Gifted Education Programme. Lack of TSN teachers in mainstream schools is another issue which needs to be tackled. Ms Barron talks of teachers

who approach her after seminars, and break down in helplessness, a clear indication that a lot needs to be done on this front.

Mrs June Tham, Executive Director of Rainbow Centre Singapore, also shared on the obstacles faced by special needs individuals, “If you want integration to be successful, it is not about the child able to cope and it is not about just the class teacher able to understand the child - it is the whole school environment. Quite often we hear stories that these kids have no friends - they are ostracised. We do not want a child to go into an educational place and not enjoy their school life.”

Ms Barron aptly summed up the current SPED situation in Singapore saying, “It is going to take a lot of time and effort to prepare the society to accept children and young adults with special needs as part of the mainstream.” ■

# My child is bright but why can't he perform?

YOUR child may be suffering from Irlen Syndrome commonly known as Visual Dyslexia.

Irlen Syndrome is not an optical problem but the brain's ability to process visual information.

This can manifest itself as:

- Experiencing of visual distortions such as shaky, blurry or halo effects when reading
- slow or inefficient reading
- poor comprehension
- poor penmanship
- eye fatigue and headaches
- error in copying and reading, skipping letters or words
- poor depth perception
- sensitive to light
- careless in math error

The Irlen Method, an internationally-acclaimed treatment, is the use of coloured overlays and combination of coloured lenses to filter out the precise wave lengths of light to overcome the problems. The Irlen Method is backed by more 30 years of research and more than 60 studies with positive findings and more on-going researches are done in Universities globally. In Singapore, the Irlen Dyslexia Clinic is headed by Dr Doris Ang who is the author of the



## Lesser-known Special Needs condition **IRLEN SYNDROME**

book “Achieve Your Breakthrough in Learning Difficulties”.

The Irlen Method can benefit individuals with conditions such as Reading problems, Dyslexia and Learning Difficulties; Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD/ADHD); Headaches and Migraines; Light Sensitivity; Autism and Asperger Syndrome and Depth Perception. With Irlen overlays and lenses, children are found to be able to focus and read better.

 For more information and self testing on Irlen Syndrome, please visit website [www.irlen.com.sg](http://www.irlen.com.sg)