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Being Special in a Meritocracy

The Role of Special Education in Singapore

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Abstract: For more than three decades the education system in Singapore, based on the mantra of meritocracy, has been successful in steering the island state towards high achievement. A strong political will has framed the educational policy as an investment for a productive and cohesive society in an internationally competitive context. Education is considered to be a powerful tool by which the integration of culturally different racial groups is facilitated. In the education of children with special needs, Singapore currently shares similar provisions with countries such as the United States, Britain and Australia. Besides special schools, there is provision for inclusion in the mainstream schools. However, critics have pointed out that the expectation to adapt to the mainstream environment where the benchmark is scholastic achievements has made it difficult for children with special needs to be successful learners. This paper will explore the issue of including special education in the portfolio of social capital investment through an examination of the limitations of the current implementation of inclusion in Singapore. It will put forward the argument that inclusive education is not just about social justice, but it could be a means to forge connectedness and foster social wellbeing and character building in all students. The paper will call for an expansion of the role of special education in the light of nation building. It will argue that the pragmatism that has served Singapore so well in past decades of development might continue to ensure that special education is harnessed and viewed as an integral component of the social cohesion equation to meet the challenges ahead.

Keywords: Special Education, Inclusion, Mainstream, Nation Building, Social Cohesion, Values Development, Social Capital Investment

Introduction

FOR MORE THAN three decades the education system in Singapore, based on the mantra of meritocracy, has been successful in steering the island state towards the status of a high-achieving, highly developed country. Strong political will has cast education as a state investment for a productive and cohesive society in an internationally competitive context. Education is considered a potent social integrative force for its mix of culturally different racial groups.

Today, as an affluent nation state, Singapore is facing the challenge of an aging society with the growing social problem of significant numbers of disconnected citizens. This has been attributed to the high levels of competitiveness and determination evident in Singaporean society, which exist alongside the self-reliance and independence for which its citizens are also known. According to Bronfenbrenner (1986), society needs to encourage the development of meaningful relationships in schools with a “curriculum of caring” (pp 435) to counter the forces of alienation. This must be more than ‘learning to care’. It must engage and empower student participants in all domains of their development, not simply in the academic aspects of schooling. It is the position of this paper that the fourth ‘R’ in education, responsib-

ility, as advocated by researchers such as Crisci, (1986) could well be achieved through the education of all children in an inclusive setting.

Currently, Singapore shares similar provisions for educating the children with special educational needs with countries such as in the UK, Australia and New Zealand. In addition to the option of special schools, there is provision for inclusion of students with special educational needs in regular schools. Critics have pointed out, however, that the expectation to adapt to a mainstream environment can make it difficult for children with special needs to be successful learners. When the benchmark for success is scholastic achievement, mainstream schooling does not provide an equal playing field for all students (Loh, 2005).

This paper will explore the issue of including special education in the portfolio of social capital investment through an examination of the limitations of the current implementation of inclusion in Singapore. It will put forward the argument that the inclusion of all children in mainstream educational settings is not only important from a social justice perspective but is also critical for forging connections, preventing alienation among students, and essential for social wellbeing and character building. It will call for a fundamental change in the implementation



of special education in Singapore. It will argue that the pragmatism that has served Singapore so well in the past decades of development should continue to ensure that special education provision could be harnessed as an integral factor in the equation of social cohesion to meet the challenges ahead.

Special Education: Issues and Controversies

The field of special education has long wrestled with the question of precisely where it is located as a discipline (Chang, 2004; UNESCO, 1994a). The debate has been located primarily within the framework of one of three distinct paradigms: the psychological (or psycho-medical), the organisational, and the sociological. All these frameworks, particularly the latter two, are further complicated by the controversy surrounding methods of service delivery, be it through provision of special schools, or mainstreaming by integration and/or inclusion. What these approaches have in common is that they are intricately intertwined with the ideological and political values of our times.

There are powerful arguments for mainstreaming on ethical, education and legal grounds. Few public institutions have received as much interest and sustained attention as education. In our modern world, every society has an implicit agenda underpinning its educational provisions. In 1989, one hundred and seventy-seven countries ratified the UNICEF (2000) UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which among other things, stressed every child's right to education. It was a landmark event that committed all those present to a shared belief in children's rights on the basis of equal opportunity. Although most primary education systems worldwide are committed to developing children's personality, talents and abilities, children with disabilities are still described as "the forgotten children", whose needs and rights have been overlooked (UNESCO, 1994a). The UNESCO Salamanca Statement (1994b) addressed this marginalisation by convincing ninety-two governments to agree on implementing inclusion programs for all children with disabilities in mainstream schools. The statement promoted inclusion as the most efficient and cost-effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all.

The inclusive ideal, however, has been the subject of intensive critique. Although research on best practices show inclusive schooling benefits both children with disabilities and the general student population (Burstein et al, 2004, Villa & Thousand, 2005.), there are strong and differing opinions among educators and the stakeholders about effective teaching and learning. Arguments against mainstreaming have highlighted problems concerning unsatis-

factory resource allocation, educators' apprehension regarding schools' ability to meet the needs of the students, some parents' preference for special school placement and the lack of public engagement in the whole inclusion debate (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994; Hegarty, 2001; Norrie, 2005; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996; Woolnough, 2004). The terms "inclusion" and "inclusiveness" draw both controversy and confusion. These terms appear to encroach upon a firmly embedded notion of what a regular school is, and for whom it exists. Mainstreaming requires that "deviant" groups of students be "marked" as requiring special attention in order to receive general education. Few would refer to mainstreaming as an educational activity for anyone else other than the "deviant" child. Inclusion does not seem to guarantee "inclusiveness". These are the recurring dilemmas that all scholars of special education face.

This notion of mainstreaming as an intrusion into the regular school system has led to calls for delimitation of conditional entry and tenure. Educators, parents, administrators and the general public all have differing views regarding the shortcomings of inclusive programs, the school organization and pedagogical issues. In order to comprehend the symbiosis of mainstreaming within the education system, Skidmore (1996) proposed that the framework on special education be directed towards an understanding of special needs as a relational concept, rather than a reified category.

Proponents of inclusive education champion its democratic principles. The notion of inclusion emphasises that the educational environment must accommodate the needs of students, with and without disabilities. Gibson (2004) pointed out that policy makers are committed to inclusive education because of the socio-cultural notion that students who learn together, regardless of their abilities, also learn to live together. This educational outcome appeals because it promotes a vision of a more egalitarian society. An inclusive classroom is a democratic classroom that welcomes all equally as members of the community. The conditions are set for pupils to learn more broadly about being responsible in a secure environment (Knight, 1999).

Rethinking Special Education in Singapore

Values are central to the education agenda (Artiles & Laursen, 1998; Nazar, 2001). The linking of values to mainstreaming is appropriate as our values underpin everything we do. Values construct guidelines that frame how we live and interact with one another and with other species. In this sense, special education and mainstreaming can be perceived as a systematic and planned attempt by educators to explore

such issues with learners – in the context of both formal and informal curricula and in the ways that schools as organizations conduct themselves, internally and in its relationships with their wider communities.

Gumpel and Awartani (2003) have argued that special education policy must be understood within socio-historical conditions because the stakeholders' vested interests must not be overlooked. Educational policies and systems in developed countries are driven by the consensus of shared values and beliefs regarding education and the concepts of equity and notions of disability. One of the ultimate goals of education is to equip citizens with the cognitive requisites to enable one to take action to resolve social issues (Brown, Green & Lauder, 2001; Duignan, 2005; Lee & Gopinathan, 2004). Findings of the beneficial effects of mainstreaming on participating children without disabilities could open up emancipatory possibilities in educational interaction for the wellbeing of children with special educational needs. Although research on this issue is limited, there is empirical support for the potential benefits of mainstreaming for non-disabled students in an integrated classroom (Biklen, Corrigan & Quick, 1989; Peck, Donaldson & Pezzoli, 1990). In their study on what prompts people to treat others with care and respect, Levy, Freitas and Slovey (2002) found that the extent to which people perceive similarity between themselves and others affects their ability to take other's perspectives. This results in the ability to empathise with and express willingness to help others within highly diverse social groups.

If education is about preparing children for the future, then schools must create a culture that enables students to acquire the requisite social skills to live and establish meaningful connections with one another. An inclusive classroom would be a learning community construct that empowers students to study and solve problems by developing shared understandings and principles of living. A graduate of such a system should be an informed and well-adjusted citizen who knows how to build warm and positive relationships with fellow members of a diverse society.

Meritocracy and the Singapore Model of Special Education

Education in the Singaporean context has adopted a pragmatic approach. It is regarded as an instrument of socialization that imparts social attitudes deemed necessary for a cohesive society to develop economically (Ashton, Green, Sung & James, 2002; Chua, 2004). The mission of the education service is to build and shape the "future of the nation". The belief that the people are its only and most precious resource and therefore the survival and success of the

nation lies in its people – is deeply entrenched in the populace. Thus spending on education has always been perceived as a capital investment (Teo, 1997) to 'value-add' human resources to more effectively meet the challenges of a competitive world.

Although Singapore adheres to the UN's agreement to provide children with a holistic education so as to develop their potential to the fullest, its vision describes a nation of 'citizens capable of meeting the challenges of the future' (Ministry of Education Singapore, 2005). The prevailing belief is that educational outcomes are concerned with accountability, performance and market relevance in the context of globalization and the knowledge-based economy (Kong, 2004). While there is a general commitment to promote equity, diversity and choice within the system, definitions of these objectives are subject to interpretation (Chang, 2004; Loh, 2005).

At present Singapore does not have legislation relating to special educational needs or equal opportunities for people with disabilities within regular school environments. When it comes to the implementation of meeting the needs of children with disabilities, it is either total segregation or total integration. Also the definition of learning needs and disabilities is highly conservative. Children who are diagnosed at birth with severe disabilities are referred to centres for early intervention. These children enter special education schools when they reach schooling age. It is estimated that there are approximately 18,000 children of schooling age with special educational needs. Of these, about 4,500 are in twenty special schools. This provision is driven by the belief that these students are much more able to develop to their full potential if they are supported by specially trained teachers, in an alternative and more protected system, to learn at their own pace. These schools are run by voluntary welfare organizations that are recognised for their strong sense of mission (Lim, 2000). They therefore support students with special needs such as impaired speech, psychological/behavioural disabilities, intellectual disabilities and impaired mobility. Government bodies such as Ministry of Education and National Council of Social Services fund and provide professional development support and infrastructures development.

Integration programs that enrol children with disabilities (chiefly those with physical disabilities and autism) in mainstream schools are "owned" largely by voluntary social welfare organizations (Lim & Sang, 2000). "Accidental" integration may also happen when parents enrol their children with special needs into regular schools without reporting their needs, due to lack of awareness or apprehension about labelling. It is also noteworthy that the legislated Compulsory Education Act does not strictly apply to children with disabilities. Children with

severe needs have the option of being exempted from school to accommodate the “difficult circumstances” they face in attending school on a daily basis.

It is nevertheless widely acknowledged that more can be done at the school level to accommodate students with special educational needs. At a recent conference on inclusion in Singapore, academics pointed out that the education system is ‘10 years behind as far as inclusive education is concerned’ (Loh, 2005). However, with increasing awareness, the public has demanded, and the government has responded, with increased allocation of resources for special schools and mainstreaming programs. Legislation is being broadened for a more inclusive system that is aimed at “a caring society” (Lee, 2004). A special budget has been allocated within a three year plan, from 2005-2008, to improve the quality of education for children with learning disabilities. The location of special schools within mainstream schools has also been trialled and more schools have been designated for mainstreaming programmes. Progress has been noted in the integration and support of children with disabilities or learning difficulties within regular schools. Intervention programs have also been set up to support students with milder disabilities already enrolled in regular schools.

Re-presenting Special Education in Singapore

Research has shown that issues such as history, culture and the educational tradition of a nation sets the tone for its receptiveness to special education reforms (Marchesi, 1986). The encouragement of the population to embrace inclusion beyond moral grounds calls for a change of mindset: a move to align special education programs to values outcomes. When the underlying intent is to forge social cohesion and shared values, then the provision of education to all children, based on recognition of diversity, needs to be reviewed. Such an endeavour may encompass bureaucratic changes. A wider social and cultural consensus has to be created.

Mainstreaming is not just beneficial for the cognitive development of students but also for their social integration (Gibson, 2004). The implication is that social cohesion and humanistic and desirable social values could be best achieved through integration or inclusive models of education. Learning and growing with students with special needs in the same classroom will provide the best impetus for the enhancement of dynamic learning in an inclusive sense. Schools that are concerned about raising standards, accountability and preoccupation with the culture of performance, should engage the presence of children with special needs within the school community as an invaluable resource that will enrich and empower

the current moral and character-building programs. Academics and stakeholders might need to consider how interactions of regular children and children with special needs can be evaluated more broadly than has hitherto been the case.

There is a need to focus on the broader social values and potential outcomes that are implicit in integration policy. It is timely to examine the developmental importance of children participating in relationships in which they take active responsibility for supporting other people. In Bronfenbrenner’s (1986) observation of the trend of alienated youth, he prescribed the ‘antidote’ of encouraging the development of meaningful relationships in schools. A qualitative study on the interactions between students with and without disabilities in integrated school settings affirmed that such experiences could have a profoundly positive impact on non-disabled children’s character development (Biklen et al., 1989). The children in that study were able to establish connections and care for other people meaningfully and without prejudice in a secure environment. The researchers observed,

“Students developed relationships with each other that were personal rather than stereotyped, interactive rather than one-sided, and caring rather than obligatory” (pp 220).

Tamm and Prellwitz (2001) pointed out that students in integrated classrooms exhibited more positive attitudes to children with a functional disability than children with no disabled classmates. The empirical evidence supports the view that the more contacts children have with children with disabilities, the more positive their attitudes (Esposito & Reed 1986). The result coincides with Gash and Coffey’s findings (1995) that well implemented integration programs resulted in a maturing of the regular students’ understanding of peers with disability. Such students had more prosocial attitudes towards children with disabilities than children with no experience of students with disabilities.

In our contemporary society, there is a need for social change in education policy and practice in order to avoid the risks of an alienated generation. According to Duignan (2005), there is a global trend towards ‘intense individualism’. A maturing urban state with an aging population base (Harrison, 1991) such as Singapore has the added concern of increasing incivility and an apparent decline of tolerance for “differences” and “weaknesses”. It is essential therefore to respond to this picture of the socially corrosive effects of intolerance carefully. To combat the force of fragmentation and sectarianism that may arise, there is a need to invest efforts to nurture an embracing and supportive culture. A moral ethic, a culture of tolerance and the ability to regard fellow

members of society with respect and dignity, is needed.

It is crucial that educational leaders and policy makers think creatively when it comes to the provision of programs for all children. Every day, in every classroom, the most basic and most important level of education policy is implemented when students and teachers partake in the interplay of learning and teaching. Mutual respect and professional preparation and support must be present for the teachers and the students alike in order to embark on restructuring school enrolment policy to effect change (Epstein, 1996). The practice of educators and students must guide the development of a more holistic policy for service provision within special education. Special education could be harnessed as an integral component in the equation of social cohesion.

Since the time of independence, the Singaporean educational system has played a significant role in nation building (Wong & Apple, 2002). It is a tool of economic engineering, a capital investment for social progress. It underpins the aspiration of building powerful social virtues: equity, shared values, kindness and social harmony. By examining the mainstreaming phenomenon within a critical framework, it is possible to view the education of students with special needs in regular settings as increasing social capital returns. Mainstreaming creates the basic structure within which interpersonal dynamics may interact and facilitates genuine social engagement within a secure and secular environment.

Conclusion

The social environment has been a powerful selective force in human evolution and therefore social relations play an increasingly important role in the wellbeing of individuals. Research suggests that valued personal relationships and strong moral values are key factors in social stability (Layard, 2003). If the conceptual model is accurate, the implications for inclusion and integration regarding nurturing

prosocial skills seem clear: mainstreaming increases social interaction and understanding. If this is the case, schools cannot overlook the potential capacity of mainstreaming and fail to “capitalize” on the insights gained about the link between mainstreaming and values development.

Inclusion may be seen as a reflection of an underlying social justice philosophy. The notion of inclusion depends on the orientation of society towards the needs of her people. In addition to elucidating positive association with moral development, there is a need for a deeper understanding of the effectiveness of capital investment in mainstreaming. Existing research underscores the benefits associated with social capital, but current benchmarking systems limit the ability to evaluate particular interpersonal dynamics associated with the benefits mediated through social capital. It is crucial to investigate the potential to be realized in the classroom. For in every classroom exists a platform for both formal and informal curricula of civil rights to be acquired and internalised.

A number of emerging studies have demonstrated the benefits of mainstreaming for the prosocial development for children. Mainstreaming opens a pathway of educational opportunity for children with special needs. It also serves as a catalyst for positive social development of the schooling experience. A balance could be established between meeting the needs of the ‘special’ community and developing the potentials of the larger community as caring and empathetic people. If one can view the integration of students with special needs as a means by which the growing apathy and alienation of the youths may be restored, it will circumvent the tension relating to allocating limited national resources. For a nation-state in a post-scarcity era, the prospect of enhancing a moral, social and political obligation without undermining the principles of an achievement-driven ideology is an enticing discourse that should not be disregarded.

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