# 3.1 Reflection

## KOTO’s Structured Learning for Disadvantaged Communities

Our visit to KOTO (Know One Teach One), Vietnam’s first social enterprise, offered insights into how structured vocation education can transform lives and empower marginalized communities. The experience inspired me to reflect on the possibilities for similar approaches in Singapore.

The most remarkable aspect of KOTO was its structured and holistic learning environment. From the moment we entered the training center, the energy and enthusiasm of the students was noticeable. It was evident that KOTO’s model, with its 24-month program combining technical skills, personal development, and internships, had created a strong sense of purpose in trainees.

A unique aspect of KOTO was the emphasis on English language proficiency – a critical skill in the hospitality industry. Slightly differing from Will to Live, another social enterprise we visited, KOTO gave us the impression that they prioritized English learning much more, which further equipped trainees for the hospitality industry. Many older students exuded confidence as they interacted with us, a testament to how KOTO’s approach had boosted their confidence in conversational English. This could be contrasted with the newer classes of students. This focus on communication skills aligns with SDG4 (Quality Education) and contributes to reducing inequalities (SDG10) by giving students the tools to compete on a more level playing field.

*A group of people posing for a photo

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*CAPT students with a senior KOTO class*

Additionally, KOTO’s 12-month program for vulnerable women in rural areas like Ha Giang added another dimension to their impact. This initiative tailored vocational training to the specific needs of women in these communities, providing them with skills to achieve economic independence, addressing SDG5 (Gender Equality), and breaking cycles of poverty in alignment with SDG1 (No Poverty).

Visiting KOTO challenged my assumptions about vocational training and its potential to drive social change. In Singapore, vocational education often carries a stigma compared to academic pathways, despite this improving in recent years. KOTO demonstrated that vocational training, when structured and delivered with purpose, can be a transformative tool for empowerment.

The students’ confidence, happiness, and enthusiasm were indicators of KOTO’s success in fostering personal growth and resilience. This reinforced my understanding of sustainable development as not just providing resources but creating environments where individuals thrive independently.

KOTO’s model also made me reflect on the cultural differences in addressing social issues. Singapore’s approach often leans towards financial aid and top-down programs. KOTO’s focus on building confidence, teaching life skills, and creating a strong sense of ownership combines empowerment with skill-building.

## Promoting Mental Wellness through Tea Talk

A person standing in a room with people sitting around

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*Michael’s sharing about Tea Talk*

We also visited Tea Talk, a social enterprise dedicated to promoting mental wellness and empowering vulnerable communities. The initiative, founded by Michael, left a lasting impression on me due to its personalized approach to mental health and its independent strategy to financially sustain its operations.

Tea Talk’s mission is encapsulated in its flagship event “Let’s Talk”, where individuals are encouraged to discuss their struggles over a cup of tea. Through counselling services, workshops, and community programs, Tea Talk provides a safe space for individuals to openly share their stories. The emphasis on conversation by simply listening and connecting aligns with SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), particularly its goal to promote mental health and well-being.

Tea Talk also conducts workshops in Ha Giang in collaboration with the British Council to address pressing issues like human trafficking. These workshops involve social workers teaching villagers and students how to identify potential trafficking cases and report them to the authorities. Similar trafficking issues were echoed when we visited the United Nations International Organization for Migration (UN IOM) Vietnam. Tea Talk’s efforts are part of an essential step towards community resilience which also aligns with SDG 16.2 to end abuse, exploitation, trafficking, and all forms of violence against and torture of children.

Additionally, Tea Talk offers programs such as the Play and Learn Program, which equips children with life skills like effective communication, navigating friendships, and understanding love. They also extend support to children from families affected by HIV and drug addiction, creating an inclusive space for growth and healing.

What sets Tea Talk apart is its multifaceted revenue model, combining counselling, workshops, honey production through "Let’s Farm", the newly opened Tea Talk 2k café, and even Michael’s personal creative outlets like painting. Tea Talk ensures financial sustainability by diversifying its income streams. While one may question the sustainability of this once Michael leaves Vietnam - Michael personally funds 30% of the organization’s operations – Tea Talk’s direction certainly promotes mental wellness in Vietnam.

Tea Talk challenged my understanding of mental health advocacy, particularly in contexts where resources are scarce. In Singapore, while there is increasing awareness and advocacy for mental well-being, stigma around mental illnesses still prevents many from seeking help. Tea Talk’s community-centric approach, focusing on openness and peer support, offers a new perspective.

One insight that stood out to me was the impact of simply being a listener. The act of sharing stories over tea highlights the power of connection in mental health support. This approach contrasts with Singapore’s typically formalized mental health services or peer support groups, where access can feel clinical and impersonal.

Tea Talk’s financial model also reinforced lessons I had learned from a friend who attended the Young Southeast Asia Leadership Initiative (YSEALI) Academic Fellowship Program. He mentioned that diversifying revenue streams is crucial for social enterprises to reduce reliance on single sources of funding, ensuring long-term resilience from government or investor funding. Tea Talk embodies this principle by blending counselling services with creative initiatives like honey farming and workshops, creating a self-sustaining system.

Overall, our visits to KOTO and Tea Talk highlighted the transformative power of social enterprises in addressing critical challenges. Both organizations demonstrate how holistic, community-driven approaches can inspire similar efforts in Singapore, leaving a lasting impression of hope and empowerment.

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# 3.2 Application

My biggest takeaway from observing the operations of KOTO and Tea Talk in Vietnam was the importance of understanding the unique needs of beneficiaries. Both demonstrated this by tailoring their approaches to empower their communities. In Singapore’s context, this provides valuable insights into fostering deeper personal connections and rethinking vocational training programs to better address the needs of underprivileged groups.

## Cultivating a Culture of Listening

One personal insight I gained from Tea Talk is the transformative power of listening. Tea Talk’s “Let’s Talk” initiative, among other workshops, highlighted the importance of creating safe environments for individuals to share their struggles. Reflecting on my own experiences, I realize that while many often intend to help others, environmental barriers often hinder meaningful conversations. Tea Talk’s focus on openness shifted my perspective on mental wellness. It showed that being a listener and providing a non-judgmental space for others to share can be just as impactful, if not more, than creating formalized support systems.

In Singapore, especially in university, our fast-paced lifestyles and high-stress academic environments make it difficult to create space for meaningful conversations. While NUS already has robust mental wellness frameworks, such as peer supporters, residential assistants, and faculty-level initiatives, these systems can feel formal and impersonal. Tea Talk’s example suggests that cultivating a culture of listening within informal, everyday interactions can significantly contribute to mental well-being.

For instance, we can encourage CAPTains to be more mindful and open to connecting with peers who may not have close support networks. This effort could extend beyond formal house talks and discussions to foster a genuine caring community. Simple acts, such as initiating conversations or organizing informal “listening circles” among friends, can go a long way in normalizing deep conversations about life and struggles. However, trust and openness take time to build and requires an intentional cultural shift.

## Rethinking Vocational Training in the IT Industry

I have always been drawn to the idea of using technology to improve lives. My interest in vocational training was sparked when I volunteered at the Kid-Powered Workshop as part of Saturday Kids’ Code in the Community program in 2019. This initiative provided underprivileged children aged 8 to 15 an opportunity to learn basic robotics. Witnessing the children’s excitement and curiosity was inspiring, but it also led me to question the long-term impact of such programs.

The most pressing concern was the lack of clear pathways for these children to translate their technical skills into career opportunities. Many programs often stop at exposure, without addressing the transition from education to employment. Similarly, KOTO’s vocational training, while transformative in its focus on soft skills and employability, left me wondering about its graduates’ long-term success in the job market.

A group of people in a room

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*Kid-Powered Robotics Workshop 2019 in partnership with*

*Saturday Kids, REC Foundation, VEX Robotics and Google Singapore*

In Singapore, there are numerous avenues for STEM-related education, such as Generation Singapore, which supports economic mobility through employment-focused training. However, these programs often lack a tailored approach for underprivileged youths. Many initiatives focus solely on technical skills, without providing the soft skills needed in the job market.

Like KOTO, a vocational training program that takes a more holistic approach could be more beneficial. This program would couple workforce preparation with technical education, ensuring participants are better equipped to succeed in the workforce.

Despite not having the capacity to execute it currently, I propose a vocational training program that focuses on both technical and soft skills development. Younger participants would receive foundational training in areas like coding or robotics. These programs are already provided by existing organizations. Programs for high school students would incorporate workshops on interview preparation and broader STEM job path decision-making to prepare participants for real-world challenges.

Partnerships with technology companies could provide mentorships, internships, and networking platforms, allowing participants to gain valuable industry insights. The program would also include guidance on career pathways, helping youths navigate educational and professional options in STEM fields. By addressing both technical and soft skills, the program would aim to create a well-rounded education for underprivileged youths to thrive in the job market.

Implementing this program could begin with a needs assessment, collaborating with organizations to identify gaps in current initiatives. The curriculum could be designed in partnership with schools and industry professionals to ensure relevance. Taking inspiration from Tea Talk’s financial model, the program could combine corporate sponsorships, government grants, and paid workshops for professionals to diversify funding.

The program could start as a small pilot to refine its approach based on participant feedback before expanding through partnerships with schools and other organizations. Success stories from graduates and publicity could help build awareness and appreciation for these efforts.

The lessons from KOTO and Tea Talk show the importance of tailoring solutions to the needs of beneficiaries. By fostering a culture of listening and introducing a holistic vocational training program, Singapore can address gaps in mental wellness and career development for underprivileged communities.

(800 words)

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