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Proposal for  
"Autism Demystification Program"  
in implementing integrated education  
with respect to students with Autism  
Spectrum Disorder.

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## **Introduction**

We are proposing the "Autism demystification program" (A.D.P.) as a strategy aimed at countering the difficulties of running inclusive education through demystifying the misconceptions of Autism.

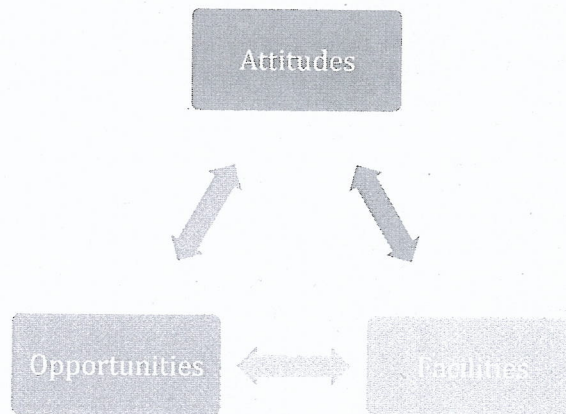
We believe that the key to raising awareness of diversity is through developing open communication and play skills. In particular, by developing stakeholder's awareness and understanding; stakeholders being: parents, teachers, typically developed peers and children with Autism. Ideally all stakeholders should be able to develop empathy and thereby apply a diversity of communication skills when interacting with children of various developmental stages.

*"The objective is to develop the potentials of every student, to promote mutual respect of individual differences among teachers and students and to cultivate an inclusive school culture."*

Adapted from Hong Kong Education Bureau, Operation Guide to the Whole school approach to integrated education, page iv, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed (2010)

## Key objectives

Aligning with the measures stressed by the Education Bureau's Operation manual of Integrated Education (2010), we are cognizant of the following three factors: -



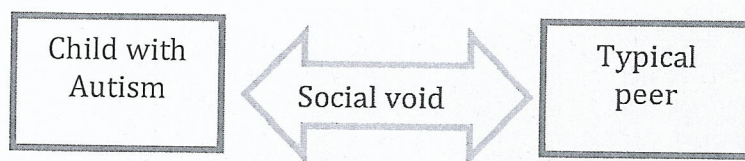
*Fig. 1 The accommodation measures to facilitate the development*

The strategy we propose is aimed at comprehensively addressing all three accommodation measures.

### Improve attitudes

Discrimination against children with Autism is often derived from a general lack of knowledge of their disabilities/ abilities. This is not necessarily a hostile attitude, but some stakeholders develop low expectations and default to a "give up" attitude towards these children. Through demystifying misconceptions toward Autism, parents and teachers will be able to foster a deeper understanding of the condition and then will be able to develop more confidence when interacting with children with Autism.

## Enhance opportunities



*Fig. 2 Adopted from P. J. Wolfberg (2003) Peer Play and the Autism Spectrum, AAPC Publishing*

Dr. Pamela J. Wolfberg (2003) highlighted the fundamental issues that hinder the opportunity for the children with Autism to socialize with one another. While the child with Autism has difficulties in interpreting social codes and conventions, their typical peers find it difficult to interpret, respond, and accommodate him/her, since a child with Autism relates, communicates, plays and thinks differently. This naturally creates a social barrier between both the child with Autism and their typical peer. (*Figure 2*) In attempting to break down this social barrier the A.D.P. aims to develop the key communication skills and 'sound bites' for typical peers to enable them to connect with children with Autism. In the long run, this not only increases the opportunity for inclusive play, but also improves the quality of their play and ultimately acceptance within the peer group.

## Low cost facilities

The A.D.P. is fundamentally an educational workshop, which does not require specifically designed facilities and therefore is a low cost initiative. With support from the school management team, each school can arrange a team of teachers and a set of teaching materials that can be used for the entire school to deliver a repeated and consistent A.D.P. .

## Responsibilities and Work Plan

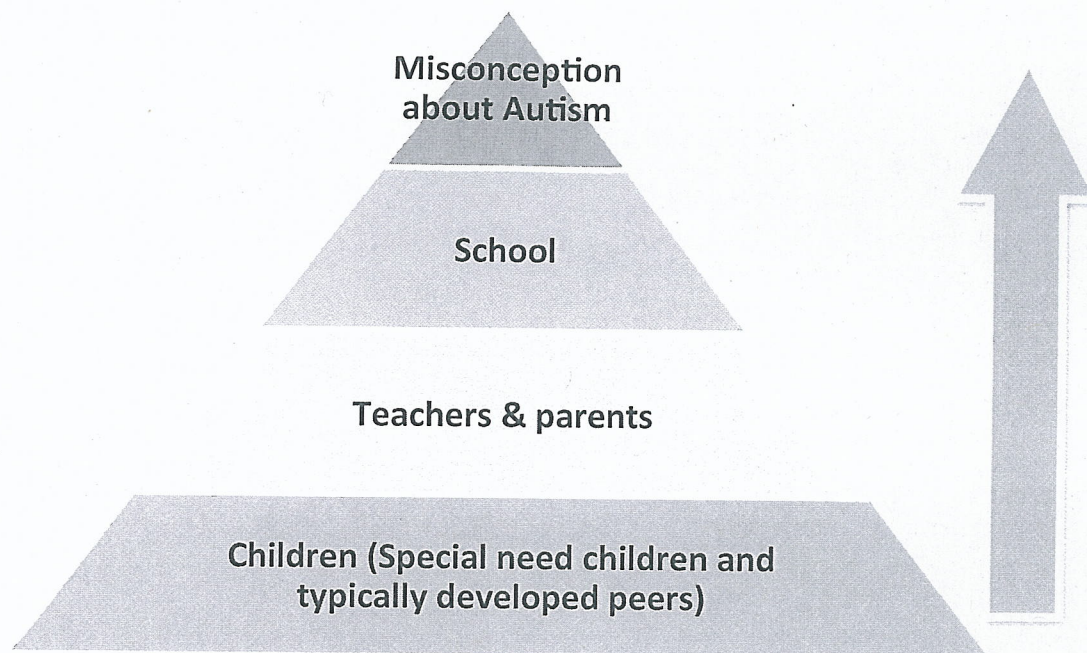


Fig. 3 Autism Demystification Program's Autism demystifying hierarchy

It is undeniable that the misconceptions of Autism are deep rooted and cultural, stemming from a basic lack of knowledge, awareness and therefore empathy.

A typical scenario would be when a teacher wants to pair up a child with Autism to play with their typical peers, parents of the typical peer would complain to the school, stressing that a child is in school to learn, not to accommodate another child. Considering this top-down effect of the cultural misconception, the A.D.P. focuses on tackling the current difficulty in inclusive education from a bottom-up approach. (Figure 3)

Child with Autism: The program aims to equip special needs teachers with appropriate communication skills e.g. Through social stories, and teaching 'sound bites' for social interaction (e.g. "Nice to meet you" "See you next time") The child will then be encouraged to practice these skills in after school play groups.

Typical peers: The program aims at placing all children (including the special needs students) in interactive A.D.P. workshops, where they will experience stimulation games (e.g. muffed ears, distorted eye glasses). These games are design to recreate the experiences and challenges a child with Autism faces when receiving and processing information from the outside world. The workshop will also include social stories and 'sound bites' that explore "friendship tips" to assist typical peers to make friends with special needs peers of different developmental stage. The successful engagement with their special needs peers will empower the typical child with a sense of achievement, encourage greater interaction and ultimately break down the barriers of social exclusion.

Teachers/ Administrators: The program aims to train teachers to handle behavioral issues, training to be provided by local behavioral therapists. This will be done in many different ways, eg. teachers will be trained to run A.D.P. in their own schools, therapists will also run behavior management trainings through workshops and shadowing. In light of this our company, Autism Recovery Network, is willing to provide volunteering therapists to this project as a give back to the community. Through training teachers to manage behavioral issues often found in children with Autism, we can avoid misunderstanding to children with Autism.

Parents: It is proposed that parents of both typical peers and children with Autism will also be educated on the A.D.P. . In addition, teachers will be able to highlight the benefits of inclusive education for both typical peers and children with Autism. Parents will be reminded of the benefits of inclusive education; developing social confidence, empathy and patience.

School management team: It is important to stress that support from the management level in leading this program will be vital to the programs' acceptance and subsequent success.

### **Conclusion**

The A.D.P., if implemented on a larger scale will undoubtedly make major improvements in breaking down misconceptions of Autism. The advantage of this program is that, it will have a positive effect no matter it is implemented in only one school or across the entire community.

In short term, the teachers trained to address behavioral issues will feel more confident in taking care of special needs children in their class, and hence be more amenable and receptive to the concepts of inclusive education. This not only lessens the workload of teachers, but the number of teaching assistant needed in the classroom.

In the long run, the project's impact can be assessed through evaluating the quality and quantity of inclusive play inside and outside classroom. Potentially, the A.D.P. can lead further on to the development of Integrated Playgroups®. The Integrated Playgroups® are renowned for their work on the social and play skills of children with Autism in Taiwan and U.S.A. They are play groups designated to provide guided play for children of all development levels. (See work of Dr. P. J. Wolfberg)