

A Special Education

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Over the past 5 years, Miss Nagashima Aya has been building ties between her school and the Cerebral Palsy Alliance Singapore School (CPAS). Miss Aya shares her passion for this collaboration and why her students have gained more than they have given.

“Hello, Jie Jie!”

I can still vividly remember my maiden visit to Cerebral Palsy Alliance Singapore School (CPAS). I remember the many questions racing through my mind as I prepared for what I was sure was going to be an eye-opening experience: “Can they talk? How should I talk to them? How can I help them?” So many questions raced through my mind as I approached the school.

Walking down a long ramp for wheelchair access to the canteen filled with much apprehension, I was greeted by a warm enthusiastic boy grinning from ear-to-ear. The sight of him in a wheelchair with limbs that were far too skinny broke my heart. He gestured for me to follow him and I instinctively reached out for the handles to push his wheelchair. But before I knew it, he was whizzing past the rest of his classmates as he wheeled himself around with ease. I felt the haze of apprehension lifting from my eyes and my heart. It was the first step of my journey that was to last for the next 5 years that opened my eyes to what these students were capable of. They could eat on their own, clear their food trays and be responsible for their own items. This was the first of many valuable lessons I was to learn at CPAS.

Over the past five years, I have had the privilege of overseeing the Special Education (SPED) Satellite Partnership between Meridian Junior College (MJC) and CPAS. And through this partnership, I witnessed many of my own students from MJC take the same route as I initially did, in understanding and celebrating what the delightful children from CPAS were capable of.

Student volunteers come and go, but what never changes is the tremendous amount of learning and growth that each Meridian student experiences in the interaction with the children from CPAS. Over the years, I have come across the “amateurs” who would “freeze” upon seeing the CPAS students, the “outgoing ones” who could click easily with them and the more “seasoned ones” who struck a fine balance between being strict and approachable. Regardless of how they started out, all of them would leave the programme wiser, more inspired and more humbled than when they first started.

Akmal* is a fine example of an outgoing volunteer who would unleash his inner child whenever he volunteered at CPAS. Like long-time friends, he would chat with the CPAS students about the latest cartoons and play with them at the playground. During the classroom sessions, he would be seated among the CPAS students, patiently guiding them and assisting in conducting character education lessons.

Right from the beginning, Akmal had been very frank about his dislike for kids. "I join this because my friends asked me to join. Generally, I cannot stand kids and their drama," Akmal had shared during one of the reflection sessions. But seeing how good Akmal was with the CPAS students, I appointed him as the leader of the student volunteers. He initially turned down the role, admitting to joining this program due to peer pressure. He was also unsure of the additional responsibilities given that he had no prior leadership experience. Trusting my judgement, he agreed to give it a shot.

Initially, the lesson ideas were simple and nothing out of the ordinary but things finally began to pick up when the volunteers came up with a unique game called the "Values BINGO". This special version of BINGO that Akmal and his peers came up with was meant to teach CPAS students key values by reflecting upon their actions. Instead of a number, each box on the BINGO card described a certain positive behaviour that students might have exhibited, for instance helping a friend in class today. When a particular behaviour was called out, CPAS students had to recall and decide if they had exhibited such behaviour or not. Those who had exhibited the positive behaviour would place a smiley face sticker in the corresponding box. The game continued until the first student successfully formed a row of five consecutive stickers.

The competitive and reflective elements certainly created a lot of hype and excitement among the CPAS students that day. Their loud incessant chatter and wide smiles at the end of the day were a clear indication of how engaged and delighted they were. Even the CPAS teacher was all praise for the volunteers as the activity had given the CPAS students an opportunity to reflect and improve themselves.

Greatly encouraged by the success of this lesson, Akmal became driven to research on more interesting lesson ideas. Sometimes, Akmal and his friends would start lessons off with making of props such as character masks. These were then used to put up skit performances. These skits, mostly live-action adaptations of common fables such as The Lion and the Mouse, taught the CPAS students certain values like kindness and courage. Catering to the students' interest in visuals, the volunteers would also spend time filming and putting together videos that exemplify right and wrong behaviours. Bursting into peals of laughter as they watched these videos of their "Kor Kors" and "Jie Jies", the eagle-eyed CPAS students would immediately identify certain actions that might be rude and suggest better behaviours.

Such lessons enabled the CPAS students to contextualise the abstract values taught in a fun and engaging manner.

Throughout his involvement in this programme, I have witnessed Akmal blossoming from just being a fun-loving playmate to a reliable mentor who knew how to be firm yet approachable and also a respected senior who gave sound advice to the new volunteers. Learning from his experiences, Akmal also became more adept at planning effective yet engaging lessons which he could confidently conduct on his own.

Greatly inspired by their relentless determination to be independent despite the challenges they faced, Akmal drew strength from the CPAS students to overcome the setbacks he faced in his studies. He started putting in more effort in his revision and whenever he felt the need to de-stress, he would drop by CPAS for a quick meet up with his “old pals”. Having initially joined the CPAS programme with no genuine desire to be a volunteer, it is heartening to see how a meaningful volunteering stint could transform this initially laidback and non-committal boy to a dedicated and passionate young man who continued to serve by volunteering at Singapore Association of the Visually Handicapped (SAVH) after his graduation.

As much as “Kors Kors” such as Akmal have made great impact on the lives of the CPAS students, I believe the reverse is equally true. As the CPAS students continue to ask after these “Kor Kors” and “Jie Jies”, volunteers like Akmal continue to often reminisce about both the fun times and the meaningful learning experiences they had with the CPAS students.

Akmal’s heartfelt words aptly reflect the thoughts of many volunteers before and after him. “I really enjoyed the wonderful sessions I had with the kids back at the Cerebral Palsy School. It was an awesome experience. Though I had my doubts at first, they have totally changed my opinion about children. To be frank, I would love to see them again. The bonds that have been formed between the kids and me can never be broken. I miss them calling me “Kor Kor”. I miss Jack’s* (one of the CPAS students) words of wisdom like ‘never give up’ and ‘we must respect one another’. These words will continue to motivate me.”



“Thank You” cards made by CPAS students

Sometimes, students volunteer with the misconception that it is all about what they can do for the CPAS students. I, myself, was also guilty of having such thoughts. If anything, this partnership has allowed both my students and I to experience the true essence of service-learning – we serve to learn, so that we may learn to serve. And I truly believe every time we give, we will learn more than we can ever give.

I have seen how this partnership has grown from having just one Character-Building Programme to the current range of programmes including Leadership Training Workshop conducted by MJC student leaders for CPAS prefects and Neighbourhood Newspaper Collection involving MJC's Service-Learning Club students and selected Co-Curricular Activities (CCAs) in CPAS. I feel myself blessed and consider it a great privilege to have been a part of an opportunity like this.

**Actual name has been changed.*