Educational Therapy in Singapore: Towards Professionalisation and Professionalism

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Introduction

In Singapore, the term *educational therapist* does not evoke a sense of familiarity or expectedness. This term is used to a lesser extent in Singapore, as compared to the European and American states. The Association of Educational Therapists (AET) had been formed in California in 1979 to formally define educational therapy and to establish principles of practice (Ungerleider & Maslow, 2001). However, the Dyslexia Association of Singapore (DAS) is independent of the AET and has adopted the use of this term only in the recent years, with practitioners previously known as *specialist tutors.* Unfamiliarity with the term *educational therapist*, culturally, can result in uncertainties and ambiguities in its use both within the organisation and in the public domain. The term is also ambiguous; it is not entirely a teacher or tutor who is merely concerned with academic issues nor is it entirely a therapist who is merely concerned with the conscious and unconscious processes of the human mind. Moreover, educational therapy in Singapore is an occupation without statutory regulation; educational therapists are not governed by the Allied Health Professions Act 2011 (Attorney-General's Chambers Singapore, 2013), unlike occupational therapists, physiotherapists and speech-language therapists who are required to be registered allied health professionals to practice in Singapore.

In view of the above, the article aims to explore how professionalism and professionalisation can be developed and sustained in a context where the practice of educational therapy is newly emerging. The article also has implications for the rest of Asia and other countries across the world where professional standards have not yet been established.

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The Educational Therapist in Singapore

All educational therapists in the DAS need to have a minimum qualification of a bachelor's degree in any field, as well as sufficient phonemic awareness (sensitivity to the sounds in language). Upon recruitment, they will be trained in a literacy programme that is based on the Orton-Gillingham (OG) approach. Highly systematic and sequential, it has a "multisensory, alphabetic, structured approach to language" (Gillingham & Stillman, 1997), tailored for teaching basic reading, spelling and writing to students with literacy difficulties who often have a diagnosis of dyslexic. In the programme, students are moved systematically in small hierarchical steps through the material - from letter-sound recognition towards the complex and ultimate goal of reading a text. In a typical session, language is broken down into components, mainly, handwriting, phonemic awareness, letter-sound association, syllable types and patterns, spelling rules, and high frequency words.

Apart from the initial training, trainee educational therapists undergo a part-time Specialist Diploma Course in the next 6 to twelve months. Both courses are conducted by the training wing of the DAS, the DAS Academy. Upon completion of the two training courses, a supervised teaching stint, and a mentoring programme, they become full-fledged educational therapists.

All educational therapists can apply to be members of the Register of Educational Therapists (Asia) or RETA, the regulatory board of educational therapists. RETA had been launched in 2012 by the DAS to promote and tighten this occupational group (DAS, 2012).

Singapore's Dyslexia Support Landscape

Singapore's Ministry of Education (MOE) provides DAS with an annual grant to fund their specialised remediation programme for mainstream students (Fu, 2009) and mainstream students enjoy the services at a subsidised rate (DAS, 2013). Hence, a substantial number of dyslexic students turn to the DAS for outside-of-school remediation. However, since 2012, MOE, perhaps in response to the issue of "inadequate support for students with special needs in mainstream schools" (Ministry of Social and Family Development, 2012), has expanded its school-based dyslexia remediation and dyslexia support programme. In 42 schools island wide, allied educators and trained mainstream teachers provide dyslexia remediation for students up to Primary Four within the school (MOE, 2013).

The Heart of Educational Therapy

Before professionalisation and professionalism can be discussed, it is imperative to return to the basics - the heart of educational therapy. In my quest for the answer, I would like to return to the climate in which special education has its root. One of the earliest accounts of special education can be found in the 'Wild Boy of Aveyron' (Itard, 1962; in Gaynor, 1973). In it, Itard documented his attempts to civilize a boy with animal-like instincts, who had been living in the forest for 12 years. He attempted to teach him to speak, communicate emotions, and

read simple words. He did not manage to help him achieve normalcy eventually but many writers such as that of Gaynor (1973) did not view his attempt as a failure at all, for the essence of special education could be extracted from one of the earliest recorded scientific account of a child with serious neurological, emotional and educational handicaps.

> 'In order to achieve the smallest success, Itard had to accept the totality of Victor (wild boy), his fluidity, his life pattern... Education must be in harmony with all the dynamic nature of life' (Lieberman, 1982, p. 568).

While consulting the principles espoused by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) which Singapore has ratified on 30 November 2012 (National Council of Social Services, n.d.), I have observed similarities between those principles and what has been learnt from Itard. The above quote is closely captured in the two of the eight principles espoused by the UNCRPD (UNICEF, 2008):

(d)   Respect for differences and accepting people with disabilities as part of human diversity.

(h)   Respect for the evolving capacity of children with disabilities and their right to preserve their identity

This overlap signifies that the essence of special education has not changed much over the years; in fact, the soul of special education has been retained. This is very much assuring and comforting. To summarise and describe how things *ought*

to be in educational therapy I would like to draw on Herbert Simon's instrumentalist theory of design (Simon, 1996). The idea of 'designing without final goals' (p. 163) is consistent with the term 'bounded rationality' (Simon, 1997) which takes into account the cognitive limitations of the decision maker and his inability to foretell or determine the future. It is the ability to recognise that the function of design goals is to motivate activity which in turn will generate new goals and can be illustrated by Simon's analogy of oil painting in Simon (1996):

> 'In oil painting every new spot of pigment laid on the canvas creates some kind of pattern that provides a continuing source of new ideas to the painter. The painting process is a process of cyclical interaction between the painter and canvas in which current goals lead to new applications of paint, while the gradually changing pattern suggests new goals.' (p. 163).

Consistent with the essence of educational therapy described in the account of the 'Wild Boy of Averyron' above, the practice of educational therapy ought to take on a 'fluid, constructivist and reflective' design (Chua, 2008, p. 66) and ought not to be fixated on the end goal. Fixation on the end goal tend to neglect the student's natural grain and his life pattern - his unique strengths, his habits, his fluctuating emotions, motivation and self-esteem, and new areas of needs during the therapy process, all of which can interfere grossly with learning when not addressed. The educational therapist should allow this current information to inform the moving

of the client from one level of learning and functioning to the next, and be attentive to new pedagogies for new goals. In doing this, I am not advocating a departure from a systematically planned and evaluated approach referred to by Poon, Conway and Khaw (2008) as the Assessment, Planning, Implementation and Evaluation (APIE) Cycle. I am suggesting that within the structure of the APIE cycle, we must remain open to a reactive approach to intervention and an intervention characterised by an attitude of openness to new goals or learning needs that arise along the way. March's (1994, p. 262) technology of foolishness is at work here because the conventional and rational practice of strict adherence and rigidity to the initial goal has been abandoned, allowing an attitude of playfulness towards intervention. This reactive approach to intervention is possible with an APIE cycle being completed in a term of 10 weeks for each client (i.e. four cycles in a year), instead of implementing just one APIE cycle per client per year. That will allow therapy to be sensitive to the client's evolving needs and an intervention that is well prescribed.

A strong treatment alliance comprising of the client, the client's family and allied professionals (Ficksman & Adelizzi, 2010) is another factor that contributes towards a reactive approach. A tightly knitted alliance will ensure that information pertaining to client is well coordinated and communicated between all parties. An educational therapist, in a utopian setting, should possess a sense of openness, playfulness and sensitivity, all of which will translate to an excellent level of competency and discretion.

Towards Professionalisation

Now that there is an understanding of what an educational therapist *ought to be*, I will now examine the existing infrastructure and offer some thoughts on how professionalisation of the practice can be done.

Evetts (2005) argued for a shift away from the concept of professionalisation towards the concept of professionalism. Despite that, I would like to propose that there is a space for professionalisation in the practice of educational therapy because the practice is newly emerging in Singapore and could do with standardisation of the education, training and qualification to allow practitioners to gain professional status and recognition (Brint, 2001). Previously perceived negatively and pessimistically as a mean by practitioners to pursue, develop and maintain the closure of the occupational group for their self interests (Abbott, 1988; as cited in Evetts, 2011), I would like to suggest that professionalisation is relevant and necessary to develop the practice of educational therapy.

Professionalisation can be done at the level of an organisation such as RETA, which was launched in 2012 to promote and tighten the occupational group of educational therapists (DAS, 2012).

RETA has a noble aim. According to Dr. Thomas Sim, the Executive Director of the DAS academy (DAS, 2012):

> 'RETA aims to be the pioneering body in endorsing the professional status of qualified practitioners in the field of specific learning differences so parents

with children in need of assistance will have a ready resource and more importantly, a trusted one. RETA will raise the awareness and reputation of educational therapists in the region, and the community will benefit.' (p. 1)

In view of the above, it will be appropriate for this regulatory organisation to have a set of code of professional ethics that educational therapists could turn to for guidance. Ethical codes are essential for indicating what is to be expected for newcomers, and the absence of these, communicates ambiguity and creates confusion.

To safeguard the standards of educational therapists, the regulatory organisation also has to maintain a minimum educational qualification or a minimum language requirement especially since the therapists will be remediating clients' language ability. In the same vein, she will have to ensure that her members have a minimum level of teaching ability, possibly through a fulfilment of a supervised teaching stint.

Currently, RETA provides an online platform for the parents to access qualified help for their dyslexic child. List of "qualified" educational therapists is accessible from the website. Thus, she has the utmost responsibility to ensure members have adequate experience to deal with issues faced by a dyslexic child by standardising the *education, training and qualification* of practitioners. In so doing, RETA can raise the entry bar of the occupation and bring professionalisation to scale.

Towards Professionalism

Having discussed the role of professionalisation, I will now move my discussion towards professionalism – an increasingly extensively used concept in a wide range of occupations and workplaces which has strong implications on trust, discretion and competence (Evetts, 2006). There are two different forms of professionalism in knowledge-based work: organisational professionalism and occupational professionalism (Evetts, 2013). Organisational professionalism is being imposed 'from above' using hierarchical structures of responsibility to promote change and impose standards (Evetts, 2011, p. 407), while occupational professionalism allows practitioners to exercise their own autonomy and discretion in decision-making that is grounded in their education, training, organizational identities and work cultures, with the appeal to professionalism operating 'from within' the occupational group (Evetts, 2011, p. 408). I will argue that the latter is more valued than the former since professionalism is always associated with individuals and never with the organisation (Svensson, 2006).

In line with the aim to 'develop, deliver and grow, a comprehensive and holistic range of programmes to meet the needs of students and demand from parents' (DAS, 2014), remediation has been expanded to areas other than language and literacy and should achieve greater relevance for students in mainstream schools. Committees have been formed to generate standardised and well structured curriculums for

different areas - English literacy, Chinese literacy, Mathematics and Study Skills. This is laudable move that reflects organisational professionalism - educational therapy is progressing towards the multi-dimensional model described by Ficksman and Adelizzi (2009), in Ficksman and Adelizzi (2010) which states the various domains of responsibilities of an educational therapist. Moreover, curriculums can also be important in ensuring consistent and quality services are provided by practicing professionals and can be seen as a form of organisational professionalism. In the current situation, however, we must remain mindful of issues surrounding *discretion and competence* which are central to the theme of "professionalism".

Discretion

While practicing standardised and highly structured curriculum, the educational therapists must not forget to exercise *'autonomy and discretionary judgement and assessment'* (Evetts, 2013, p. 787). It is crucial that educational therapists be taught 'fidelity with flexibility' to allow them work flexibly within the constraints of the essential pivot points (Coleman, Gallagher & Job, 2012, p. 34).

While doing therapy work, the therapist must continue to embrace the totality and fluidity of the client (just like Itard's intervention with the wild boy), to use the curriculum flexibly to address the needs of the client who must remain as the focus so as to pursue a 'fluid, constructivist and reflective' design (Chua, 2009b, p. 66).

Competence

With the multi-dimensional model of educational therapy advocated by Ficksman and Adelizzi (2009) which contains the domains of perception, socio-cultural context, development, memory, deep learning, language, executive function, autonomy, behaviour, temperament, emotion and empathy (in Ficksman and Adelizzi, 2010), as well as the need for educational therapists to be trained in an additional domain of their choice other than in literacy (known as dual specialisation), the DAS has invested tremendously in staff development in recent years. Indeed, she must continue to do so to raise competent therapists who have knowledge and skills across all the domains to provide a holistic remediation.

Conclusion

In this article, I have described the climate of educational therapy in Singapore, and have illustrated how DAS has moved this relatively new profession towards professionalisation and professionalism. While doing so, I have also highlighted areas which we must remain mindful of. With educational therapists who are qualified, competent and discerning , the young clients will receive the help that they need to overcome their learning barriers. This is an urgent call, because once the window of opportunity is missed, they will, like the wild boy of Aveyron, resist the treatment given, retreat into their forest of deep darkness and remain forever in their labyrinth of hopelessness.

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