

The Nesbitt Centre Submission

1. Social Construction- 'otherness'

The mark of any 'civilized' society is the way we look after our vulnerable people. Does Hong Kong live up to 'civilized' society with its current lacking SEN policy? Current Government Policies and statements can only serve to legitimize the social construction of segregation and otherness.

The obstacles facing people with intellectual disabilities range from lack of awareness in the community to restricted Education and Employment opportunities. These barriers are a result of Hong Kong's inability to respond to their needs.

It is true that we are going in the right direction and people with disabilities are more 'out there' or 'visible' in Hong Kong than in the past, but what does this mean for People with Intellectual Disabilities? Are they encouraged and embraced by Hong Kong or merely ignored and seen as 'others'?

2. The lives of people with intellectual Disabilities

The barriers currently facing people with intellectual disabilities in Hong Kong can only be broken down if the people themselves join the ongoing discussion. We must listen to their voice and attitudes towards education and inclusion in an attempt to provide a truly inclusive provision that meets their needs.

Most people with an intellectual Disability are able to live in a supported home environment and hold down a meaningful job, but are they given the correct opportunities? I have witnessed a 20 year old student with Down Syndrome pick up a dropped receipt in a restaurant and attempt to give it back to the waiter; he completely ignored her and pushed past her, another patron had to ask him to listen to her.

Similar experiences include taxi drivers and staff at McDonalds not giving students the correct change when they are alone. I also stood outside a McDonalds waiting for a student to buy their lunch, through the window, I saw a staff member ignore the student and allow other patrons to be served first. When I intervened and questioned why he had done this, he simply said 'I could not understand him'. I questioned why he had not used the pictures of the food to help the communication process, he just shrugged his shoulders.

These are the very real barriers facing our students on a daily basis. There is a system of ignorance and 'otherness' that makes it so difficult for people with intellectual Disabilities to live their life as any other member of the Hong Kong community would expect to. If this is the general attitude in Hong Kong, what hope do our students have of a fulfilling and meaningful life? Adults with disabilities such as Down Syndrome are living well into their late 50's and beyond. It is imperative that effective Independent living programmes are available to support the long term possibility that people with Intellectual disabilities may out live their parents or primary caregivers. But who will pay for this care? Without the opportunity to have meaningful, paid employment, they cannot support themselves, so who will support their living? Why aren't the Government providing this sort of care? Or better still, providing an Education system that provides Life long education for people with Intellectual Disabilities?

3. Education is Key

I believe that more needs to be done in the area of education as educating culture is predisposed to remake itself and the society that the education system resides in. Children with Special Education Needs should be offered an inclusive Education from the very earliest opportunity. But they are not. Mainstream children should be educated in an environment that is accepting of those with Disabilities to help dispel the attitude of segregation and 'otherness'. But they are not.

A student at The Nesbitt Centre was desperate to be included when she was at school, she so wanted to be part of the school life that she would run away from the 'segregated' 'special' unit and hide in the Mainstream classrooms. What was she trying to communicate by this behaviour? "*Include me!*" Perhaps? So why didn't anyone listen? Because the Mainstream Education available was not appropriate and could not cater for her 'Special' needs. Labeling someone as 'Special' is just another way of saying 'I can't deal with this person', let someone else do it. That is not good enough.

Early intervention and effective, needs based inclusive Education should make a disability into ability, thus preparing children and young adults with intellectual Disabilities for employment, independent Living and acceptance and, in doing so; reduce the long term financial pressure on the government. At present this is not happening and therefore only available for a very selective few people who can afford to send their children to the appropriate Educational Institution. If the Government offer appropriate provision for Children, the money spent will be a saving in the long term as these children will not be Dependent Adults in the future.