

DPA SINGAPORE' SHORT SUBMISSION TO CRC COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES IN SINGAPORE

The Disabled People's Association (DPA) welcomes the opportunity to share information with the CRC Committee on children with disabilities in Singapore. This short submission was prepared with the technical support of the International Disability Alliance (IDA).

DPA recognises and welcomes the efforts made by the Singapore Government to support, protect and integrate children with disabilities in Singapore. However, DPA would like to bring to the Committee's attention the factors that continue to contribute to social inequality and to the lack of equal opportunities for all children in Singapore, resulting from an education system that is not yet fully inclusive and integrated.

LACK of a HUMAN RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH to DISABILITY (Articles 1-4 CRPD)

As declared by the Government in its State Report to the CRPD¹, there is no uniform definition of "disability" in Singapore (para. 65). In the context of the five-years roadmap for inclusion (Enabling Masterplan), persons with disabilities include all persons "*whose prospects of securing, retaining places and advancing in education and training institutions, employment and recreation as equal members of the community are substantially reduced as a result of physical, sensory, intellectual and developmental impairments*". This definition clearly reflects a medical model of disability, and the assessment of disability is made by medical professionals.

The Penal Code provides a definition of person with "mental disability" as "*an impairment of or a disturbance in the functioning of the mind or brain resulting from any disability or disorder of the mind or brain which impairs the ability to make a proper judgement in the giving of consent to sexual touching*".² According to Article 1 of the CRPD, it is not the impairment that reduces the access to education, employment and the inclusion in the community, but rather the barriers present in these institutions: hence, the disability model in Singapore is still attached to the medical perspective.

DISCRIMINATION FRAMEWORK and AWARENESS RAISING (Articles 5 and 8 CRPD)

Article 12 of the Singaporean Constitution states that "*all persons are equal before the law and entitled to the equal protection of the law*". However, it is not clear how this provisions also protects the rights of persons with disabilities (including children with disability) in practice, considering the lack of specific legislation protecting them against discrimination, which mainly occurs in schools and workplaces.³

According to a survey by Lien Foundation, parents have declared themselves uncomfortable about their child having to sit next to student with disability in class: close to two-thirds of the respondents shared the belief that Singaporeans are willing to share public spaces with children with disability, but are not willing to interact with them. Such findings highlight that inequality and discrimination against people with disabilities remains in Singapore.⁴ The National Council of Social Services launched a five-year public education campaign titled 'See the True Me' to promote a more positive view of persons with disabilities and inclusion in society. DPA is a partner in this campaign and welcomes such initiatives. However, awareness raising by itself will not be sufficient to combat discriminatory attitudes and behaviours; thus DPA encourages the CRC Committee to raise this issue during the

¹ Singapore Initial State Report to the CRPD, CRPD/C/SGP/1

² Section 376F (5) of the Penal Code (Cap. 224, 2008 Rev. Ed. Sg.)

³ Disabled People's Association (DPA), "Singapore and the UNCRPD"

⁴ Lien Foundation, Inclusive Attitudes Survey Part 1 (Pg. 7 and 23, May 2016)

dialogue with the Singapore government so that it considers the adoption of specific legislation to effectively protect the rights of children with disabilities.

NATIONAL LEGISLATION on CHILDREN

The Singapore Government has taken a number of measures and laws to ensure that children have access to the right to care and support. These laws include, but are not limited to;

- The [Children and Young Persons Act \(CYPA\)](#) that safeguards the care, protection and rehabilitation of children and young persons below 16 years of age.
- The [Women's Charter](#) provides for the protection of young girls against abuse and exploitation.
- The [Guardianship of Infants Act \(GIA\)](#) protects the best interests of a child whose parents are divorced or separated.
- The Penal Code criminalises and prohibits any sexual activity involving children and young persons; including provisions for statutory rape.
- The Adoption of [Children Act](#) protects the interests of adopted children.
- The Employment Act prohibits the employment of children below the age of 13 years.

While these laws play an important role in ensuring that children in Singapore are not abused and exploited, more can be done to ensure that children are provided with the opportunity to learn from each other in the education context. These experiences can have a lifelong impact and contribute in the fabric of nation-building in Singapore.

RIGHT TO EDUCATION (Art. 24 CRPD and Articles 28-29 CRC)

In 2019, amendments to the Compulsory Education Act 2019 (CE Act) brought into the fold Singaporean children between 6 and 15 years old, with what the Ministry of Education (MOE) classifies as "moderate-to-severe special educational needs (SEN)". This ensures that Singaporean children with SEN will be required to attend primary-level education but in Government-funded Special Education (SPED) schools. Children with disabilities who are residents in Singapore, but are not citizens are not covered by CE Act.

Additionally, the CE Act will not address the fact that the education system remains segregated between the Government schools and the Government-funded, but social service organisation run, special education (SPED) schools.

The CE Act also does not address the lack of parity of school fees between SPED schools and Government schools and this can feed social inequality. SPED schools charge fees and lower income families can apply for means tested subsidies, whilst Government schools provide an across the board fee based on citizenship (Singapore Citizen, Permanent Resident, or International Student) regardless of income.

And the lack of guarantee regarding enrolment waiting lists at SPED schools, as compared to Government schools, also perpetuates unequal access to education in Singapore.

Concerns are not limited to SPED schools alone, as the current curriculum for teachers does not provide enough practical training to support children with disabilities in Government schools.

Certifications pathways for educators are not adequate to prepare them to teach students with disabilities. For teachers in mainstream schools, the compulsory 12-hour module on special needs does not offer in-depth knowledge on disabilities and learning accommodations, and there is no subsequent follow-up to ensure that teachers who have been deployed know how to manage children with disabilities effectively. The National Institute of Education (NIE) does not offer depth in the practical learning and hands-on experience required to prepare teachers in handling a class that has students with SEN. Teachers who are trained in special needs make up 10% of mainstream primary, and 20% of mainstream secondary of the educator populace. While these teachers are in schools designated to be better prepared for students with SEN, this limits the choices parents have when enrolling their child into a suitable institution.

The lack of holistic training for educators might also pose a challenge for children who have the intellectual agility, but lack the social and verbal skills to express themselves. Additionally, when working with students who have SEN, a lower student to staff ratio is ideal. With the lack of Government school teachers who have been trained to support those with disabilities, these numbers are bound to increase. This can affect the quality of the education of the students with disabilities. In fact, DPA has heard anecdotes from parents of children with disabilities, that teachers often are frustrated with the lack of support or preparation they have to integrate students with SEN in their classes and that the teacher feels it takes away time from teaching the students without SEN.

The Ministry of Education (MOE) has currently in place the Allied Educator programme. Allied Educators work together with teachers to ensure that students are integrated into the school system. However, schools tend to have one Allied Educator per school, and they are limited in their ability to provide sufficient classroom support to the teacher due to a number of reasons – lack of robust training in the area of student behavioural management and unclear career progression resulting in a high turnover rate – which can affect students with SEN in the long run.

In recent years, the Government has been providing a stronger emphasis on life skills (as opposed to relying solely on academic qualifications), however the social system has yet to catch up. Schools will need to overhaul their curriculum to cater for the more diverse learning styles and needs of children with disabilities.

Because of all these disparities, the lack of adequate training for teachers and the continuing segregation of children with disabilities in special schools, children with disabilities in Singapore are not treated on an equal basis with others, not being granted the same educational opportunities. DPA encourages the CRC Committee to raise this issue during the public dialogue with the State to ensure that children with disabilities are provided with reasonable accommodation and individualized support, if needed, to attend mainstream schools.

LACK OF DISAGGREGATED DATA (Art. 31 CRPD)

Additionally, the lack of nationwide statistics on disability makes it difficult to test the effectiveness of national inclusive education campaigns and initiatives. DPA would like the CRC Committee to raise this issue during the constructive dialogue, urging the Singapore Government to collect disability specific data, utilising the Washington Group Short Set of Disability Questions, so that accurate statistics can be recorded.

Singapore will be undergoing a nationwide census in 2020, and MSF, together with the Department of Statistics aim to gather (for the first time) disability specific data on the population in Singapore. The granularity of this data that allows for aggregated data is still unknown for the time being.