Chapter 13
Disability Awareness in Teacher Education in Singapore

Levan Lim
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

Thana Thaver
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

ABSTRACT

As the sole teacher education body in Singapore, the National Institute of Education (NIE), plays a pivotal role in equipping Singaporean teachers with the knowledge and skills to work with and support students with disabilities for both mainstream and special schools through its teacher education programs. In addition to the learning of strategies and skills to work with students with disabilities, it is also imperative for teacher education to promote positive attitudinal change among teachers towards persons with disabilities. This chapter describes the disability-awareness approach adopted by the NIE for its preservice teachers and the rationale behind adopting such an approach to foster inclusive attitudes that is grounded within relevant literature and situates disability within Singapore’s socio-historical context.

INTRODUCTION

The attitudes of mainstream or general education teachers towards students with disabilities and their inclusion are critical to these students’ successful participation within mainstream school environments. Teacher education plays a significant role in its capacity to foster positive and inclusive attitudes among teachers, both at the pre-service and in-service levels. There is increasing evidence that traditional information-based special education courses, which focus primarily on the deficits of people with disabilities and ways of providing remediation and intervention may not be effective in developing inclusive attitudes among teachers (e.g., Hastings, Hewes, Lock, & Witting, 1996; Tait & Purdie, 2000).

A number of researchers in the field are suggesting that to foster inclusive attitudes among teachers, there is a need for courses to adopt a disability-awareness approach. This approach is one which seeks to position participants to be more critically reflective of their attitudes, values and beliefs toward people with disabilities and inclusion and the structures, policies and practices in society that have contributed

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to the exclusion of people with disabilities from mainstream society (e.g., Avramidis & Kalyva, 2007; Bishop & Jones, 2002; Marshall, Ralph, & Palmer, 2002; Robertson, 1999).

As the sole teacher certification body in Singapore, the National Institute of Education (NIE) plays a pivotal role in equipping Singaporean teachers with the knowledge and skills to work with and support students with disabilities for both mainstream and special schools through its teacher education programs. In addition to the learning of strategies and skills to work with students with disabilities, it is also imperative for teacher education to promote positive attitudinal change among teachers towards persons with disabilities. This chapter describes the disability awareness approach adopted by the NIE for its pre-service teachers and the rationale behind adopting such an approach to foster inclusive attitudes that is grounded within relevant literature and situates disability within Singapore’s socio-historical context.

BACKGROUND: CONTEXTUALIZING DISABILITY IN SINGAPORE

Since 1965 when Singapore gained its independence, students with and without disabilities have been pervasively viewed as belonging to the special and mainstream education systems respectively. This dual system of education, where the mainstream education system is separate from the special education system – comprising of special schools run by voluntary welfare organizations instead of the Ministry of Education (Lim & Nam, 2000) has continued to the present. It is therefore not surprising that many Singaporeans without disabilities have grown up apart from their peers and other persons with disabilities. The lack of personal practical knowledge and experience with persons with disabilities on the part of many Singaporeans have, in turn, contributed to the generally negative societal attitudes and their reproduction over decades towards persons with disabilities (Lim & Thaver, 2008). Such attitudes are also representative of many teachers the authors have encountered at the NIE (Lim & Thaver, 2014).

An inclusive attitudes survey commissioned by the Lien Foundation – a philanthropic local organization that seeks to promote a more inclusive society in Singapore – was conducted in 2016 to examine inclusion in Singapore through exploring the views and attitudes of Singaporeans towards children with special needs. Over a 1,000 members of the public polled revealed that while the majority of Singaporeans (7 in 10) support the idea of inclusive education, only a third (30%) agree that Singapore is an inclusive society for children with special needs. A majority (64%) of the respondents expressed that Singaporeans are willing to share public spaces with children with disabilities but not willing to interact with them. The survey also revealed that only one in 10 Singaporeans expressed confidence in interacting with children with special needs (Lien Foundation, 2016). These survey findings are disappointing considering the unprecedented amount of attention and work by the government, disability voluntary welfare organizations, and charities to improve the lives of persons with disabilities over the past decade since the official envisioning of Singapore as an inclusive society for all including persons with disabilities in 2004.

In August 2004, in his inauguration speech as Prime Minister of Singapore, Mr. Lee Hsien Loong announced the vision of Singapore as an inclusive society, and explicitly mentioned the inclusion of persons with disabilities within this vision. A month later, he called for greater efforts to integrate people with disabilities into mainstream society, beginning with the integration of students with disabilities (Teo, 2004). This re-envisioning of Singapore as an inclusive society is pre-dated by Singapore’s reinvention of itself at the cusp of the new millennium as a world-class city-state, which its citizens would be proud to call home and stake their futures. Having attained economic prosperity, political stability
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