



**Asian Family Summit (Sustainable Development & Family Well Being: Agenda for
Action in Asia) Report**

Topic: Special Education Support for Special Needs Organisations

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Special Education Support found to be most useful for Special Needs Organisations

Introduction

There is an increased understanding about children with special educational needs (SEN), which has also lately included the desire to implement effective models of inclusion. This has seen a range of models explored and employed that have enabled schools to support their most vulnerable students. Such a tool has helped to further develop their untapped potential and pushed them to achieve as much independence as they are capable of without becoming over-reliant on their caregivers. Ultimately, this has allowed children with SEN to therefore become well-adjusted individuals in the community.

There is considerable evidence to suggest that the deployment of structured systems of support is essential in enabling children who experience difficulties with learning to be effectively included in mainstream schools (Hue, 2007) and that this must be supported by well-informed policies (Rose and Coles, 2002). To implement appropriate models of support requires initiatives and interventions founded upon culturally sound empirical studies of local teaching practices and existing support systems whilst drawing upon current understandings from international research. A wide range of models for providing such support have proven successful in different circumstances, including partnerships between special and mainstream schools. Inclusion inevitably challenges schools to provide appropriate support for all children and various support models have been implemented internationally to enable inclusion. These have included the use of a Special Education Needs Coordinator in the UK (Cole, 2005); Special Need Officers in Singapore (Chen and Poon, 2008); Learning Support Teachers in Ireland (Griffin and Shevlin 2007); Support Teacher (Learning Difficulties) in Australia (Forlin, 2001); Teaching or Education Assistants in the USA and Europe

(Giangreco and Doyle, 2007; Moran and Abbott, 2002); and learning mentors (Cruddas, 2005; Jones, Doveston and Rose, 2009), volunteer mentoring schemes (Rose and Jones, 2007), and resource schools in the UK (Groom and Maunonen-Eskelinen, 2005). All have gained momentum in recent years as a means of supporting inclusive practices. Significant amount of research, much of it from the UK and the USA, has focused upon the types of support models employed. Many of these have been developed on the basis of local need and availability of resources, and it is clear that the transferability of models from one location to another may not always be possible, or indeed desirable (Feng and Jament, 2008). There is a need to ensure that the 'Y Flight Project' is comprehensively discussed later in this paper. Before that, it is important to contextualise special education needs and its alignment with the **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Sustainable Development Goals** as these goals have clearly influenced the development of recent procedures in Hong Kong.

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) - The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

In September 2015, world leaders adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (cite). These goals were to ensure that everyone in the world, including children and youths, would be living in a more conducive and safe environment by 2030 (UNICEF - The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, n.d.). UNICEF, an international organisation aims to protect the rights of children in the world (About UNICEF | UNICEF, n.d.) and hence also pledges to carry out the SDGs so that the Goals would be beneficial for all children in the world. There are 17 SDGs (17 Goals, n.d.) and among them, UNICEF has focused on 11 SDGs. One of the SDGs focused on is Goal 4 on Quality Education. Not only that, UNICEF is accountable for 8 global SDG indicators and one of which includes early childhood development (Children and the Sustainable Development Goals - UNICEF DATA, n.d.). Since UNICEF believes

that every child has the right to education (UNICEF - Education, n.d.), it is important to ensure that the children with special needs gain access to quality education as well, in spite of their disability. Also, for children with special needs, their early childhood years is a crucial period of time to make sure that they can gain access to aid and support, so that they can realise their “full potential” (World Health Organization, p. 7, 2012). UNICEF also supports “child-friendly approaches” and this would include ensuring a conducive environment in schools, and teaching and learning styles that are tailored to every child’s need (UNICEF - Education, n.d.). With the importance of ensuring that every child, including children with special needs, secure quality education, it is important that special needs organisations place focus on special education support for special needs children.

Y Flight Project

The Y Flight Project is a three-year project incorporating the principles of family-centered practice, for low income families with special educational needs (SEN) children who lived in Sham Shui Po and Tin Shui Wai in Hong Kong. It is a project organised and executed by Hong Kong Young Women’s Christian Association.

This project has five aims. It aims to alleviate the parental stress of parents who are taking care of their children with SEN. Secondly, it also hopes to improve the parent-child relationships in families with SEN children as well as to enhance the executive functioning of the children. It believes that the family’s support network is crucial hence it aims to strengthen the support network and community resources of the families. Lastly, it aims to increase the families’ integration with the community in which they live in.

A four tier-model has been crafted for providing versatile services to children, parents, families and the community as a whole. The model consists of (T1) acceptance and management, (T2) assessment and training, (T3) a mutual support network, and (T4) community education. These tiers would be elaborated in the later part of this report.

In evaluating this project's effectiveness for the beneficiaries, HKYWCA has also done a programme evaluation research. The research is a mixed-methods design which includes a survey and focus groups was conducted to assess the achievements of the project. It has found that the project has benefited the families, by alleviating their parental stress, enhancing their family relationships as well as strengthening their social support network.

Tier 1 - Acceptance and Management

The first of the four tiers revolves around the parents of SEN children. Often the first step that is imperative in ensuring that these children are well supported is acceptance by their parents and equipping them with adequate skills to allow them to properly manage the various needs of their child. Reaching acceptance can be a tumultuous journey for the parents and it can be beneficial to facilitate this process by providing them with external services such as counselling that can be valuable in attending to the parents' emotional needs. Professional help can be instrumental in helping these parents, especially if it is a first time experience for them. Besides facilitating acceptance, counselling services can equip these parents with necessary skills that are able to help them better manage the needs of their child. In the initial stages, handling a SEN child can be overwhelming for the parent and it is crucial that they are educated and guided on the various sources that they can tap on for help.

Tier 2 - Assessment and Training

Other than equipping their parents with necessary skills, it is important that their children are also attended to. To facilitate their adaptation to the surroundings, assessment and training programmes can be curated to meet their needs. These programmes can focus on developing their executive functioning skills that may be affected due to their special needs. Executive functioning skills encompass skills that are neurologically based involving mental control and self-regulation such as organization and planning. In conducting these programmes, it is essential that the concept of multiple intelligence is utilized in which it is acknowledged that children learn via different methods such as visual, musical or kinesthetic. The programme should not be a one size fit all approach. Another important aspect is to involve their parents so as to ensure that they are involved in their children's learning journey. At the same time, this fosters parent-child bonding.

Tier 3 - Mutual Support Network

Family-based activities are organized to facilitate the parent-child relationship and to build up the social network among the families with SEN children. Programmes such as family arts and crafts are organized, where parents can engage with their SEN children in a fun and engaging way, enhancing their attachment, bond and relationship. During these programmes, parents can engage with other parents who have SEN children too, enlarging their social network. Due to the homogeneity of the group, parents will be able to empathize with one another, forming a strong support system for the parents. As they share their experiences with one another, the normalization process (Foucault, 1999) can occur which provides emotional support, helping parents know and feel that they are not alone in their struggles. The parents will also be able to share resources with one another, providing instrumental or informational support for one another as well. These incidences ultimately create a strong support network

for the parents with SEN children that can continue after the programmes, or even after the whole project.

Tier 4 - Community Education

Other than looking at the individual and interpersonal social ecology levels, the project looks at the wider community social ecology level as well (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Community education activities are organized to cultivate social acceptance and inclusion of SEN children in the society. One such programme is the Social Inclusion Programme, where the SEN children are given temporary roles to play in the community. For example, some children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) act as “librarians” in the Hong Kong Central Library and help library-goers check out books, while some children with dyslexia act as “reporters” and interview a lecturer, and other children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) act as “tour guides” during tram trips and give information about different places in Hong Kong. This not only boosts the confidence and morale of the SEN children, but it also debunks social stigmas and stereotypes of SEN children, showing they are indeed capable of performing “normal” roles in the community. Hence, this cultivates social acceptance and inclusion of SEN children in the society.

Supporting Caregivers for Special Needs Clients

Support for caregivers is of paramount importance in many aspects of healthcare, and that also includes the area of special needs. Various research journals and articles have found that the process of caregiving entail multiple levels and facets of stress (Phelps, McCammon, Wuensch, & Golden, 2009) (Pilapil, Coletti, Rabey,& DeLaet, 2017) (Fingerhut, 2005). The caregiving journey may have a strain on the caregivers’ psychological well-being, financial

state, and even personal health and relationships with other family members. To this point, caregivers have even been known as the “invisible patient” (Adelman, Tmanova, Delgado, Dion., & Lachs, 2014). Caregivers are an important resource for clients of special needs. Apart from the support through local special needs resources such as Early Intervention Programme for Infants & Children (EIPIC) or Special Education (SPED) Schools, caregivers may be the clients’ primary social support, spending an extended amount of time with them (with the exception of clients residing in homes or institutions). It is therefore important for caregivers to receive adequate support as well, so that 1) they are able to better support the client 2) in the process of caregiving, they are protected from the risks of caregivers’ strain, and through which, better care for the client.

The recent Asian Family Summit in Hong Kong included a presentation on a community based family focused cancer care project (The Walking Hand-in-Hand (WHIH) Cancer Family Support Project) which focused on improving the quality of life of both patients and caregivers. Research that was done indicated that the quality of life and mental health of both patients and caregivers improved after the programme, and reduced their depression and anxiety levels. Although this paper is on special needs groups and not cancer patients, the encompassing ideas and takeaways on supporting caregivers (even in the cancer healthcare setting) may also benefit special needs organizations. A notable point about this project is that it is based in Hong Kong, where a large majority of patients are outpatients, therefore, caregivers’ support is of paramount importance. The transferrable learning points are as follows:

Process of Help

A case is first received via a referral after patient's discharge, from which a case worker (or social worker) is assigned. Following which, assessment is made by the worker. Depending on the assessment, community resources are mobilized, such as volunteer comfort calls or enrollment into charity programme. Also, a key feature of this programme is that it encompasses home visits for clients and caregivers, so that there is a continued support and care for both clients and caregivers. Other means of support include support group meetings and family outings.

Key observations

(1) Continuity of care

Continuity of care is of heavy emphasis in this project. As clients/ patients transit from being an inpatient to an outpatient, the hospital/ institution does not relinquish the care of the patient completely. As the care is handed over from the healthcare team to the caregiver, there are proper supports in place to ensure that the caregiver is not unreached. Thereby, caregivers receive the support they require based on the social worker's assessment, and clients may benefit as a result, due to the caregiver's being supported.

(2) An awareness for service gaps

It was mentioned that patients in Hong Kong predominantly receive treatment as outpatients, and therefore it was crucial that caregivers receive adequate support. Through recognition of this factor, WHIH has been incorporated and aims that no caregivers go unreached. This awareness of service gaps is a quality that is important for organizations for to better support clients.

Implications for Special Needs Organizations

A consideration for caregivers' support is crucial in order to ultimately support the client. Factors to note include the current services for caregiving that is provided and how accessible and effective are the services. Certain barriers to caregivers' support which may constitute as service gaps must be taken into account, such as costs for caregivers' training courses or lack of knowledge of support. As gleaned from WHIH project, a multidisciplinary collaboration between healthcare and social settings must be established to ensure clients and families receive proper support.

Conclusion

The importance of special education support is addressed in this paper. Not only that, Y-Flight, a programme conducted in Hong Kong was also shared and evaluated. Special education support should not only focus on the children, but also the caregivers and teachers in special education schools. It is important that caregivers are given the necessary support in view of the possible burn out that they may face while caring for special needs children.

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