

Personal Reflections on Friendship Building

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1 Component A – Positioning of Self

1.1 Past

The first time I encountered people with disabilities was when my new neighbours moved in a floor above us. Even though almost twenty years have gone by, I still have vivid memories of the family. I remember the family making a lot of noise, banging the floor at night, lots of quarrelling, crying, shouting and screaming. They were a family of six with the age of the four children ranging from about 3 years old to 10 years old. I recall my parents and other adult neighbours saying that they were ‘abnormal’ but nevertheless everyone in the neighbourhood got along fine. The mother being a housewife interacted more with the other adults as compared to the father. He was the sole breadwinner and was working as a labourer. The children played with all of us as like every other children in the neighbourhood. I remember all the adults saying that the couple always made senseless conversations and I remember the children always digressing from conversation topics with us. The floor of the house was always sticky and the house had a peculiar smell, as did the family members. They were quite unkempt and I remember the children’s skin were always sticky. Two of the children were in the same primary school as most of us but they were in the monolingual class and were always failing their tests and examinations.

At that time, I knew they were different from most of us but everyone seemed to accept them just as they were. As far as I could remember there was no deliberate avoidance of them, though I am not too sure if there was any scorn, sympathy or despise felt by others. My feeling towards them

was normal as I treated them like any other people. I remember my mother would sometimes say it was pitiful to have the whole family like 'that'. After 2 years, they moved out and all contact was lost. Reflecting back, now I know that they were probably a family with learning disabilities but somehow they seemed to be able to manage and survive quite well.

The other experience I had with people with disabilities was a wheelchair-bound middle-aged man with some dogs. The neighbourhood kids and I used to go to his house to help bring his dogs out for walks. We did not have much conversation with him, we had no idea what was his source of income and he seemed to live alone by himself. We just went to pick up the dogs, played with them and took them for walks. At that time, I felt he was a strong and independent person who seemed to handle his disability well and did not wallow in misery or self-pity.

Another experience I had was when I accompanied a neighbour to cut her hair at somebody's house. There was a girl about 10 years old with Down's syndrome and I thought she was rather cute and independent as she was watching TV by herself. I never had a chance to talk to her. At that time, I never felt any fear or deep sympathy towards her. I just felt like she was just like any other normal person.

During my youth, I never had much opportunity to mingle around with anyone with disabilities. I knew a boy with hearing impairment as an acquaintance in my tertiary education and I used to marvel at how he managed to study and he even went overseas to further his education.

My attitude towards people with disabilities was that they were like any other normal human beings. There was not much fear or sympathy on my part. I treated them like how I would treat anybody else and I would help them if I could. I did not really remember pondering over the issue of people with disabilities so much at that time as I was too caught up with my own life and studies.

After finishing my studies, I decided to find a job that would involve some kind of social work as I wanted to work with children with disabilities. Before I clinched the job as a teacher at the Movement for the Intellectually Disabled of Singapore (MINDS), I was worried about my ability to handle the teaching task as it was totally new to me and I have never considered being a teacher in the first place! Fortunately I had some good mentors while starting out in my career who guided me very well. I learnt a lot from them on how to handle difficult children, how to conduct some interesting lessons and how to cater to individual needs of the students.

Before I entered special education, I had totally no idea what it was about. I thought it was just about making sure the students were well taken care of and have something to do while in school. I was quite impressed to know they have Individual Education Plan (IEP), a flexible curriculum and an assessment booklet to guide the teachers. I was also quite surprised at the programs they have for the students and the school kind-of operated like any other mainstream schools except with a different curriculum.

Due to my new interest in special education, I tried volunteering at Asian Women Welfare Association (AWWA) for their hydrotherapy sessions a few years ago and it was an enjoyable

experience getting to know other children with physical disabilities, discovering the things they could and could not do and the programs offered by the school. Though I did not have a chance to see the other programs offered by other special schools, I have gathered some information about the programs from other special educators. Each special school has been trying to do their best to cater to more diverse needs of the special students but somehow I feel that all the special schools have not been consolidating their efforts together.

I also took up sign language to further my interests in special education and to know people who are hearing impaired. I communicate with some of my hearing-impaired friends using MSN messenger and sign language but it is still quite difficult, as a lot of practice is needed. Most of them are very animated and fun-loving people and I have known, through them, the difficulties faced by them and how they try to face it. For example, one of my hearing-impaired friends was worried about how his livelihood would be affected, as the enrolment for the School for the Deaf is getting smaller. Lily Goh, a hearing-impaired girl, was asked not to participate in Singapore Idol competition as the organisers felt it would not be fair for her to compete with people without disabilities. People with special needs sometimes have limited opportunities as compared to others.

While travelling overseas, I will try to visit some of the special schools there and it has always been an eye-opening and refreshing experience. The first special school I visited overseas was in Perth. We did not see much as most of the children went for excursions and it was nearing end of the term for them. However, we did see that the infrastructure for the school was disabled-friendly and their teacher-students ratio was smaller than ours back in Singapore.

I also visited one special school and one home for the disabled in Nepal. The school was really run down and the class that we saw had a teacher-student ratio of about 1 to 8. They did not have much resources but I was surprised they even had special schools for the disabled children there. The home was in a large compound and had more physically and severely disabled people there. I also visited some schools and centres in Bangladesh during the AFMR conference in 1997. I was again pleasantly surprised that even the developing countries have been trying to do more for their people with disabilities.

When I was in Utah for a short visit, I participated in one field trip to the planetarium with one of the centres for children with learning disabilities and realized there was a lot of support for these children. It was during this trip that I finally learnt that my long-time pen-pal's sister is intellectually disabled. My pen pal told me that her sister had graduated from her high school. This was the first time I heard of inclusion and thought it was a really good idea. It was also during this trip that I first saw a boy with Down's syndrome working in a cafeteria and everybody's reaction to him was normal. They did not stare at him and I thought open employment should be the way for our graduates from MINDS. Glad to say, some of our graduates have been working at cafeterias at Nanyang Polytechnic.

The last study trip I made was to Kuala Lumpur in 2004 and we saw a lot of integration programs there because they did not have the resources to build separate special schools. Although the special classes are within the school compound and not mainstreamed or included, the idea that the mainstream and the special education students have a chance to mingle with

each other and the government can save the money for other purposes is a brilliant idea. We also visited one centre that is similar to MINDS and one centre for children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

Before entering special education, I did not know that each school has their own programs for people with disabilities and there are different types of schools for different types of disabilities. When I first started teaching, I thought it was good that they have separate schools for these slow learners with difficulties as I thought the slower pace in syllabus might help them. I have changed my mind since. Sports and concert events have been organised to display their abilities and talents. This is good or else they will not have a chance to perform. In Singapore, people with disabilities generally have more support as compared to some of their counterparts in developing countries in Asia.

My past experiences with people with disabilities have led me to treat them like I would any other person albeit with more compassion and patience. They should be treated equally and given a chance to prove their usefulness to the society.

1.2 Present

After being in special education for about a decade, attending numerous courses and seminars, reading up articles about education, talking to various people, seeing all the available options and the general attitude of people who are not involved in special education, I have begun to feel that segregation in education is not such a good idea after all. It has also led me to believe that people with disabilities should be treated equally and fairly like any other person. Instead of taking a 'pitiful' stand towards them, we should be empathetic. In order to be empathetic, we have to know more about people with disabilities.

People in general tend to pity people with disabilities and think of them as unfortunate. There are even some ignorant people who shun people with disabilities as if they have some kind of infectious disease. Public education programs regarding people with disabilities usually show a very pitiful sight of them and encourage help in the form of donations which in turn makes the public feel that they have done their part as long as they have donated some money. These programs also tend to show only the 'better' side of people with disabilities, thus giving the public a one-sided impression of them. These programs do not show the violent side of certain people with intellectual disabilities, which leads to putting the parents and special educators in a bad light when trying to discipline the children or students in public. Some public even intervene and scold the parents or special educators while the parents or special educators are disciplining the children or students. Now, there are more programs relating to special children but they tend to showcase children of the milder form of intellectual disabilities. Programs should show both sides of people with disabilities.

In Singapore, the education system has already streamlined and segregated students into mainstream schools and special schools leading to the majority of our young people with either

limited or totally no experience and exposure to people with disabilities. Previously, though we had the monolingual students in the same school as us and thus have some exposure to students with learning disabilities, we still did not have exposure to people with other types of disabilities. The situation now is even worse than before. The younger generation's only exposure to people with disabilities is through charity events and it always all boils down to donation. Even though we have the Community Involvement Program and Service Learning Program in school, most of the students do their compulsory stints as required and life goes on as usual which makes us wonder if the exposure to people with disabilities ever makes an impact in their thinking and what more could they have done.

The little exposure of the public to people with disabilities is also due to families having a tendency to keep people with disabilities at home as the infrastructure in Singapore is sometimes unsuitable and also because of the stigma associated with people with disabilities. Some families may not know how to manage their children's behaviour and find it easier to keep them at home. A lot of the families also do not know where to get assistance and even if they do, sometimes the procedure & processing takes a long time and frustrate the families. One of my students' parents once told me that they had to wait for about a year or so for all the tests to be done before the child could be enrolled in a special school.

After reading articles about special education in other countries during this course, I am really enlightened by some of the issues that have been raised. The trend is to move towards inclusion and the issues involve improving the quality of life for people with disabilities, their acceptance into society and the general attitude towards them by the public. While it is heartening to know

that more schools in other countries are moving towards some kind of integration, however in Singapore, this is not the case. There will be more segregation as more special schools are being built. As stated in an article by Lim and Choo, once students are referred to special schools, it is difficult for them to move back to the mainstream school (Lim, L & Choo, L.H., 2002). I agree that there should be more fluid and mutual transitions between the two systems. This will enable the young people to be more aware of people with disabilities, how to befriend them and to react to them. Most people express anxiety and ignorance of not knowing how to react and deal with situations involving people with disabilities. Sometimes, they can also be totally uninterested to be involved in the life of these people with disabilities as they are too busy with their own life. Life in Singapore is fast-paced leaving little time to do other things that we would ideally wish to do. There is also no financial incentive for them to try to know or help these people with disabilities, as people in Singapore can be very materialistic.

The literature readings also gave me more alternative ideas of the concept of the quality of life for people with disabilities and what could be done to improve it. The quality of life is not just about providing them with a comfortable life and making sure no danger comes to them. It should be emphasized that more could be done to make sure they have the means to support and take care of themselves and contribute to the society in different ways. Their voices, choices, interests and relationships with others should also be taken into consideration. In the past and sometimes even now, it has always been that they could not make any decisions and we decide for them what is best in our views. It is time to review our concepts.

1.3 Future

First, I will like to see more campaigns on public awareness targeting on the contributions people with disabilities can offer to the world instead of portraying them just as charity cases. The public should also be educated on the positive as well as negative sides of people with intellectual disabilities and the difficulties faced by them and the people around them. All types of disabilities should be shown and not just the milder and more acceptable types of behaviour.

Our educational system should also be altered to cater to all needs of all children equally. Children should not be pushed around from one system to another just because no one is willing to go beyond the present level of workload. More support and training should be given to mainstream teachers so that they can cope better. Sad to say, this kind of exclusion is also happening in special schools. When students cannot adapt well in one class, they are always transferred to a 'special class' for behaviour modification programs. Once they are in the special class, it is not that easy for them to be transferred back to the regular classes because other teachers may have some pre-conceived bias against them. The mindset of some special educators needs to be changed if we want to change the mindset of other mainstream educators. Special schools should also consolidate their efforts and not operate independently of each other.

There should also be more integration and interaction programs going on between the mainstream and the special schools, if not ideally, inclusion and mainstreaming. Integration and interaction programs will expose children to each other and promote awareness, empathy and tolerance. This will lead to a better understanding of people with special needs and hopefully promote a more balanced relationship between them.

Relationships between people and people with special needs have always been kind-of one-way especially with people with intellectual disabilities. It is very difficult for people with intellectual disabilities to form meaningful relationship with others. People with special needs should be treated as equal human beings without being belittled or pitied. People with disabilities also have problems voicing out their interests, thus they do not have a proper perception of self and may rely on others to tell them what to do and how to behave. Most of them do not have meaningful leisure activities or hobbies to keep them occupied.

As a special educator, my role will be to educate as many people as I can as I realise that most people are actually very interested when I talk to them about my experience with special needs as they have little or no experience with people with special needs. I will also try to listen more to my students rather than having to direct them all the time. I will give them some choices regarding their activities in school.

One of the main issues I am concerned with is the quality of life of people with intellectual disabilities have in terms of how they spend their time and the relationships they have with others. I will like to see them develop their own leisure activities and hobbies to occupy their own free time constructively. I will also like to see them develop friendships with their own peer as well as with others on a more equal basis such that both parties can benefit from each other's company. Public awareness, inclusion and mainstreaming should be encouraged to better improve the quality of life for people with special needs. One should be sensitive and flexible about catering to the needs of people with disabilities.

2.3 Quality of Life

Every person with disabilities should be allowed and encouraged to make their own choices. They should also develop their interests and leisure activities to lead a more meaningful life. Strong family support should be present to help and guide them choose the way of life they want. They should also have relationships that are more meaningful by contributing to the relationships and not just receiving from it.

The above issues are very important to people with special needs and they are the main problems here in Singapore and in other countries. We should work on these issues and people with special needs should not be marginalized just because they are not active economic contributors. I feel I am in a position where I can make small changes to the life of the people with disabilities by prioritizing the above issues and working on them.

For the action plan for my selected issues, I will not be focusing on public awareness as they have other organisations to do the promoting. I will be doing public education on my part by talking to friends and acquaintances about people with special needs. Some of the other course-mates are also doing public awareness in their own mainstream schools and they are in a better position to increase public awareness among our young children and youth as they are in direct contact with them. I will also not be touching on inclusion and mainstreaming as it is up to the Ministry of Education and the government to make the mandate for inclusion and mainstreaming. Some schools like the United World College have already been doing interaction programmes with schools from the Movement for the Intellectually Disabled of Singapore (MINDS) for a few years while Riding for the Disabled Association (RDA) has been providing children with special needs an opportunity to do horse riding and interaction with others. Some

schools in Singapore have also been doing interaction programmes but they are not on a regular basis and tend to be more ad-hoc. Different classes of students from mainstream schools will come and interact with students of special needs and this kind of arrangement does not allow for students to get to know each other better to develop a more permanent and meaningful friendship. A few schools interact on a more regular basis, for example, the mainstream students are assigned to the same special class for a while. Within my own school, I have been trying to integrate my special class of children with ASD with the regular classes whenever there are opportunities.

I will be selecting the issue of improving the quality of life for people with disabilities as I feel it is within my sphere of influence. Within the quality of life for people with disabilities, family support is something that is not quite within my sphere of influence though I can advise the family on how to tackle the problems of having a child with special needs. Giving people with special needs their own voice and choice is something that I should work on, as I am also equally guilty of the tendency to make decisions for my students. I will learn to respect their choices within reasonable limits. Two main issues I will want to work on are helping the students with intellectual disabilities to **identify their interests and develop their hobbies** to occupy their free time constructively and the **development of meaningful friendship and relationship with others**. These two issues are within my realm of daily living and influence.

The main reason I want to work on the issue of developing interests, hobbies and friendship for people with disabilities is because of an ex-student whom I have seen struggling to make meaning of his life on his own. This ex-student has always been 'taken care' of by teachers who

were willing to bring him to churches, movies and other social events with them and his social circle of friends were only teachers. When the teacher who was 'taking care' of him got married and was too busy with his new life, the ex-student was 'sort of' passed on to the next willing teacher. When this new teacher had to go overseas to study, it created a void in the ex-student's life. Other teachers simply did not have that much time to spend with him. Due to this 'vacuum' in his social life, this ex-student started hanging out with some undesirable company who introduced him to some of the vices in life. Despite repeated advice from teachers, the ex-student persisted in his new way of life and even refused to pick up phone calls from the teachers. He moved from one group of friendships to another, to whoever is willing to 'take care' of him. Until recently he started calling some of the teachers and said that he has already stopped hanging out with some people and the situation right now is he would call some teachers regularly just to chit chat. In the meantime, the teacher who went overseas came back and he would check on the ex-student occasionally though their relationship was never quite the same again. During the whole process, I feel the ex-student has gone through some experience of growing up and making friends on his own, though some friendships are not that desirable. The main problem for this ex-student is he does not have a strong family support since he comes from a dysfunctional family. The other problem is he does not have a group of friends he can truly call his own and has to rely on teachers who may have limited time. For people like him, it will be good if there are some kind of friendship networks and schemes for developing his hobbies and interests to occupy his time.

Most of the intellectually disabled students meet their friends only in schools with the exception of some of the higher functioning students who manage to call up their friends, fix a date and go

out together. Their other interaction with the public might be during some interaction programs at ad-hoc basis. Very often, they do not have many friends and depend very much on family support.

I have done some informal face-to-face interviews with some high-functioning graduating students from my school regarding their views on friendship and the kinds of relationship they have with others. The consensus is that most of them do not have many 'outside' or other friends (not from their own school). However, they do go out with friends in their own school occasionally for bowling and other activities. They also call each other up once in a while for chitchatting. Most of them stay at home, do not know what to do during their free time, watch television programs most of the time and only go out occasionally. Most of them also do not have any interests or hobbies and even if they have, they have no one to share with and do not know how to develop the interests and hobbies further. Some of them roam around their neighbourhood and mix with bad company.

One of them has some friends from the neighbourhood and mainstream schools to play soccer and to go to mosque with. Topics of conversation focused mainly on soccer and music. He seems to interact quite well with friends from the mainstream schools but he has not much development of his personal interests and hobbies at home. He just watches television programs at home. The other student has a much younger friend from the mainstream school and spends her time watching television programs as well. Another student who stays at the Tampines Home stated that most of his friends are from the Home. He said that he has some friends from NTU interaction club who would bring the whole group out for excursions and interaction programs.

He said he has their telephone numbers but could only call them once in a while as he has been told not to call them too often as the NTU students need to study as well. He said he did not have any neighbourhood friends.

I also did some interviews with teachers who regularly bring students or ex-students out. Most of them tend to bring younger students out as they are cuter but there are teachers who do bring older or ex- students out to check on their well-being and give them an opportunity to socialise with the other students. Most of the relationships with the teachers are more of mentoring relationships. It is difficult to have an equal and balanced relationship. Most of the teachers stated that the lack of time and man-power are the major problems in bringing these students out. Ideally the teachers would like to bring the students out more often to let them have more exposure to the public world and to socialise with each other.

A check with teachers from other special education schools also revealed that most of the schools do not have a tracking system of what happens to the graduates and even if something happens to them, it is not within the realm of the school to intervene. As mentioned in the above story of the ex-student in my school who mixed with bad company, when the school and the organization was approached to see whether they (e.g. the social worker) could counsel the student and keep track of him. The reply was he was no longer in the school and was therefore not the concern of the organization.

The sharing session that Jaspreet gave also indicated that most of the relationships she has are from her extended family and she does not see much need to socialise with others. She is very

fortunate she to have a very strong family support. It would be great to see her socializing more with others instead of just her own family members or the people from Down Syndrome Association. She has the skills to make and maintain friendships as she has quite a mind of her own and is able to relate and share her experiences. She also has her interests and hobbies to occupy herself during her free time.

I have also talked casually to other friends and acquaintances about issues concerning people with special needs and most of them have indicated that they hardly see people with disabilities around in Singapore and are curious where all these people are. They have also indicated that they hardly have any chance to interact with people with disabilities and would not know how to react and mix around with them. They have also expressed anxiety if they have to be politically correct when they meet people with special needs. All of them agreed that infrastructure in Singapore is not suitable for people with disabilities and one of them has expressed exasperation that there are no ramps in one of the hospitals! For the genuinely interested individuals, they are a special breed of people who takes time out to get to know more about people with disabilities. Even so, generally they will have to join some associations. The little interaction with them is limited to events organized by associations like for example the NTU group which spends almost every Sat afternoon with students of MINDS, some Christian groups and other ad-hoc one day interaction programs provided by some companies. Interactions like these hardly develop into meaningful friendships or relationships.

2.4 Common Problems Faced in Developing Friendships

From what I have noticed and found out from the data collected about our students and people with disabilities especially those with intellectual disabilities, it is difficult for them to make any meaningful friendships and develop any hobbies to occupy themselves during their free time. Even with their own peers, it is difficult to extend the friendship beyond school. From articles about developing relationship, friendship, hobbies and interests, these are common problems faced by most people with intellectual disabilities all over the world. Several reasons for these problems are:

- Lack of parental support is a barrier as some parents are too protective and refuse to let their children mix with other intellectually disabled children, as they fear what would happen if they go out among themselves without the supervision of adults. Most parents prefer their children to stay at home than to mix around with others in case others may exploit them or entice their children into bad company. Most of them do not expose their children to the public and are not willing to take the risks of their children forming a more meaningful relationship with others without constant adult supervision. However, some parents are more informed than other parents are. They make conscientious efforts to enrol their children at some associations so that their children will have more chance to mingle around with other people.
- The students' friendships tend to be with their own peers and with teachers or volunteers. They do not really interact with other people, as they have no opportunities to mix around with them. They also lack some of the social skills required to make and maintain a friendship. They do have much general knowledge and information about many things and therefore they may not have much to talk to or discuss with others.

- The students with intellectual disabilities do not have much interests or hobbies and they generally lack initiative to find something to do. They may not have the skills to develop their interest and hobbies further.
- Most people are too busy with their own schedule to make time for people with disabilities. There is also a lack of time on both the teachers and parents' parts. There are not enough teachers, parents and volunteers to bring the students out or to develop some programs to cultivate the students' interests and hobbies and skills to form friendships with others.
- Most people do not know how to react and deal with people with disabilities due to their limited knowledge and exposure to them. There is also a lack of meaningful interaction with the public as the public hardly have a chance to interact with them.
- The schools may not be acceptable or agreeable to teachers bringing the students out on their own in case of issues of responsibility if anything happens.
- There is also a lack of support from the schools for students' after school activities. The teachers do not have enough time and resources to keep track of students' activities after school. There is also a lack of support for students to form alliances with each other in school, for example, there is no support group or clubs for these students who may want to hang out with each other beyond school hours.
- Most people with disabilities have to join some associations if they want to meet other people.
- Some of these students have very poor hygiene and it hampers their confidence as well as their socializing skills.

There is also the issue that the students may expect others to be like the teachers, parents or volunteers to have a lot of time to spend with them and become too reliant on these teachers, parents and volunteers. Like in the case of the ex-student who became too reliant on teachers to be part of his social circle of friends and once when it was gone, he felt lost and ended up mixing with bad company.

These above issues can be dealt with by having more support staff to come up with some programs and supervision to make sure that they are successful. Support staff can come in the form of volunteers or paid facilitators. Volunteers may be difficult to come by due to the constraint of time, as everyone in Singapore is very busy with their own life. The commitment to see things through may also not be there as they are on a voluntary basis. A more workable solution will be to employ paid staff to develop some programs or clubs. The programs, clubs, or recreation agencies can help students identify their interests and develop their hobbies. The students can develop their hobbies and learn how to occupy their free time constructively.

Friendship club can be set up to introduce more friends to the students, increase their circle of friends, teach them how to make and maintain a relationship and how to exchange ideas and information. They can organise more outings and integration programs for these students with other people by setting up some collaboration with other organisations to promote integration and inclusion in the society. They should keep track of the students' development of their activities and emotional well-being. They can also work on developing students' general knowledge by exposing them to more things so that these students will have more things to talk about with others. Another thing they can work on is the general hygiene of the students. A

number of programs can be developed to increase chances and opportunities for these students with intellectual disabilities to be slowly integrated and included into the society.

Every person with intellectual disabilities should have equal rights and opportunities to make friends but we must provide them with some kind of start-up or aid to create opportunities for them. It is possible for them to develop some interest and hobbies to occupy their free time constructively so that they will not go around mixing with bad company. They can also develop friendships with their own peers and with others and later contribute to the relationships according to their own means. They can develop their skills in social etiquette and learn how to make and maintain friendships. All these will provide them with alternative ways to have a more meaningful quality of life.

3 Component C – Researching the Identified Issue

Various articles have stated about the importance of inclusion for people with special needs and its benefits to both people with disabilities and people without disabilities. The earliest the integration, the easiest it will be for people with special needs to gain acceptance into the society, to develop friendships and to make use of the different types of community service in public. Early inclusion makes it easier for students with special needs to establish relationships with peers without disabilities as compared to students with special needs placed in mainstream classrooms later in their schooling life (Hall & McGregor, 2000). We can start by introducing and encouraging people with disabilities to use the community services more often during travelling skills in school.

Students with special needs generally experience more social isolation than peers without disabilities. Their relationships with each other tend to reflect more of acquaintanceship rather than friendship. Intrinsic factors like deficits in self-esteem, social skills and mobility and extrinsic factors such as over-protective parents, scarcity of role models, inadequate social opportunities and ostracization by peers have affected integration (Doubt & McColl, 2003). Students with moderate intellectual disabilities in special schools have expressed greater feelings of loneliness than students in self-contained classes in mainstream schools. They have difficulties establishing friendship and sometimes develop depression. Recent studies have also shown that children with disabilities are less well-liked by peers and are often ignored (Heiman & Margalit, 1998).

In one article, it has been suggested that quality of life and community belonging are moderately correlated suggesting that having friends, activities and support are associated with higher life

satisfaction. Students with intellectual disability feel significantly less belonging and less control over their choices than peers without disabilities. They also engage more in solitary activities and identify less with the neighbourhood (Bramston, Bruggerman & Pretty, 2002).

There is a lack of peer friendship for people with disabilities and their favourite past time includes watching television programs and they sometimes form friendships with television personalities. (Jobling, Moni & Nolan, 2000). Social interactions tend to be with other people with disabilities. The opportunities for people with special needs to form social networks and meet other people are limited despite encouragement as people are more comfortable spending time with those they share similar options, interests and skills (Carnaby, 1998). We can slowly eliminate all these prejudices by having early intervention and integration so that friendship can start at an early age and develop positively.

Parents have also indicated that recreation, activities and hobbies as important components of their children's quality of life. The most common goals they have is for their children basic needs met, followed by them belonging to a social network and having them happy, contented and healthy. They have indicated that activities to keep their children busy as being important and will like to see their children to have friends and have a life (McIntyre, Kraemer, Blacher & Simmerman, 2004). Parents of children with severe and profound disabilities identify friendship development as a priority for their children. Some anecdotal reports have suggested that it will be more difficult for older children with disabilities to develop or maintain typical friendship with non-disabled peers than for younger children with disabilities (Hall & McGregor, 2000). Therefore, it is crucial to have early intervention and integration.

There are also concerns about interaction between children with disabilities and their non-disabled peers resembling care-giving relationships (Hall & McGregor, 2000). Research has also suggested that people with disabilities have limited social connections and few friends and many do have an assortment of relationship with formal caregivers (Pottie & Sumarah, 2004).

There are several approaches to developing and cultivating friendship as shown in the following paragraphs. In one study, they utilized the Circle of Friends Intervention Approach to improve social acceptance of classmates with special needs. The Circle of Friends Approach is implemented to support process of including people with disabilities in local community where they had previously lived in institutions and students who experienced special education needs in mainstream schools where they had previously been educated in separate special schools. It has also been adapted to support children experiencing emotional, behavioural and social difficulties in an educational setting by enlisting help of other children. It has been noted that there is a positive impact on social acceptance of students with special needs in their peer groups and this is a useful way to change children's perception (Frederickson & Turner, 2003). We can use some elements of the approach for the training sessions.

Another study conducted a 6-session training program that is designed to help a group of young adults with Down's syndrome understand friendship better by exploring and discussing various types of friendships and emotions. Structured materials such as The Circle Concept and Network Hand, videos and the students' own experiences have been used. It has been found that programs like enhancing literacy works well as the friendship develops when the students try to meet the

challenges of improving the reading and writing skills of the students with disabilities (Jobling, Moni & Nolan, 2000). Some elements of this program can be modified for use in the training session for our students.

The inclusion practices of special recreation agencies have been studied in Illinois. The main concern is though people with special needs are physically integrated, they may not be socially connected. The agencies assess individuals' leisure preferences and needs. They also select age-appropriate community and identify environment constraints and demands of activity. The required skill levels of participants are assessed. Strategies have been developed to enable participants to overcome skill deficits. Implementation strategies identify adaptive equipment if required and provide buddy/inclusion aide/companion system. Inclusion specialists are also involved and the program is constantly evaluated (Wachter & McGowan, 2002). We can also apply this method of assessing our students' needs and wants, choosing appropriate environment and provide required support for them to integrate into the society.

In another research, four existing friendships between persons with and without developmental disabilities are studied through interview sessions. Friendship relationships and factors that foster or inhibit friendship are explored and described. It has been found that persons with disabilities are often very faithful to the relationship and engage in friendship maintenance behaviour. They also provide expression of humour, support and assistance in the relationship. This seems to reverse the traditional care-giver/care-receiver relationship. This indicates that friendship between persons with and without disabilities do occur and can be reciprocal and meaningful,

thereby echoing Aristotle conceptualization of friendship: choice, goodwill towards the other, recognition of goodwill and goodwill reciprocated (Pottie & Sumarah, 2004).

The values of persons with mental handicaps, the importance of mutual relationships, a sense of community and the spiritual dimension have always been stressed. The aim is not to change or modify persons with disabilities but to enter into relationships with them by spending more time with them. This will break down barriers of stereotyping and labelling and allow the persons with disabilities to contribute to the friendship as well, for example by helping with the household chores. Persons with disabilities can also help persons without disabilities to become de-sophisticated, introspective and more spiritual. Beauty can be found inside persons with disabilities if they are given the opportunity to grow through authentic relationship (Sumarah, 1987).

A 3-year Community Membership Research Project used paid community builders to integrate three older adults with developmental disabilities into the community. The community builders assisted the participants individually to discover preferences, interests and talents through exploration of their neighbourhood. After assessing the participants, the community builders would try to construct an image of how the participants might contribute their presence or talents and get them connected to suitable activity sites. The community builders would eventually 'fade off' as a physical presence when their on-site support was no longer needed. Two of the case studies were more successful and it showed that community building process made a positive impact on the participants' social networks. Success in expanding the social network is highly linked to regular participation in activities that the participants like and the activities should have

unstructured social time for people to mingle with each other (Harlan-Simmons, Holtz, Todd & Mooney, 2001). This approach can be adapted for our people with intellectual disabilities but it is time-consuming and labour-intensive.

It will be great if we can tailor-make individual programs for people with disabilities so that they can integrate into the society more easily and contribute to the society as well. Some of the above approaches can be modified and adapted for use in our context. We should assess each individual to find out their preferences and skills, match them to the appropriate activity sites and provide adequate support and training to integrate them successfully into the society.

4 Component D – Action Plan

What	How	Why	Who	When
Form a Friendship Club	Recruit high functioning students & interested teachers	To cultivate existing friendships & introduce new ones To assess individuals' interests, needs and skills	Teng Students Teachers	1 month Jul 2005
Conduct training sessions	Training program on developing interests/hobbies & friendship	To learn leisure activities, necessary social skills & increase general knowledge	Teng Students Teachers	2 months Aug/Sep 2005
Organise gatherings and outings	Organise gatherings and outings	To further develop social skills and for enjoyment/ recreation	Teng Students Teachers	3 months Oct-Dec 2005
Form friendships with students and people from other special schools /organisations	Liaise with other special schools /organisations to go to each other sites or go for an outing	To promote interaction with others and contribute back to society	Teng Students Teachers Other students/adults from other agencies	3 months Jan-Mar 2006
Recruit people without disabilities	By words of mouth or through friends who are interested	To promote more interaction with people without disabilities and to promote public awareness	Teng Students Teachers Friends	3 months Apr-Jun 2006

The overall aim of the action plan is to improve the quality of life for people with intellectual disabilities by developing interests, hobbies and genuine friendships with others. The objectives for the action plan are:

- To develop skills for leisure activities when alone or at home
- To develop social skills and friendship making and maintenance skills
- To increase general knowledge to improve self-awareness and strengthen friendship
- To work towards a mutual and equal friendship by contributing to the friendship

The following are steps for the action plan :

4.1 To form a Friendship Club

Some like-minded teachers are recruited and briefed about the program. The teachers will brainstorm to come up with more ideas for the program. Program can include lessons on friendship, how to develop interests and hobbies and how to increase general knowledge. It can also include activities to do during gatherings after school hours using school compound or someone's house. Activities can include playing board games, watching videos, hanging out and chitchatting, playing ball games and others.

Teachers will seek permission from the Principal to use the school compound such as the staff lounge and the basketball court after school hours for the program. Teachers will seek parental consent after briefing them about the program.

High-functioning or suitable students with intellectual disabilities from Lee Kong Chian Gardens School-Minds are recruited into the program. There is an existing core group of

students in the school who socialize occasionally after school hours. We will tap on this group and include a few suitable students as well.

Introductions between students and teachers are made. They will get to know each other through chitchatting and playing games. Teachers will interview each student informally to get an idea of the students' likes and dislikes and their attitudes towards certain concepts such as friendship. Teachers will also assess the students' skills level, abilities and talents to better cater to each individual's needs and wants. This can be held weekly or fortnightly.

4.2 To conduct training sessions

Teachers will conduct training sessions on the development and cultivating of friendship. Students will learn how to make and maintain friendship, the appropriate social behaviour and proper social etiquette. Students will also be taught how to maintain personal hygiene as many of our students have poor hygiene that will hamper their socialization with others. Teachers will conduct lessons to increase the general knowledge of students so that they will have more things to talk about and discuss with other people.

Teachers and students will play indoor games such as board games, charades and carom and outdoor games like ball games and cycling to develop their skills and talents. Students will also be guided on how to occupy their free time alone by engaging in some activities such as reading, art/craft, playing computer games and others. This can be held once a week or fortnightly.

4.3 To organise outings & gatherings

Teachers will organise trips to members' house to socialise or play games. Outings such as watching movies, bowling, going to library and going for coffee together will also be organised. Initially teachers will accompany students for these gatherings and outings. This can be held fortnightly or once a month. Later, the teachers' presence will fade out slowly to let the students organise trips by themselves. Teachers will keep themselves up to date by asking students and parents if they have organised any gatherings recently.

4.4 To form friendships with students and people from other special schools/ organisations

Teachers will try to source out and liaise from other MINDS schools and workshops for existing friendship circles or people who are interested to join the Friendship Club. Teachers will organise the gatherings in small groups so that maximum benefits can be reaped. Smaller groups allow for more individualised interaction. Once students are comfortable with other friends that they have made, they may organise gatherings on their own. Teachers will try to keep track of the development of the friendships made by talking to and counselling the students when necessary.

Teachers will try to extend the friendship circle to other APSN schools and to homes like Red Cross Home and old folks' homes. Students will be introduced to people staying in the Homes by interacting with them and by helping them to clean up the place. In this way, people with intellectually disabilities can contribute back to the society in their own way. This can be held once a month.

4.5 To recruit people without disabilities

Teachers will recruit people without disabilities by words of mouth through friends who are interested to befriend people with intellectual disabilities. This will be better since it is easier to monitor the friendship network and the people without disabilities will be more committed since they are genuinely interested. This can be held once a month

The evaluation of the success of the program will be done through interviews with the students, teachers and people involved. Observations of the students can also be done by checking their level of self-esteem and self-confidence, their hygiene level and the way they hold conversations with others.

Lack of time and man-power can limit the progress of the program. Teachers and volunteer friends may not have enough time to carry out the training program and to organise gatherings. There may not be enough teachers and volunteer friends to organise the gatherings.

The alternatives to this action plan will be:

- Action plan can be done in a smaller scale involving students, teachers and friends of teachers only.
- Teachers can try to find out if there is any existing friendship circle in other schools and try to introduce the students into the groups.
- Paid facilitators can be employed like the Community Builders in the article ‘Building Social Relationships through Valued Roles: Three Older Adults and the

Community Membership Project' by Harlan-Simmons, Holtz, Todd and Mooney.
This will counter the problems of time constraint and lack of man-power. It will also be more individualised.

This course has helped me to identify core issues in special education and how I can try to carry out an action plan with the core issue in mind. Hopefully, this action plan will result in improving the quality of life for people with intellectual disabilities.