



Briefing on inclusive education in Singapore

Summary of main points from the Singapore Association of Occupational Therapists (SAOT):

1. Inclusive education benefits children and youth with, and without disabilities.
2. Inclusive education requires different strategies, tools, equipment and adaptations to the environment to enable the participation of children and youth with disabilities in school activities (both in-class and co-curricular activities), to maximise their academic and social development. Therefore, skills and expertise from a range of professionals is required to support all involved stakeholders.
3. Occupational therapists are a needed profession who are educated and skilled to work collaboratively with school staff and parents to enable the participation of children and youth with disabilities in schools.
4. SAOT recommends that Health, Social and Family Development, and Education Ministries look into improving students' access to Allied Health Professionals such as occupational therapists. Occupational therapists can work together with Allied Educators, Counsellors, and Educational & Career Guidance Counsellors to facilitate the holistic development of children and youth with varying disabilities in schools.

SAOT would be happy to provide further information or assistance as required. Please do not hesitate to contact the President of SAOT, Ms. Ngooi Bi Xia.

Inclusive education and occupational therapy

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948), the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006) advocates for an inclusive education system for all children and youth. To achieve this aim, children and youth require effective support measures in schools which maximise academic and social development (World Federation of Occupational Therapists, 2016).

The benefits of inclusive education are reported for both children with and without disabilities. Some studies have shown greater progress in reading, maths and general academic achievement for all children in inclusive education (e.g. Cole, Waldron & Majd, 2004; Kalambouka, Farrell and Dyson, 2007; Sermier Dessemontet and Bless, 2013). Moreover, children have the opportunity to develop meaningful friendships, understand, appreciate and respect individual differences, and prepare for living in a diverse society.

School is made up of numerous occupations which focus on learning activities (e.g. writing stories / essays, drawing/art, maths, drama, sport, history), activities to look after oneself (e.g. eating lunch, using the toilet, changing clothes for sport, getting to class), and school-leisure activities (e.g. playing/socialising with friends, free play, participating in organised groups). Children and youth with



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disabilities have the same engagement requirements in these school occupations. However, they may require different strategies, tools, equipment or adaptations to the environment to make this possible (Missiuna et al., 2012).

General education teachers are skilled professionals. However, the different strategies, tools, equipment and adaptations to the environment, requires skills and expertise from a range of professionals. Occupational therapists are an example of a needed profession who are educated and skilled to work collaboratively with education professionals (teachers and allied educators) as well as parents. Occupational therapists enable, support and promote full participation and wellbeing of children and youth with disabilities by supporting their strengths and finding solutions which reduce or remove limitations and restrictions to learning and participation (World Federation of Occupational Therapists, 2016).

International practice

School-based occupational therapy is a common practice in countries such as Canada and America from as early as the 1980s (American Occupational Therapy Association, 1987, Coleman, 1988; Dunn, 1990). The type of children that occupational therapists work with include those with handwriting difficulties, social and emotional issues, coordination difficulties, and physical disabilities. In term of diagnostic groups, it is common for occupational therapists to work with children who are included in mainstream education such as those with autism spectrum disorder, attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD), and fine/gross motor deficits, developmental coordination disorder and cerebral palsy. There are many research articles documenting about school-based occupational therapy in primary school (e.g., Bayona et al., 2006; Case-Smith, 2002).

There are different models of practices for occupational therapy to work within the mainstream school. One of the more recent and contemporary work is published in Canada, on a consultative service delivery model called *Partner for Change* (Missiuna et al., 2012). This model emphasizes the partnership of the occupational therapist with educators and parents to change the life and daily environment of a child, highlighting the importance of working within the context of where the child spend time in. The model also uses a tiered approach that includes whole class instruction, dynamic performance analysis and monitoring of response to intervention.

Current situation locally

Currently, children and youth in mainstream schools with disabilities have access to time limited and ad-hoc services, which mean that true and effective collaboration with education professionals is difficult to establish to promote an inclusive culture and quality delivery within schools. In addition, existing funding structures between health and education mean that professionals such as occupational therapists have limited scope to support children and youth with disabilities within the education setting.



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Having professionals such as occupational therapists employed within the education system could create innovative collaborations that can benefit all children and youth in schools, with and without disabilities.

School-based therapy has many benefits, including providing assessment and intervention that are contextually based, and partnering school teachers, allied educators and other children for inclusive practices. With the Compulsory Education Act starting in Singapore from 2019, it is foreseeable that there will be more children with disabilities included in schools. Occupational therapists can play a big role as part of the Allied Health Professional services, in supporting these children through the use of assistive technology, environmental modification, Universal Design for Learning principles, and life/social skills development. Having professional support for school teachers, allied educators, counsellors, and educational and career guidance counsellors will be an important step towards an inclusive education for our children. Inclusive education is about supporting ALL children and youth in schools, and this requires collaborative effort from the Ministries of Health, Education, and Social and Family Development, to provide schools with access to needed professionals.



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