INTRODUCTION

In Singapore, the education of children with disabilities is provided largely in dedicated special education (SPED) schools.

As of January 2010, there are 20 SPED schools run by Voluntary Welfare Organizations (VWO) receiving funding from the Ministry of Education (MOE) and National Council of Social Service (NCSS). SPED schools run different programs catering to distinct disability groups who are unable to benefit from the mainstream schooling.

Support for SPED schools increased when Prime Minister of Singapore commented on a more inclusive society in his National Day Rally Speech in 2004. Taking it forward, the 5 years Enabling Masterplan 2007-2011 was released in 2007 which sets a vision for Singapore to be an inclusive society where persons with disabilities are viewed as equal and contributing members of society. A total of 31 key recommendations was put forth to work towards the vision as set and to see that persons with disabilities (PWDs) will be appreciated and respected for their differences and will live with dignity in the community. Of the many recommendations, the masterplan calls for formal partnership agreements between mainstream and special schools to target specific integration areas and for public, people and private sectors to work together with PWDs and their families to achieve the vision.

Integrating individuals with special needs into community life has been a central goal for advocacy groups in any society for many years. Integration, although defined in various ways, is simply thought of as a process that brings people together with and without a disability in shared physical settings where meaningful social interactions can be fostered and maintained (Hutchinson & McGill, 1992). Most importantly, it is a key to ensuring that people not only live in but are also members of their respective communities.

The driving force of social integration is to see that being part of the community will positively influence the quality of life of individuals with disabilities. The concept of quality of life has been studied and conceptualized in many studies over the years. Of the core principles of quality of life, 2 key salient points stood out (Robert L Schalock 1997):

a) Quality of life of a person is experienced when a person’s basic needs are met and when he or she has the same opportunities as anyone else to pursue and achieve goals in the major life setting of home, community, school and work
b) Quality of life is enhanced by the acceptance and full integration of persons into their local communities

This paper covers the APSN journey of enhancing social integration.
The APSN Story

Since its inception in 1976, the Association for Persons with Special Needs (APSN) has been mindful of the isolationist nature of special schools. Therefore, it has over the years introduced a series of programmes and activities to integrate our intellectually disabled students with their normal peers and with members of society. Some of the programmes introduced are:

1. SOCIAL INTEGRATION THROUGH THE SINGAPORE-NEW DELHI STUDENT EXCHANGE PROGRAM

   With the intention of creating opportunities for our students to experience a student exchange program like many mainstream schools, a group of Indian business women started this exchange program for our junior school program. Started back in 2006, the student exchange program between Chaoyang School and Shri Ram School (New Delhi) has been going on strongly yearly. Such exchange program has given our students opportunities to take learning beyond the school onto an international platform, learning about different cultures and most importantly to be able to practice their independent living skills away from the comfort zones of their homes and families. The exposure to a foreign land and interacting with counterparts in New Delhi and meeting people (including the President of India) is an invaluable learning experience for our children. In recent years, the exchange program saw the participation of staff and students from our neighbouring mainstream school, Presbyterian High School. Our students with intellectual disabilities together with their peers from Shri Ram School (also persons with intellectual disabilities) were given opportunities to have school activities alongside their mainstream peers.

2. SOCIAL INTEGRATION THROUGH ARTS PROGRAM

   Moving beyond the norm of curriculum program, APSN has consistently built platforms for our students to put forth their talents in many different areas. These include arts programs where our students’ artworks are exhibited in the community, to having performing arts groups such as the hip hop dance group (Groovys) from Chaoyang School, performing in key community events. In December 2010, they took part in a music exchange program with students from School of Digital Media and Infocomm Technology, Singapore Polytechnic. They also participated in the many activities organised by the Very Special Arts, Singapore.

3. SOCIAL INTEGRATION THROUGH COMMUNITY SERVICE PROGRAMS

   APSN students have been encouraged to contribute actively back to the society to build personal character. Some of the activities include beach clean up as part of environmental protection, janitorial services given to old folks home and many more. In 2009, a group of our junior students from Chaoyang School contributed to the Singapore National Day through the Funpack Packing Activity. Our students packed a total of 1500 fun packs.

4. SOCIAL INTEGRATION THROUGH SPORTS ACTIVITIES

   Sports have been integrated into the APSN education curriculum. Our students participate in many sports programs both on a national and international platform eg through Special Olympics and various other school championship activities. Our students also took part in the annual OSIM Triathlon in 2010 with involvement of individual volunteers. We have also through our corporate volunteers brought sports inclusion to a new platform, from dragon boat activities, to sports meet. Last year, our beneficiaries together with corporate volunteers came together for a walkathon event, which rose close to $ 40 000 for the Association.
(5) SOCIAL INTEGRATION THROUGH BUDDY PROGRAM

Many other social integration activities are also propagated in APSN schools and will continue to be part of the APSN education experience. These include buddy reading program, work attachment programs and many others where our students are given the opportunities to come together with their mainstream peers on a shared platform.

To further push our efforts of integrating our clients with intellectual disabilities, the Association started the Best Buddies Chapter in Singapore in partnership with the National University of Singapore.

“BEST BUDDIES” in Singapore

Interpersonal relationships and social inclusion are recognized as important indicators of quality of life for persons with disabilities (Schalock, 2000). With a strong belief that our beneficiaries should be given opportunities to be like any of their mainstream peers, APSN started this befriending program when we were approached by the Best Buddies International back in 2006. In fact, we had a similar program some 20 years back.

Best Buddies is a nonprofit organization dedicated to establishing a global volunteer movement that creates opportunities for one-to-one friendships, integrated employment and leadership development for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). Founded in 1989 by Anthony Kennedy Shriver, Best Buddies is a vibrant, international organization that has grown from one original chapter to almost 1,500 middle school, high school, and college chapters worldwide. Best Buddies programs engage participants in each of the 50 states of American, and in 50 countries around the world. Best Buddies’ seven formal programs – Best Buddies Middle Schools, High Schools, Colleges, Citizens, e-Buddies, Jobs and Ambassadors – positively impact nearly 700,000 individuals with and without disabilities worldwide.

Since APSN first started this buddy program in 2006, we have impacted the lives of close to 100 buddies pairs and even brought about positive changes to our students with intellectual disabilities. For their mainstream peers, this befriending program has also created a whole new understanding of persons with intellectual disabilities which will greatly make them more receptive when they step into the workforce.

METHODOLOGY

Adults with Intellectual disabilities from our vocational training program, Centre for Adults (CFA), are paired on a one-to-one friendship with their peers from The National University of Singapore. Once they are officially paired up, the buddies will then engage in their individuals’ pair activities. Occasional group outings will be organized to keep the group dynamics strong and to create a greater sense of belonging for the Best Buddies Program participants. At the end of the 1 year befriending program, peer buddies from the University are strongly encouraged to continue to keep in touch with their friends with intellectual disabilities. After 4 years of running the program though, we have observed that the stay-on rate on the friendship was only 10 – 20 % of the yearly participants. On the other hand, buddies from the adult training centre are happy that they are able to participate in the program for the year and are ever so ready to be to continue with the program and be matched with a new peer buddy. To them, it was the happiness to be able to have friends beyond their own circle and the excitement of having a friend from National University of Singapore as their buddy.
OBSERVATIONS

Program instructors from CFA have noted an improved behaviour from participants of the Best Buddies Program. Their fellow friends from the training centre are also observed to be on good behaviour so that they too can be selected to be part of the friendship program.

To further study the benefits brought about by the program, an online survey was conducted on the participants of the program from National University of Singapore (NUS) and a focus group discussion with the participants from the Centre for Adults (CFA).

Survey

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Targeted Number of Respondents</th>
<th>36 NUS Buddies</th>
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<td>-- Past participants from Best Buddies Program 2009 and 2010</td>
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<tr>
<th>Number of Respondents</th>
<th>27 person</th>
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QUESTION TYPE

1) Understanding Intellectual Disability

2) Experience with persons with intellectual disability prior to participating in the program

3) First time working directly with persons with intellectual disabilities

4) Fears and Concerns before participating in the program

5) Ways of addressing the fears and concerns

6) Types of activities done together with their buddy

7) Efforts taken to make contact with their buddy

8) Personal reflection from the participation in the program
Section 1  Understanding Intellectual Disability

NUS buddies who signed up for the program often have a rudimentary understanding of the intellectual disability condition and joined the program to find out more. An interesting fact was also seen from the years in running the program: undergraduates reading Psychology are more knowledgeable of the condition and be able to give a more detailed explanation as compared to their other course mates.

Most of the respondents to the online poll gave a positive response when asked if they have heard of the intellectual disability condition before their participation in the program. However, they do not have prior experience with persons with intellectual disabilities and their participation in the Best Buddies Program was the first direct experience for most of the respondents.

Section 2 : Experience with Persons with Intellectual Disabilities

With no prior working experience, Best Buddies Program has been their first direct attempt to work closely with persons with intellectual disabilities.
Section 3  Concerns Before Program Participation

It was their first time being involved directly with persons with intellectual disabilities for the participants in 2009 and 2010. Opinions were polled to rate their top concerns prior to their involvement. The highest response count was raised as not knowing how to communicate with their buddy with intellectual disabilities, followed by not having a common topic to the least rated of being looked at for having a friend with special needs. With most of them having their first direct involvement with persons with intellectual disabilities, such concerns are expected. To overcome the mental block, volunteers actively participated in group activities to get peer support. This may suggest that volunteers will look towards group involvement when participating in social integration activities rather than undertaking it individually.

Section 4  Frequency of engagement

The concerns which were raised by the volunteers were further explored to see if they are reserved in their contact with their buddy. It was noted that participants will make efforts to participate in monthly group activities as compared to their own pair activities.
Section 5: Types of Activities

A successful social integration need to have two components: relationship with others and use of community resources (Szivos, 1991, cited in Carnaby S, 1998). Participants were asked on the type of activities they engage in with their buddy. This provides us the basis and extent of involvement the participants are willing to undertake with their peers with intellectual disabilities. Participating in university activities and events were also listed as additional activities that they will do together with their buddy.

Section 6: Attitudes After Participation in Program

Participants were asked on their afterthoughts on their program, giving the 3 best fit descriptions. The top 3 rated comments reaffirmed our belief that promotion of social integration through the buddy program will indirectly drive towards a better quality of life for persons with intellectual disabilities. However, it was not pursued in the survey, their attitude prior to their participation of the program.
In addition to all the above review, peer buddies were asked on how to further improve the quality of the program. Some of the most given comments were to have more male volunteers, more regular group activities rather than personal interaction only in the buddy pairs and creating a greater sense of belonging to the program for all participants.

Feedback were also gathered from the participants on how they feel about their friendship with persons with intellectual disabilities. Following were recorded:

- I feel that I have to put in extra efforts as my buddy has Autism Spectrum Disorder. Most of us are already putting in the additional efforts to maintain a friendship with persons with intellectual disabilities and if your buddy has other conditions it will be more taxing.
- I have helped my buddy open up and be more brave when speaking to people she is not familiar with. She used to be very quiet and would cry easily when someone talked to her. Now she is able to manage that much better than before.
- Initially we seemed to be doing a lot of educating from telling them the importance of punctuality to taking public transport to how to behave appropriately in a social setting to the basic do’s and don’ts of our friendship. I used to get 10 – 20 calls from my buddy within an hour!
- My school work does get busy and I feel bad on not following up on the friendship
- It was quite awkward when my buddy asked me very personal questions like whether I have a boyfriend, how much my family earn and even asking to know my guy friends. I just have to let her know that such questions are sensitive and she just cannot push to get an answer.

Highlights from CFA Buddies (Persons with Intellectual Disabilities)

Before their induction in the program, CFA (Centre for Adults) buddies go through a short interview session and were asked the following questions:

- A) Do you know what is a Best Buddy Program?
- B) Why do you want to be part of this program?
- C) What are the activities that you want to do with your friends?

It was noted that all CFA buddies unanimously said that they do not have friends from outside their training centre and would love to have a friend (not from their school) to keep for life if they can. They would love to do activities together with their friends from the Best Buddies Program after their training in the Centre and on their off days from work.

The comments made by the trainees from CFA who were participants from the program run in 2009 and 2010

- I enjoy my time with my best buddies. We did a lot of things together when we are free.
- I started doing volunteer work with my buddy
- Every time we go out, I love to take photos with my best buddy
- I look forward to doing things with my buddy every time. We go shopping, watch movies, play sports together and I was even introduced to her friends.
- Sometimes my buddy is busy with study and we don’t go out but we send sms to each other
- My friend has taught me how to take public transport
- I have learnt that it is not right to ask my buddy to spend money on me
- I feel sad when my buddy doesn’t call me or go out with me.
Note: Each year, clients from APSN Centre for Adults (CFA) are recommended by their instructors in the Centre for the program based on the criterion that such participation will help develop the clients into a better person (eg improvement in personal and social skills).

**DISCUSSION**

In a study conducted by Dr Mitchell Prinstein from The University of North Carolina (2005), associations among friendship contact/quality and adaptive functioning among adolescents with mental retardation were examined. The following findings were established:

- Students with mental retardation (buddies) who were part of the study have friendships with a Peer Buddy (person without intellectual disabilities) and a best friend. Interestingly, the best friend in most cases was another student with mental retardation.
- Reported results also state that Best Buddies Friendships also help the Buddies be aware and develop their social skills.
- The study also found that Best Buddies Friendships provide the Buddies a safe environment to learn new skills and experiment with new social roles (ie being an equal) that expose the Buddies to new experiences.
- Best Buddies friendships that have a higher rate of contact and of positive relationship qualities are associated with higher self esteem in Buddies.
- Peer buddies (person without intellectual disabilities) felt a lower level of friendship quality with their Buddies. On the contrary, the Buddies felt a higher sense of friendship quality through the intimacy and support they received.

**Case Studies**

Two case references were taken to further examine the benefits brought about to persons with and without intellectual disabilities through the Best Buddies Program.

**Case 1 : Jian Ting, 22 years old, female, member from Centre for Adults and a Best Buddies Participant in 2010**

Before participating in the Best Buddies Program, Jian Ting was just like any of her friends from the training centre. Life was about going to the centre for training and back home with the occasional family outings and activities. Jian Ting came from a very protective family, who does not allow her to take public transport and even the monthly recreation outing organized by the Centre for Adults has to be a very "reported" event ie calling her sister to let her know her whereabouts. Like many of her friends in the Centre, Jian Ting's social life was again very much restricted to her fellow peers with intellectual disabilities also. This has greatly affected Jian Ting where she lacks self confidence in her day-to-day life. Observing her low self confidence, her instructor recommended her for participation. Jian Ting's self esteem took a further blow when the peer buddy who was initially paired with her, pulled out of the program.

A fellow peer buddy then readily got her into her group and got her to participate in the activities she organized for her own buddy. From going concerts together, to having meals and just doing some weekend shopping, Jian Ting joined all the activities. According to her peer buddy, Jian Ting slowly opened up and was more willing to try new things she never did before.
Jian Ting was brought into the world of volunteering by her peer buddy. Through it, Jian Ting was able to know more friends and was able to explore a side of her that even her family members are not aware of in the past. She was able to take public transport independently as compared to the past where family members had to bring her around.

Currently Jian Ting is holding a job at a landscape company. She still volunteers in the centre providing care services for the senior citizens, reporting there on a weekly basis on weekends to do her part in contributing back to the society; and this has been done now without the companionship of her peer buddy. Her confidence level has improved greatly and Jian Ting is just ever ready to share her volunteering experience to any one.

Case 2 : Phua Lixian, 27 years old, female, Post Graduate Student at The National University of Singapore.

Lixian started volunteering for the Best Buddies Program back in 2006, helping to organize the chapter activities and outings. Although she had prior experience in adhoc volunteering in an institution catering to persons with severe intellectual disabilities, Lixian has never been on a friendship program with persons with intellectual disabilities and social integration was never in her dictionary. Her periodic volunteering for persons with severe intellectual disabilities was just another activity organized by the university. Through the Best Buddies befriending program, she is more in tune with the need of promoting social integration for persons with intellectual disabilities and on treating them as equal beyond the academic platform.

Lixian noted:

Before I joined the program, I did not think about the integration of persons with intellectual disability with our society. I have volunteered with homes for persons with intellectual disability. I helped to plan recreational games for such persons with intellectual disability living in the home. Therefore, I tend to view them as beneficiaries. I am contented to see that my interaction with them ends with my volunteering time with them. I have never thought that they can take care of themselves in the future and that they also have thoughts and problems like me.

The volunteering experience in best buddies has allowed me to perceive the potential and capability of persons with intellectual disability. This program inspires me to do more for the future of such people. Who is to say that they cannot have normal friends; cannot live a normal life like you and me. If one in ten people is willing to make the effort to befriend them and to help them engage in social activities, that one person would be able to see the simple happiness in life through their eyes and at the same time, help persons with intellectual disability to go through the stages of life with greater ease and comfort.

Being involved in this befriending program has helped me to slow down and enjoy the simplicity of life. In busy schedule and deadlines, sometimes I don’t have time to enjoy simple things. Because of my buddy, I am able to take time out to enjoy window shopping and enjoy a great movie. I have learned how to simplify my thoughts for the easier understanding of my buddy. My buddy cares for me because I am her friend and she tends to remind me to take care of myself. In the past, I used to receive such reminders from my family too and I would feel that they are naggy. Now I learned to appreciate and be more patient with my family.

I was also surprised that I am the only friend that my buddies have. I have learnt to be very patient and understanding towards their excitement on the activities.
Lixian had been paired with 2 buddies with intellectual disabilities and have helped developed her friends into more responsible adults, one of them being Jian Ting.

CONCLUSION

An intellectual disability is a disability characterized by significant limitations both in intellectual functioning and adaptive behaviours (American Association on Mental Retardation, 2002). With a distinct education system away from their mainstream peers, additional efforts have to be taken to help persons with intellectual disabilities acquire the skills needed for independent living. Skills development is likely to be most effective when the behaviors are specific, are practised in environment in which they have functional value (Steve, Woolf & Oakland, 2010). We have seen how our clients with intellectual disabilities are able to have their adaptive skills being put to the test through their friendship with their peers from the National University of Singapore.

Peer buddy programs have also shown some success in facilitating positive social relationships between students with and without intellectual disabilities (Hughes, Carter, Bradford & Copeland, 2002). However, it is only when both are on an equal status platform that we see a meaningful relationship between persons with and without intellectual disabilities, especially so when in a recreational setting.

Through such direct relationship, attitudes towards persons with intellectual disabilities can only be changed. The theory of “Mere Exposure Effect” (Zajonc, 2001) holds that repeated exposure to something is sufficient to change individual’s attitude towards it. Literature has also stressed that in order to break down barriers and achieve successful inclusion, it is important to provide people who do not have disabilities with not just opportunities for interaction but also information, instruction and familiarization with difference aspects of intellectual disability (Cutts & Sigafoos, 2001; Piercy, Wilton, & Townsend, 2002). With a proper education and guided approach towards such social integration program, attitudes towards people with intellectual disabilities will then become significantly more positive with the increased contact (Katrina, Kan, Anna & Joel 2010).

Special education is a challenging journey for all: APSN as the service provider, parents and caregivers, the beneficiaries themselves and the community we are in. It is only through the additional efforts of promoting social participating and integration, more than just imparting the literacy and numeracy knowledge alone, that we are able to promote independent living and to empower persons with intellectual disabilities to lead dignified, fulfilling and independent lives as integral members of our society.

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