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Exploring the experiences of individuals with and related to autism in Singapore

http://reachautism.sg

Final Year Project Report
Illustrated Feature Writing
Project ID: 32684

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NANYANG TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY
WEER KIM WEE SCHOOL OF COMMUNICATION AND INFORMATION
ACADEMIC YEAR 2009/2010
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ABSTRACT

Autism is a mysterious neurological disorder that has no definitive cause and cure at present. Individuals with autism are typically perceived to be anti-social and do not enjoy the company of others. However, it is less known that such behaviour is the result of inborn social and communication impairment; being born with a disorder is not their choice. In fact, their inability to integrate into the society at times makes them helplessly think that they do not belong to this planet.

In our four comprehensive profile feature stories, we look into the joys, woes, struggles and difficulties that individuals with and related to autism face, as they battle with social stigma and insufficient resources. We also examine the topic from education, economic, social and employment- and therapy-support aspects, interviewing experts for their insights in these areas.

Despite the rugged path ahead, we see individuals with autism brave through rounds and rounds of challenges with admirable perseverance, along with encouraging support from surrounding persons.

As we embark on the journey to explore what goes behind these enclosed worlds and how individuals with autism strives hard to keep an open mind to embrace this planet, breathe optimism and feel for them.
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INTRODUCTION

What is autism? When posed with this question, many would form images of a silent and withdrawn individual who retreats into engaging in his or her own activity instead of socialising with surrounding peers. However, this may not be an accurate representation of an individual with autism.

With the recognition of 1988 Oscar winning drama film *Rain Man*, starring American actor Dustin Hoffman as Raymond Babbitt, who is an autistic savant with outstanding memory, individuals with autism are typically stereotyped as having savant skills — special talents that are in contrast with the individuals’ overall limitations. Such media representation partially contributes to an injurious divergence between the general understanding of autism and the clinical evidences of the complex developmental disorder. In fact, the public’s perception of autism falls into two extreme categories of myths about autism, of which neither is true — individuals with autism either enjoy being alone or they act weirdly but are exceptionally brilliant, making them “difficult people to be with”.

Besides stereotypes propagated by the media, there is also a lack of comprehensive local mainstream media reports that address the stigma and fallacies about autism. A thorough search of the largest local print media company Singapore Press Holdings (SPH) newspapers’ database *Newslink* over a 16-year period from 1994 to present yields a humble result of less than 40 relevant news features about autism, English and Chinese combined.

Misconceptions formed as a consequence of insufficient knowledge can become a harmful origin of social stigma that alienates individuals with autism and their families. As such, it is the responsibility of journalism to educate the public by providing first-hand accounts of individuals with and related to autism.
Focusing on the aim to raise awareness about autism, we explored the different facets of the brain-based developmental disorder by documenting profile feature stories of an individual with autism, along with three other individuals whose lives revolve around the issue of autism — a parent whose son was diagnosed with autism, a special needs pre-school teacher who has spent seven years educating children with autism, as well as an occupational therapist who is an enthusiastic advocate for children with autism.

In addition, we also interviewed the president of Autism Resource Centre (Singapore), who played a significant role in shaping the autism landscape in Singapore in the past five years. To furnish the discussion of the topic with an academic aspect, we also sought views from two assistant professors from the National Institute of Education, who specialise in early childhood and special needs education.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Our multimedia project consists of four in-depth profile feature stories, interweaved with relevant insights from three experts, as well as basic facts that serve as useful background information to better understand the stories. The subjective experiences of the profile interviewees, balanced with objective perspectives of the experts, will provide a good mix to appeal to our readers — relate to them emotionally while learning more about autism cognitively.

In the following stories, we look at the life experiences of four profile interviewees with and related to autism, the joys, woes and difficulties they encountered, how they coped with struggles and the various issues they are concerned with:
Ms Choo Kah Ying, special needs writer and educator, single parent of son with autism

Being a previous sufferer of manic depression, Ms Choo recovered with strong determination after realising the need for her to become healthy again in order to better take care of her autism-diagnosed son. She is an advocate of individuals with special needs, and conducts workshops to empower caregivers. As academics believe active socialising will help individuals with autism integrate into the society, Ms Choo’s decision to homeschool her son presents a contradiction to the popular belief. She also feels strongly about the marginalisation of the disabled community in Singapore and wishes that the public can be more accommodating to these people.

In her story, the education and social aspects of autism are examined.

Mr “Chong Chee Meng”, teenager with autism

Struggling to construct a world that he thinks he does not belong to and living in the space where little empathy was given, Mr Chong talks about his emotional turmoil as he encountered rejections, alienations and failures. He expresses worry for his future, which highlights the lack of post-formal education resources and support available in Singapore. Interestingly at the same time, he also exudes hope in his life.

In his story, the employment-support, education and social aspects of autism are discussed.

Ms Christy Wong, special needs pre-school educator

Though the eyes of Ms Wong, we see how pre-school children are educated in an educational institution. She talks about the intriguing factor that attracts her to stay in the job for seven years, and the challenges she faced being one of the
first persons to make the world known to children with autism and guides them in their critical developmental period. In her story, aspects in education and government measures in the special needs sector are presented.

Ms Elisa Chong, occupational therapist

Occupational therapist is one of the professions that work closely with individuals with autism. Ms Chong focuses on talking about how physical therapy can help improve the individuals’ awareness of their body. She explains how their bizarre behaviours are caused by sensory processing disorder that makes the actions uncontrollable, not because they are cognitively incompetent. In her story, therapy-support, economic and financial assistance aspects are addressed.

In addition to the profile stories articles, the interviews are also recorded and presented in various multimedia forms — vodcasts, podcasts and slideshows, adding visual graphics and audio dimensions to the news feature. These content are found online in our multimedia website, Enclosed Worlds, Open Minds (http://reachautism.sg), which also contains links to other resources, facts about autism and editorial reflections.

BACKGROUND ON TOPIC

Facts on autism

Autism is characterised as a “mysterious disorder”, where its cause is still uncertain even at present. Some research suggests that autism may be caused by an array of reasons
involving genetic factors and biological problems, which affect the ability of the brain to process language and information from the senses.

Individuals with autism generally demonstrate a triad of clinical characteristics in the following areas:

a) social impairment — inability to interact and form relationships;

b) communication impairment — inability to communicate opinions and feelings;

c) impairment of flexibility and thinking — exhibited in repetitive behaviors and difficulty in interpreting sensory inputs (K. Poon, personal communication, December 15, 2009).

Autism was first coined as a disorder in the early 1940s by two doctors — Leo Kanner and Hans Asperger. Working independently of each other, Kanner identified a set of common behavioral patterns among the young children under study, while Asperger observed different patterns of behaviour in the more able adolescents. Such behaviours were later known as Asperger’s Syndrome, another form of autism. As individuals with autism generally show a mixture of features that simultaneously fit into the two groups described by both Kanner and Asperger, diagnoses are often considered under the umbrella term Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), which encompasses different degree of severity of the condition (CBC News, 2009).

Autism is usually diagnosed within the first three years of life. At present, there is a lack of definitive cure from current medical technologies. While recovery is impossible, early and effective intervention and education can help circumvent the deterioration of the condition and minimise the experience of inconvenience in daily function impaired by the developmental disability (K. Poon, personal communication, December 15, 2009).

Early intervention includes therapies such as floor-time therapy (child-directed-play therapy to build emotional reciprocity and engagement), sensory integrative therapy (physical
therapy to improve ease of movement, coordination and sensing), Picture Exchange Communication System (using pictures to induce communication) and Applied Behavioral Analysis (applying techniques of behaviorism to modify behavior). There are also other innovative therapies such as dolphins-assisted therapy. Recent research has shown that interaction with dolphins could reduce repetitive stereotyped behaviours— for example, flapping of hands (Chia & Kee, 2009).

A rising phenomenon

Despite being a relatively recent diagnosis, autism is increasing its prevalence as one of the fastest growing developmental disabilities in the modern-day world. According to the compiled statistics from several countries, the United Nations estimated that currently, one in every 150 individuals is diagnosed with autism. This ratio is making autism more common than pediatric cancer, childhood diabetes and juvenile AIDS combined (Mayanja, 2009).

In Singapore, although there is no accurate statistical figure on the actual number of individuals diagnosed with autism, Autism Resource Centre (Singapore) bases its estimate on recent research in other countries and expects a prevalence rate of about 24,000 individuals affected by autism spectrum disorder, some whose condition is mild while others more severe. Of the estimated number, it is further deduced that near 5,500 children are under the age of 19 years old. In addition, around 216 new cases of children with autism are estimated to be diagnosed in Singapore per year (Autism Resource Centre (Singapore), n.d.).

Changes in autism landscape in Singapore

Currently, the special needs sector is managed using the ‘many helping hands approach’, in which social services are provided by charities and overseen by the government. The Ministry of Community, Youth and Sports (MCYS) is tasked the overall role of “identifying needs and coordinating services which it helped co-fund” (Li, 2006).
In the past five years, favourable changes have been made to the local autism landscape. Besides increased funding and closer collaboration between the Ministry of Education and special schools, the establishment of Pathlight School in 2004 is yet another milestone. The school offers a combination of academic education and vocational training, which fills in the gap between full special schools and mainstream schools.

In addition, increased deployment of Special Needs Officers to mainstream schools to support students with autism, and the implementation of ‘Satellite School Model’ to socially and academically integrate with students from mainstream school through sharing of school facilities, have made the path of education less rugged for students with autism (Ng, 2007). Recent establishments of Bizlink Singapore, Special Needs Trust Company and Centre for Enabled Living (CEL) help provide employment and financial aid to caregivers and individuals with autism. The effectiveness of these measures is still under observation.

However, areas in tertiary education, employment, residential living in the long-run and continuous social and welfare support for adults and elderly with autism remain as the key challenges to be looked into in the near future. Furthermore, an observation by special needs writer and educator Ms Choo Kah Ying (2006) illustrates that individuals with special needs, including those with autism, are frowned upon in the society as a result of the lack of empathy:

“By being brought up to conform to the rules and norms of society, we often err in our inability to exhibit tolerance for diversity and difference. We glare, criticise and jump to conclusions before we seek to understand” (p. 76).

This warrants the need for constant education of the public about autism to raise awareness and minimise social stigmatisation, so that individuals with autism can be
integrated into the society. Although born less fortunate, individuals with autism deserve an equal quality of life, the privilege to lead a fulfilling lifestyle and be treated with dignity.

WHY AUTISM

Autism is a much less-discussed topic in Singapore society, with scarce comprehensive coverage by the local media that serves to demystify the disorder. From the brief conversations we had with members of public, individuals with autism are perceived to be enclosed in their own worlds; hence it is wrongly assumed that the best way to deal with them is to leave them alone. However, the sad truth contrary to this popular misconception is that individuals with autism are keen to make friends, but impairments in the areas of social, communication and sensory processing render them helpless.

As Singapore progresses towards strengthening its ‘heartware’\(^1\) in the 21\(^{st}\) century, achieving social cohesion by embracing and empathising with minority groups with disabilities and special needs becomes one of our salient goals (Singapore 21 Committee, 1999). Our news feature will come in timely as the government takes big steps to make Singapore society more disabled-friendly and inclusive.

Although prevalence rate of autism is rising, the amount of public attention it has received is limited. It is important to look in depth and generate discourse about how society can provide assistance to individuals with autism, especially in terms of integration, as well as how significant persons related to individuals with autism can support their development. Moreover, research shows that medical knowledge empowerment can successfully help parents whose child is autistic to resist stigma (Farrugia, 2009).

\(^1\) ‘Heartware’ refers to the intangibles of society, including social cohesion and attitudes of a people. The term was introduced by Singapore 21 Committee to improve the soft infrastructure of Singapore.
Recognising that knowledge is power, our project aims to build social connectedness and minimise social stigma by raising awareness on issues related to autism, thus educating members of society the necessary knowledge required to dismiss misconceptions and embrace differences. We also target to bring hope to families of individuals with autism by empowering them with the knowledge that with appropriate early intervention and supportive care, individuals with autism can still acquire basic life skills and fend for themselves.

NEWS GATHERING PROCESS

The search for four main profile interviewees

We conducted extensive information gathering to search for the four most suitable interviewees whose experiences will be documented as in-depth profile stories. Books, Internet, academic databases and news archives gave us an idea of the traits and characteristics we would like to look out for in our potential interviewees.

Only a total of seven interviewees were involved because the nature of our news feature is profile stories-based, as opposed to the study of a phenomenon, in which numerous interviewees are required.

Understanding that the experiences of our interviewees are crucial to the content of the news feature, we implemented strict selection criteria. Substantial effort has been placed into searching for suitable contacts and researching on them before deciding if their contribution can level up the calibre of our news content. We managed to find the four interviewees whose perspectives are representative of the categories they belong to, yet their personal experiences are unique.
The first interviewee we selected was writer and educator **Ms Choo Kah Ying**. She has a 13 year-old son, Sebastien, who is autistic. She raises him up single-handedly. Prior to the birth of her son, she was a sufferer of manic depression. However, Ms Choo has since recovered from the condition after a stark realisation struck her — she had to return to her healthy state again so that she could properly take care of her son. Another unique point about Ms Choo is that she empowers herself with knowledge about autism such that she homeschools her son. We believe her courage in confronting her son’s disability and the determination she has in empowering herself will inspire readers, especially parents of individuals with autism.

**Mr “Chong Chee Meng”** is a 19 year old teenager with autism. We were elated when he agreed to be interviewed because we were met with several rejections by other individuals with autism before we contacted him. Many did not want media exposure for fear of risking the revelation of their identity, even though we reassured them that they could remain anonymous. Although suffering from mild autism and having been educated in mainstream schools, Mr Chong exhibits the feeling of inferiority and worry for the future, which are two typical psychological states of high-functioning individuals with autism. These may be the consequences of the social marginalisation he faced, which he admitted in the interview later on. Being alienated and shunned in school was one of the real-life examples of the challenges Mr Chong struggled with in life. In addition, he switched from a Science course to an Arts course while studying in junior college, venturing into a brand new arena of academic study. His determination and mature thoughts were laudable.

**Ms Christy Wong**, a special needs pre-school educator who has taught students with autism for seven years, is the second interviewee we approached. Her long serving term and admirable patience in educating the special kids are the best testimonies of a passionate and dedicated teacher. Her perspectives about parent-teacher-therapist cooperation emphasise the
importance of tackling the disorder with a unifying approach. In addition, Ms Wong’s initiative to keep in contact with her graduated students and their parents is a heart-warming example of how a teacher advances beyond her responsibilities to become a friend who genuinely cares.

The final profile that we spoke to is occupational therapist Ms Elisa Chong. Being an expert in sensory integrative therapy, a physical therapy that helps individuals with autism ameliorate their daily function, Ms Chong’s insights shed a new light to our understanding of treatments to the disorder. She explains that the strange and repetitive behaviours exhibited by individuals of autism were the result of sensory deficit, which is less known even among parents of children with autism. Apart from discharging duties required by her profession, her enthusiasm and dedication in discovering the strengths of her patients show that she is a true advocate and believer in the ability of the individuals with autism.

In addition, we also interviewed the president of Autism Resource Centre (Singapore) Ms Denise Phua and two assistant professors from the National Institute of Education (NIE), who specialise in early childhood and special needs education. Ms Phua, Member of Parliament (MP) who focuses in developing and improving the resources made available to the disabled and special needs communities, is the main driver of the autism scene in Singapore. Dr Noel Chia led a research on dolphins-assisted therapy on children with autism and found that the results were encouraging. Dr Kenneth Poon specialises in autism education and has been invited to present talks on related topics.

**Execution**

We avoided contacting individuals who have been interviewed by the media previously to inject variety to the existing content, with the exception of one — Ms Choo Kah Ying. She was interviewed by The Straits Times and Channel News Asia for being a previous sufferer of manic depression who has fully recovered and is now off mediation.
Despite such media coverage, we decided to go ahead contacting her because we have a different approach to her story — the focus lies in her opinions about stigmatisation of kids with autism and her wonderful and distressed moments in raising her son with autism.

After first proper rounds of interviews, we carried out subsequent follow-up interviews and photo-shoot sessions for more holistic coverage of the profiles.

Recognising the importance to address an array of aspects surrounding autism, we interviewed the president of Autism Resource Centre (Singapore) and two professors, whose expertise will serve as authoritative voices to elaborate on the education, economic, social, employment- and therapy-support aspects. We also made references to news articles on national policies to supplement the stories with facts about government’s moves in this sector.

PROPOSED AUDIENCE

Our project aims to bring more awareness to the plight of individuals with autism — a group of people with disability who are sidelined in the society.

*General public*

The general public is the main core of our target audience. As there remain several misconceptions by the public towards individuals with autism, we hope to educate them with the proper concepts of autism and influence them to eventually welcome this group of people as part of the society, showing more care, tolerance and acceptance.

*Parents of children with autism*

Parents of children with autism face much more pressure and stress in our society. Our stories aim to share the experiences of caregivers and people revolving around
individuals with autism, and make these parents realise that they are not alone. Thus, we are providing them with another alternative platform to seek assistance and engage them in discussions on autism, for the betterment of their children.

As such, in line with the World Autism Awareness Day on April 2, mainstream new media platform, omy.sg, a bilingual-friendly (Mandarin and English) news and interactive web portal by media group Singapore Press Holdings (SPH), has kindly agreed to run our four-part multimedia illustrated feature as a series of reports from March 29 to April 1, to reach out to a greater audience group, in addition to our multimedia website at http://reachautism.sg.

**PROJECT STYLE ANALYSIS**

The new media platform will be the future of journalism. Young people are engaging in new media discourse, and many news agencies are embarking on multimedia journalism as well, bringing different forms of presentation and perspectives to a news issue. For instance, The New York Times (nytimes.com) and CNN (cnn.com) offers slideshows and video snippets to allow users to have a visual understanding of the various news stories. Hence, we feel that packing our illustrated feature into a multimedia feature will bring our stories to life, increasing visual appeal and create much more impact on our readers, as our interviewees share their stories “live”.

*Why Chinese as language medium*

As we approach our topic on autism, we realise that there are many resources available, be it in books or online information. However, they are mostly in English; Chinese resources are very limited. Therefore, with our multimedia feature in the Chinese medium,
we wish to cater to audiences who are not very conversant or proficient in English to be able to get hold of information on autism and the aids needed through our stories.

**Why online journalism**

While a print feature presents information in large formats, there may be a tendency for information overload, losing the readers’ interest on the topic. Going online will allow us to provide bite-sized information to our readers, increasing accessibility and information retention. With the inter-connectivity nature of the World Wide Web, we are able to provide even more resources through “in-site” or “out-of-site” hyperlinks and increase user traffic to our website via search engines with effective meta-tagging, which in turn reach out to a bigger audience pool.

In addition, by doing an online feature, we are able to engage users in timely and immediate discussions on autism issues and hence in turn provide the necessary assistance to those people in need.

**Web development**

**STRUCTURE**

Our multimedia site runs on a mySQL database and is powered by WordPress.org, a popular content management system. Each of our pages on the front-end are dynamically generated from PHP (HyperText Preprocessor) pages, based on input from the backend control panel, and is highly customizable based on our needs.

Publishing of stories are made easy with WYSIWYG (What You See Is What You Get) text editors. As much as it brings convenience, we are also able to create sophisticated article layouts with additional HTML (HyperText Markup Language) input.
LAYOUT

We have sub-divided our feature website into three categories for easy access. They are namely: Features Stories, Multimedia and Resources.

**Feature Stories.** This section archives our four profile stories (in text) on:

1. Parent of a child with autism
2. Individual with autism
3. Special needs pre-school educator
4. Occupational therapist

Each text story is furnished with multimedia selection buttons to allow users to choose the format in which they would want the story be told — be it in the form of a vodcast, podcast or slideshow. Users can comment, print, email, rate or even share the articles via Web 2.0 applications and social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Sharing is another powerful tool which we leverage on to cast our stories beyond our website.

**Multimedia.** This section archives all our multimedia clips — vodcasts, podcasts and slideshows. Besides multimedia components from our stories, users will be able to find other autism related information in vodcasts and podcasts formats, for instance, explanations on misconceptions of people with autism, autism therapy research findings, just to name a few.
Each multimedia clip is accompanied by a short summary of the content, to allow users to have a better grasp of the information related in clips.

**Resources.** This section is a consolidation of the different resources that may be useful to parents, caregivers or even individuals with autism themselves. The resources are grouped under different sub-headings for easy reference.

The website functions on a 2-column layout where the left column holds the main content and the right column serves as the sidebar, feeding bite-sized facts, tags, snippets of other stories in the different sections to increase eyeball retention.

As we have to fulfill the basic requirement of the illustrated feature writing, whereby each story must be at least 2,000 words long, we are not able to let the full text of the story run full length. The extensive length of the scrolling page will turn readers off, hence losing traffic easily and we would not be able to put our messages in our stories across to our readers effectively. Therefore, we have decided to paginate our stories and only allow the amount of text to run on each page to keep within the 600 to 800-word limit.

SEO, also known as Search Engine Optimisation, is important to any website in drawing traffic. While our current site starts off on a small scale, we may have plans to expand the feature with more content in the future; therefore with the combination of pagination and links to related stories would increase connectivity within the site, hence allowing search engine spiders to crawl deeper into content-rich pages, impact on page rank, and increase the chances of our content being searched on the web.
VISUAL AESTHETICS

We aim to achieve intuitive surfing through the following visual aesthetics attributes:

**Colours.** The use of colours for a website is the core to grabbing the attention of the readers and web users. We have decided to use white, dark grey and dark red as the main colours for our site. These are contrasting colours and works well with the eye.

**Icons and white spaces.** To further distinguish our multimedia elements that are embedded within our stories, we used three icons to differentiate them and are accompanied by intuitive button tags to increase usability.

We did research on the latest web design trends for 2010 and drew inspirations from these sources and implemented them on our website, in a move to upkeep with the latest movements in the web design arena. For instance, we made use of white spaces to hold the entire web content together, giving users a better visual experience and “breathing” space. We have also adopted the use of large images for our stories to create visual impact on our readers.

**Pop-up multimedia clips.** As for the multimedia clips, we decided not to embed them directly on the article page, as it is not as visually appealing, and less customisable to fit the overall feel and look of our website. Hence, we adopted one of the trends of web design in 2010, which is the use of modal boxes. They are known as inline pop-up, displaying content on a top layer over the existing page, without opening additional browser windows. They are unobtrusive, and
increases users’ experience and interaction. This is a way to bypass the pop-up blockers running in the background of most web browsers, which can sometimes hinder web browsing experience.

**Interactive elements.** The web is not static. Interactive elements are necessary to engage and empower web users. Hence, we decided to give our users a first-hand interactive experience when they access our site via direct link. We have embedded a Flash interactive component on our homepage to display our story highlights, and the different multimedia components of the each story as well. Users can then choose how they would want to view our stories — either via textual reports, video, audio or even through photos.

**Images.** We have also made use of thumbnails extensively throughout the site. This is to increase navigability of our site as images are more effective in drawing attention as compared to plain text. Images are all web-optimized, at the same time not losing their sharpness and clarity, to speed up loading of the pages.

**Writing Style**

Our feature consists of four stories, each profiling an interviewee relevant to our topic on autism. Since we have decided to focus on the autism scene in Singapore, which is closer to our hearts, we would want to localise our content, make them relevant and strike a chord in our local audience.

We decided to use profile stories-focused approach in presenting autism because it is a serious topic that encompasses clinical knowledge, deviation from the norm, as well as social issues. Furthermore, majority of the existing news articles on autism addressed the
related issues with the style of hard news writing. This may render the information difficult to digest. Hence, introducing this topic to our readers through the experiences of our four main profile interviewees will add a softer touch to the general news coverage. We humanised every story in every way we can, embarking on different storytelling techniques to invoke responses from our readers, be it intellectually or emotionally, with the aim to generate greater reader interest and engagement.

Writing for the web differs greatly from print. Attention span of web users is relatively shorter as compared to newspaper or magazine readers. Differing reading habits of web users also pose as a challenge. Some scan through the page, some read in detail while others may read only parts that interest them. As such, we have to take all these factors into considerations when writing our stories.

Therefore, we adopted a non-linear system of writing, breaking each feature story into five to seven sub-parts, each addressing a different issue, using each interviewee’s personal stories and experiences to illustrate them. Every article is paginated according to the sub-parts, and web users can read the story non-linearly and yet piece the story coherently. Each sub-part is given an intriguing or suspenseful sub-headline to lure our readers to click in to read the part of the story. In this way, we are empowering our readers as they read our multimedia feature, giving them full control of how they would like to approach a story.

**Multimedia Style**

Our feature offers three different multimedia elements – vodcast (video), podcast (audio) and slideshow (photo gallery).

These components are presented in modal boxes when users click on the icons to view them. These inline pop-ups are “web skins” that we have created to give consistency to our multimedia presentation.
The use of these multimedia elements is part of an alternative storytelling method.

**VODCAST**

We have two approaches to the use of vodcast. The first is using interview segments of our profile interviewees combining with moving visuals to tell their stories. This technique aims to bring our stories to life and add a softer touch to a serious issue. The other is more of an informational vodcast, where authority figures share interesting information on autism.

**PODCAST**

We have adopted a “radio show” format for our podcast presentation to give our multimedia package more consistency. Such a format allows us to add on easily for future stories. Similar to that of the vodcast, depending on the nature of the stories or interviewee scope, podcasts can either be in audio story or strictly interview style.

**SLIDESHOWS**

This component uses photos to tell a story, and not just a mere collection of photos. We have programmed this component such that users can choose to activate and play the slideshow automatically, or view through the photos at their own pace, by clicking on navigational links provided or on thumbnails.

Content selection, storytelling techniques, tools and features, site navigation and interaction with audience add to users’ experience. With these available user opportunities, there would be effective engagement between audiences and the content and services of the website.
Our journey of planning, coordinating, executing and post-editing the multimedia project was met with numerous difficulties. Through which, we learnt and grew.

**Limited Manpower**

The greatest challenge is the lack of manpower, with only two journalists handling all the components of a multimedia project—website, vodcasts, podcasts and slideshows, on top of the basic required in-depth feature writing. Nevertheless, this limitation has honed our ability to manage time, distribute tasks properly and work under stress; stay disciplined and committed, as well as communicate effectively to increase efficiency. The journey has also strengthened our belief that with determination and dedication, nothing is impossible.

**Web development**

Creating a Chinese website posed to be a big challenge for us and we met with several technical issues along the way.

**CONTENT MANAGEMENT AND LAYOUT**

As we are using a content management system to run our feature website, our database must be able to capture Chinese input. On initial setup, we tried inputting dummy Chinese text into the WYSIWYG editors. The characters appeared on screen, but upon saving the text onto the database, the characters cannot be registered and were all converted to a series of questions marks. Therefore, to solve this issue, we had to access the database directly to change the “connection character sets and collations” for every database entry point to UTF-8 (8-bit Unicode Transformation Format) in order to capture Chinese input on the backend control panel.
Another problem we had was the limitation of Chinese typeface for use on the web platform. Some font-family groups threw our Chinese characters display out-of-sync, such that a headline with 10 characters may display as a mixture of typefaces and sizes. Hence, we had to search for web-safe Chinese typefaces and specify them onto our cascading style sheets (CSS) so that it will apply across the entire site.

Different web users use different web browsers — Internet Explorer, Firefox, Google Chrome, Safari, etc. When testing the alpha version trial, we encountered the problem where some programming scripts were compatible only in Internet Explorer and not the others, thus web elements do not appear where they should be in the different browser. As such, we had to debug the scripts or re-code them till they are compatible across the four major browser platforms.

**SLIDESHOW COMPONENT**

We also faced some problems with our slideshow component. As the photos are composed to the right tone and contrast, when displayed in Internet Explorer, some pixels which are detected by the system as “absolute black” will be triggered off by the system to recognize them as “transparent”, resulting in white spots on the photos. Upon checking our source files, there are no such white pixilation problems. Neither did this issue arise when tested on other browsers. It was later found to be a bug in the browser itself. Because of incompatibility, we had to readjust the “blacks” in the affected photos to solve the problem, of course, maintain the overall tone and contrast of the source photos.
Tackling a sensitive issue

REJECTIONS AND NEGLECTS

Our initial plan to interview several persons whom we deemed fit did not materialise because our request to profile certain individuals with autism was rejected by their employer companies. They were concerned that media exposure would place them in a difficult position to answer to their stakeholders, despite constant reassurance from us that the interviewees’ identity will be protected.

In addition, while some relevant associations could not render help in establishing contacts because of their lack of resources, others simply ignored us by failing to reply despite our several attempts to contact them.

We worked around these limitations by persevering and extensively requesting for help from our existing contact base. This is where we experienced the real and exciting facet of journalism — searching for our key sources with the use of a good balance of public relational yet thick-skinned manners to gain compliance. Through many referrals, we successfully secured interviews with the interviewees, who willingly agreed to help.

WRITING WITH ETHICS OF CARE

Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, we exercised due care as we wrote the stories. Derogatory terms that seem to highlight abnormality and anomaly, such as “不正常” (aberration) and “缺陷” (deficiency) were avoided unless there are no other better alternatives to describe the point. This challenge has trained us to think more profoundly and show more empathy as we conveyed our points and ideas.
Interviews

We faced difficulty when communicating with Mr “Chong Chee Meng”, the individual with autism. Some of his perspectives appeared to be abstract and illogical. We overcome this challenge by building chemistry with him, thinking fast on feet and patiently requested him to elaborate what he meant again. At times, he also felt uneasy to answer certain questions. Understanding from his standpoint, we skipped those questions because his feelings matters most to us.

In contrast to Mr Chong, Ms Choo Kah Ying was very articulate and willing to share. Her challenge for us was to keep the theme focused and prevent her from digressing. We asked the more important questions first (when her interest level was high) and popped the next one right after she has fully elaborated her answer for the previous to keep her from sidetracking. We had a relaxed conversation with her after the proper interview, which also revealed other interesting story points that are useful in framing of our stories and understanding our project.

Interviewing special needs pre-school teacher Ms Christy Wong and occupational therapist Ms Elisa Chong involved the knowledge of several technical terms that describe early intervention and therapies for individuals with autism. We tackled this challenge by reading widely and keeping an open mind to understand and internalise those terms, so that we could explain the terms in more simplified and comprehensive manner.

Writing the profile stories

As we are addressing certain macro level issues, for example funding and social support, from micro level perspectives, we had to ensure that the content from both extreme categories are presented coherently. We also had to make sure that the stories are representative, with a good mix of micro personal experiences and macro social issues.
Hence, we made references to news features from the TIMES magazines, as well as Pulitzer prize-winning news stories to improve on how we can structure our story. We also read up on government policies to learn about what has been done and what is lacking, to provide solid information to the stories.

**Translations**

Although our Chinese language project aims to serve readers who are less proficient in English, interestingly, six of our interviewees (except “Chee Meng”) found themselves to articulate and communicate better in English. We decided that journalistic content should not be compromised as a result of language difference; hence we conducted the interviews in English and wrote the feature stories in Chinese. Much consideration was taken and attention was paid in deciding whether direct or indirect translation of quotes would be more suitable to express a thought.

While the process of translating certain ideas, especially technical terms, from English to Chinese proved to be a challenge, we embraced it with the positive mindset that this is a good chance to improve our bilingual effectiveness.

We also made the multimedia elements more Chinese readers-friendly by inputting Chinese subtitles for all our vodcasts and podcasts. Although it was time-consuming, we felt that our Chinese readers’ access to knowledge should not be compromised as a result of language incompetency. Thus bringing the important message across is our priority.

This incident presents us with the reality that the Chinese-speaking community is likely to be disadvantaged as most relevant knowledge is available in English, thus motivating us to input extra efforts to better serve our Chinese-speaking readers.
Photography and videography

To protect the identity of individuals with autism who are not directly involved in the story, we were careful when we took the photographs and videos. In particular, when we visually documented Ms Christy Wong teaching her students, we brainstormed for the best angles to take photos and videos of her, such that her students’ faces would not be revealed. In addition, we also let her vet through the photos and videos to ensure that the identities of her students are well-protected before releasing them to the public.

Vodcasts and podcasts productions

The choice of content for print and broadcast journalism can be very different. While the former concerns about going in-depth, the latter may place more emphasis in information that are more enticing and easy to understand. We adjusted our initial print journalism mindset when we produced the vodcasts and podcasts in the form of broadcast news documentary clips. For example, we selected the most emotional portion of Ms Choo Kah Ying’s interview because her nonverbal cues, especially facial expression and vocal intonation, conveyed her feelings more meaningfully than her words did.

In addition, we also had to deal with issues on exporting formats suitable for web streaming. Our videos were firstly exported on QuickTime compression format (*.mov) in Final Cut Pro, and reconverted to Flash Video format (*.flv) which had a smaller file size, making streaming easier on the web as it will take less time to load. However, on conversion to Flash Video format, we realised that the picture quality of the video was compromised. They turned out very pixelated. Hence, we had to go through the conversion process again, and readjusting the settings, until the right output is achieved.

Our podcasts were edited with an open source software, Audacity. We met with problems like trying to achieve the same volume across different tracks and eliminating noise
in our voice-over recordings. At times when the recordings are beyond salvage, we had to re-record them for input. It took us several trial and errors before we could achieve our desired output as open source software are not as sophisticated as propriety software which offers more control and options.

_The last-minute changes_

We were posed with another challenge when one of our profile story interviewee, Mr “Chong Chee Meng”, requested not to be named after reviewing his completed profile story. We made an exception in letting him check the story to ensure that its publication will not put his future interests at stake. Despite agreeing initially to appear in our article, vodcast and photos with his true identity, Mr Chong, after several rounds of serious discussions with his family and peers, felt that the exposure would risk his future especially in terms of employment, even though he was not portrayed in a negative light in the story. Our persuasion did not work in the end. Thinking about the whole issue from Mr Chong’s standpoint, we acceded to his request, which was made less than three weeks before the project was due. We coped with this last-minute change by re-processing his vodcast into podcast and removed several photos that may reveal his identity.

Although we felt disappointed that one of our most news-worthy elements had to be sacrificed, we thought it would be more detrimental if Mr Chong had to face any unanticipated negative consequences because of this story, if there is any.

This incident has also made us realise that individuals with autism still fear about being judged upon inaccurately by the society. A lot of courage is required for them to face the world confidently. Hence, the need to advocate for this community is obvious.
While our multimedia project is the culmination of the practical journalistic skills we had adequately acquired from school, it is also a remarkable milestone in our personal development.

Through the first-hand interactions and deep explorations of the lives of individuals with and related to autism, we learnt to empathise with their plight, keep an open mind and not make assumptions and jump into conclusion before fully understanding the situation.

From the interviews, we found out that some parents tend to misunderstand their child’s condition, or refused to accept the fact that the child was born with the disability. Members of public tend to perceive inaccurately as a result of insufficient knowledge. Despite being viewed unfairly, we witnessed the laudable strong fighting spirit among these individuals who struggle to move out of their enclosed worlds and embrace their condition with an open mind and positive outlook.

Because of this project, we saw meaning in journalism to raise awareness about autism, for the betterment of this minority in our country and eventually our society, as it progresses towards being inclusive of diversities. Besides shedding light on autism for members of public, we also hope that our news feature can provide some insights into certain issues that have been overlooked by the policy makers and social welfare organisations.


# APPENDIX

## A: Profile feature stories

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专题简介（345字）

自闭症，一个隐形却又不能置之不理的病症。

在大家敞开双手欢迎这个世界，满怀理想拥抱生命时，在一个不起眼的小角落，有一群人正跌跌撞撞地踏着缓慢的成长步伐，认识这个在他们眼里不属于他们的世界。

因为语言沟通障碍，他们不知如何抒发情绪和想法；因为不懂得与他人沟通，他们往往被同伴排挤。

因为发育进度迟缓，他们的学习过程比同伴更慢更吃力；因为生理构造特殊，他们古怪的动作被标签为“精神失常”；因为生命的道路布满荆棘，未来踏入社会工作、组织家庭的梦想，似乎遥不可及。

然而，尽管被主流社会视为“异类”，他们不畏艰辛，努力接受劣势情况，尽力走出自己封闭的世界，奔向充满希望的未来。

跟随《自闭·不封闭》人物专题报道，走进自闭症患者和相关人士的生活，经历他们乐观又彷徨、平静又愤怒、喜悦又悲伤，种种五味杂陈的情绪。

欲浏览专题报道、多媒体、自闭症基本知识、资源和采访侧记，请到 http://reachautism.sg。
面对着 13 岁的儿子在地铁车厢里闹情绪的状况，她将双手环绕儿子的肩膀，给了他一个温柔的拥抱。即使她知道这么做会引来旁人异样的眼光，她也选择视若无睹，反而本能地用母爱保护儿子，安抚他内心的不安。

这名细心呵护患有自闭症儿子的单亲妈妈，就是俞佳莹（38 岁）。在她的眼里，儿子俞轩昂（Sebastien）是“上天赐给她的礼物”，因为儿子的降临不仅让曾患上躁郁症（manic-depression）的她痊愈，也让她成为帮助有特殊需要人士的作家兼教育工作者。

儿子，生命的动力

1991 年，佳莹被诊断出患上躁郁症，造成她的情绪周旋于极度快乐和沮丧之间，甚至萌生轻生的念头。然而，正处于青春年华的她并没有对病情抱以认真的态度，不按时吃药的坏习惯更是让情况加剧。直到儿子走进了她的生命，她决心改变生活形态。

她说：“我以前不是很懂得经营我自己的人生，但是为了 Sebastien，我有了活下去的理由。”

在澳洲完成大学学业后，佳莹到美国从事学术研究工作，2005 年带着儿子从美国返新。

访问在她和儿子居住的宏茂桥三方式组屋单位里进行。我们敲了敲门，门一打开，迎接我们的正是一个笑容灿烂、浑身充满干劲的佳莹。

那个早晨，她娓娓道出了她和儿子这些日子以来携手展开的成长“历险记”。“
自闭，成长的障碍

正当许多父母在庆祝18个月大的婴儿牙牙学语时，佳莹却在那个时候得知儿子患上了自闭症。当时，她对自闭症一无所知，内心尽是惊讶和悸动。她这么形容：“感觉就像有一只怪物在侵蚀我的儿子。”

自闭症是一种因神经系统失调而导致的发育障碍，影响患者的社交及沟通能力、感官系统和行为模式。病症的病因仍是个谜，医学界目前怀疑可能是与基因突变有关，再由环境因素触发。

诊断结果发现，轩昂的病况属于典型性自闭症（classic autistic disorder），在沟通方面是一大问题。此外，他在学习上厕所和辨认事物等成长指标的进度也较为迟缓。访问进行时，正好遇上轩昂情绪不稳定，发出吟唱声以表抗议的时候。

佳莹望了望儿子，然后身体趋向我们，眼神满载感情，像是要告诉我们一个秘密。她说：“即使到现在，我也没有办法从儿子发出的吟唱声来推测他是开心还是难过。我必须看他的表情。”

本应与生俱来的“开心就笑，难过就哭”的情感传达，却是在自闭症患者的感觉系统所缺乏的，可想而知他们的世界是多么的无可奈何。

用心，治疗的关键

当行为治疗师上门分析轩昂的行为以评估他的进展时，他参差不齐的表现让治疗师找不到规律，不知该如何对症下药。为此，佳莹和治疗师都感到焦虑及无助。

佳莹发现，儿子像许多自闭症患者一样，不懂得如何塑造和控制他所能认知的世界。“这样的一个世界对他来说是非常可怕的。”
后来，经过无数次耐心和细微的观察，他们才摸索出这样的结论：轩昂在动态下的思维比较灵敏，对于有故事性及语境的内容较有反应。佳莹于是将这些学习特点融入为儿子量身定做的功课中，通过知识的吸收，帮助他拼凑出一个他能接受的世界。

10 多年来与治疗师合作的经验让佳莹领悟到，协助自闭症患者的专家和家长，往往都习惯使用专业知识和受到社会标准洗礼的观点出发，忘了以最单纯的心态，站在自闭症患者的角度思考。这样的做法，只会疏远他们和自闭症患者的距离，无法有效地给予治疗及关怀。

歧视，纯粹因误解？

除了面对儿子成长的挑战，佳莹也得忍受外界由于误解而投以的歧视眼光。

她在自己撰写的书“Raising Sebastien”里这么写道：我们在成长的过程中都被灌输要符合社会规则和准则的观念，因此经常无法接受有别于准则的差异和多样性。与其寻求理解，我们往往都瞪大眼睛打量异类、批评和妄下结论。

这样的感触，其实来自她和儿子外出时的经历。好几次，轩昂因为不适应人群而情绪失控、在公共场所大吵大闹时，旁人不是投以不耐烦的眼神，就是冷冷的批评：“这孩子怎么这么没家教。”或是把他当作疯子，以为他会施暴而远离他，假装他不存在。

尽管他人的误解难免让佳莹沮丧、无奈，甚至愤怒，她还是试着体谅他们的行为。她愿意这么看待：是因为他人直视的“图像”不完整，像缺了一块的拼图，才会造成错误的刻板印象。

弱势群体渴望的，无非就是这么一份同理心。
留家，心疼的无奈

新加坡国立教育学院幼儿与特殊教育学部的潘健龙助理教授认为，自闭症患者要走出自己的框框，就要多与外界交流。他在与自闭症患者的家长沟通时，发现他们不是不让孩子出门，就是不让他们独立外出，因而减少了自闭症患者能与外界直接接触的机会。

佳莹选择让儿子在家接受家庭教育（home schooling）的做法，似乎与学者的说法背道而驰。其实，她是因为在美国亲眼目睹看护者抓住儿子的手强迫他写字，儿子挣扎失声痛哭的一幕在她心里留下阴影，所以决心使用家庭教育的方式为儿子量身定做教材，好让儿子在学习中找到乐趣，也让她更好地掌握儿子的学习进度。

为弥补在家自学的短处，佳莹在为特殊需要儿童举办工作坊时，也会让儿子参与，认识新朋友，平衡他的社交生活。她也经常带儿子出外走走，接近人群。

据了解，本地有 3 个闭症患者家长互助小组，其中以“Shoulders”的家长小组最为悠久，2003 年成立，至今仍然活跃。家长小组所扮演的角色大部分是填补资源上的空隙，提供自闭症患者的家长一些咨询服务，并通过经验和知识的分享及互助，了解养育自闭症孩童的方式。

曾经是本地自闭症患者家长互助小组的会员，加上目前开办自闭症教育工作坊，佳莹在与家长交流后发现，他们关注的课题包括孩子在本地接受的特殊教育素质及相关开支。

前景，有望变更好

自闭症资源中心（Autism Resource Centre）主席潘丽萍说，自闭症儿童的教育素质近年来已有所提高。中心旗下的 WeCAN 自闭症儿童初期矫育课程两年前受到英国国家自闭症协会（National Autistic Society）的国际认可；成立于 2004 年的新
光学校（Pathlight School）填补了介于特殊与主流学校之间的缺位，提供结合主流学习和生活技能的综合教育及训练。学校也成立设计工作室，并与星巴克（Starbucks）合作开设新光咖啡厅，分别教导学生美术及服务业所需的一技之长，增加他们的就业机会。

新光学校目前有 560 名学生，是全世界收生人数最多的自闭症学校。当中，约四成的学生来自低收入家庭。潘丽萍说：“他们都获得高额的学费津贴，校服、书本和拓展课程也得到赞助。我们会确保所有适合在我们的学校接受教育的小孩，不会因为经济困境而被拒于门外。”

在今年 3 月举行的财政预算案辩论中，社会发展、青年及体育部也宣布，所有参与初期矫育课程的特殊需要儿童都将获得每月 300 元的经济支助。受惠的也包括家境不错的孩童。

与 10 年前相比，本地的自闭症资源已更完善、更合宜。潘丽萍建议，与其等待情况改善，家长和专业人士不妨积极参与改变现状。“我们可以为解决问题而做出贡献，未来的前景也只会变得更好，就像本地的自闭症领域过去 10 年取得进步一样。”

笑话，不只是珍贵回忆

每一天都是新的体验，13 年的相伴，创造了许多能够让佳莹一一细数的珍贵回忆。

她满脸光荣地说，去年底，儿子迈向越渐懂得表达的新里程碑——他学会讲笑话了。

“Sebastien 指着一张狗的图画，念‘wolf’，然后咯咯笑。我告诉他那是‘dog’，不是‘wolf’，他接着说‘dog, woof, woof’。我这才发现他在‘耍’我，
在跟我开玩笑。我问他牛和猫的叫声是什么，他都没兴趣，反而带着戏谑的眼神，看着猫大喊‘tiger’！

比起我们平常拿来消遣的冷笑话，轩昂的笑话来得更具意义。一般家长可能会对孩子无厘头的笑话一笑置之，但儿子顽皮的言语在佳莹的眼里，既微妙又深刻难忘。

还有一次，母子同心协力“挽救”了一只蟑螂的生命。有一天，一只蟑螂出现在家里，佳莹不敢碰，于是叫儿子用杯子盖着。谁知轩昂这么做后，里头的蟑螂挣扎移动，趴在地上的他也握住杯子，跟着移动。佳莹边笑边往门的方向走去，并打开大门，两人终于将这只蟑螂“护送”出了门外。描述这段回忆时，佳莹神采飞扬，比手划脚，可见她是多么珍惜这些看似不起眼的乐趣。

访问要结束时，轩昂刚好经过，他指着摆在佳莹前面的电风扇。我们把目光转向电风扇，原来，风扇的叶片上有一条断掉的橡皮筋。当我们想着是不是要用一根细细长长的工具把它勾出来时，轩昂迅速开了又关电风扇，轻而易举地让橡皮筋掉落在地上。

虽然站在我们面前的，是一名在正常世界里处于劣势的自闭症少年，但他不经意流露的小聪明，确实为之惊叹。而相信他是特别、指引他迈向不闭人生的，正是用尽生命全力保护他、爱着他的母亲。
【人物专访二】
自闭症患者钟智明
他想从自我的避风港走出来（2965 字）

一般人对未来都抱着期许，有规划地往自己的理想目标迈进。但是，对于自闭症患者钟智明（假名）来说，他的未来是个未知数，只能“过一天，算一天”。

这样的想法看似悲观，可年仅 19 岁的他并不认为如此。“如果我设了目标却没有达成，我会很伤心的。只要做好我份内的事，我就会很有满足感。”单纯的思维，在“我”的一个空间里寻求满足，反而让我们感觉到了他与世无争的乐观心态。

乐观态度的背后，其实包含了智明 10 年走过的辛苦历程。患上自闭症后，他所承受的心理压力和挑战已经超越了他所能忍耐的限度。朋友排斥他，不和他交往；他尽全力证明自己和一般人一样也有领导能力、成为奖学金得主的潜力，却不被认同。这些接踵而来的打击，几乎让他陷入崩溃，还一度到心理卫生学院求医。

智明说：“我简直像个行尸走肉！”

智明感叹社会对于自闭症患者的了解不足，因此能够让他们发挥才能和潜力的机会不多。即使有再大的梦想，除非天时地利人和，不然也只是海市蜃楼。

不合群，被觉得“怪”

我们争取到了与智明进行一次访问的机会。他很坦然面对自己的情况，也很乐意分享他的心路历程。采访地点在东海岸公园，坐在我们面前的是一名戴者黑色镜框，身穿绿色上衣和牛仔裤的短发男生。他不善于主动与别人打开话匣子，眼神也一直飘移着，不敢直视我们。这似乎流露出他在陌生的状况中的顾虑和不安。

访问开始前，他从书包里拿出了白纸和黑笔，聚精会神地用绘画记载周围看到的事物。在作画的过程中，他似乎找到了自己的“避风港”，过后也越来越健谈。
智明小时候不会讲话，直到4岁进入幼儿园才开始学会基本的说话方式。原本以为比同龄孩子稍晚起步并无大碍，然而，即使升上小学三年级，他还是无法正常地与他人沟通，也没有办法跟上进度。智明透露，他相当不合群，同学们觉得他的行为和谈吐怪异，避开他也不和他玩耍。他根本无社交圈子可言。

当时，校方甚至建议他转到特殊学校上课，但是他的父母坚信，不管多艰难，他还是能够适应主流学校的生活。他就这样跌跌撞撞、一步一脚印在主流教育体系里挣扎着。

就在9岁的时候，智明被医生诊断出患上了自闭症。那时候，没有多少人真正了解什么是自闭症。智明的父母开始担心着急，因为特定的语言治疗和职业治疗等疗程都非常昂贵，也不代表能百分百控制或改善病情。智明说，因为年幼，他不知道自己患了什么病，以为是“什么癌症之类的病症”。

新加坡国立教育学院幼儿与特殊教育学部的潘健龙助理教授指出，自闭症是个“无形的残疾”，所涵盖的范围极广。潘教授说，自闭症患者基本上在3个方面有所欠缺。

首先是社交互动方面：他们无法有效地跟他人沟通和交际，生活圈子狭小。其次是有语言沟通的问题：自闭症患者在语言运用方面会有所障碍，甚至不知道如何把心中想说的话和思绪表达出来。再者，自闭症患者在行为方面比一般人异常，例如他们可能会在公共场合大喊以宣泄突如其来的情绪变动或到处乱跑，有过动迹象。但是否真正患上自闭症，需要由合格的专科医生诊断。

不屈服，坚持走正规路

尽管求学过程布满荆棘，智明还是顺利通过小六会考，升上中学，过后也到初院就读，接受主流教育。
可是他的学生生涯比一般学生更艰辛。

随着升学课业难度的提高和范围的扩大，智明要学习的东西更多了。在初院时期，他原本修读理科，却因为吸收能力和反应比一般学生慢而让他备感压力，也浇熄了他对于学习的兴趣。

因为喜欢玩如《三国志》之类有策略性的电脑游戏，以刺激脑力和从中学习历史知识，智明觉得探索性的科目会比较适合他。所以为了“化解冲突”，他宁愿从理科转修文科，多读 1 年的初院课程。

在学校里，智明没有办法与他人交流。他尝试加入团体性质的课外活动如学生警团，却因为迫切要证明自己的领导能力，想担任组长并给予贡献，反而弄巧反拙，被队员排挤，最后得退出警团。他更是没有办法服从指示，忌妒他人的成就，且无法为他人着想，导致压力重重，认为自己什么都不如他人，陷入了绝望之中。

想到当时的情况，智明摇头叹气说：“我的社交能力很差，不知道什么时候该聆听，什么时候该加入讨论，所以很不受欢迎；朋友少之又少，（我感到）很寂寞。”

智明坦诚，他的一大问题是“自我心态”太重，也没有“他人”的概念。他觉得“自己是整个世界的统治者”。若任何事情不顺着他的意思，他会变得很激动；情况不顺的话，还会对人破口谩骂。

智明说，学生时期的作文就已经显示了他的自杀倾向，因为自己对于生死完全没有概念。

回忆起当时的生活和经历，智明顿时有些激动。“有一段时间我认为死比生更有价值，死的时候一切都能了结，是一切的终结！”
跌跌撞撞，活在“错误的星球”

10年来经历的风风雨雨，智明逐渐看得开了，思维也成熟了许多。他说，老师和父母都一直耐心教导，他不能辜负他们对他的期望。

虽然如此，智明认为自己还是活在一个“错误的星球”上，无法从中抽离。

“可能是因为我的过去不快乐，或是我不会为他人着想，甚至无法控制自己的内心情绪起伏。我还是没有办法走出‘自我’的想法。”

患有自闭症的作家天宝葛兰汀（Temple Grandin）也在自传中提到：“我们都需要空间，自闭症患者也需要他们的隐秘处，一个允许他们躲藏、避静的自我世界。”

未来，充满未知数

智明今年刚考获‘A’水准文凭，对于未来事业的打算，他只想走一步看一步。

几个月前，智明向一个机构提出就业申请。他兴致勃勃地填写表格，因为他渴望能够找到自己想做的工作，把所学的知识传授给更多人。不过，在表格的病例栏目中，他必须填上他的自闭症情况。他开始有了顾虑，也担心因为自己说出了病况，就等于自动丢失了就业机会。最后，这份工作也没有着落。

自闭症资源中心（Autism Resource Centre）主席潘丽萍接受访问时透露，本地所给予自闭症患者的支援服务，大多还是以自闭症儿童为主；倒是年纪越大的自闭症人士若要寻求援助的话，还是有一定的困难，因为资源有限。但她认为这一环节在不久的将来会有所改善。

据了解，只有20%的自闭症患者，因病情属于较严重，而无法工作。其余的80%，只要有适当的培训、指导和职业分配，还是能够成功踏入社会职场的。

潘丽萍说：“我国还在寻找一个模式，提供互助受聘计划，让自闭症患者在一些特定的职场上得到工作机会。”
我国社会发展、青年及体育部和国家福利理事会也在积极探讨如何让自闭症患者自食其力，融入社会的工作团队。

其中，慈善机构商联中心（Bizlink Centre Singapore）为弱势群体提供一系列的就业支援服务，如帮助残疾人士进行职业配对和职业评估，让企业能够找到适当的员工，履行企业社会责任，同时也帮助这些在社会上被忽略、遗忘的人士。

**走出门扉，破茧而出**

其实，采访的过程中，我们发现智明是个很有想法的人，毕竟他在主流教育体系下接受了13年的教育。他彬彬有礼的言谈举止化解了“自闭症患者难亲近”的刻板印象，是他踏入社会进行社交的一种优势。

智明想把自己的经验和他人分享，除了举办自闭症患者的小型聚会，也在网络论坛上极力召集同样患上自闭症的人，讨论他们所遇到的困难和问题，通过互相扶持，在现有的支援和能力范围内，共同面对挑战。

智明在部落格中写了这么一句话：“唯一能处理生活中的不稳定，就是让其他事物稳定下来。”因为走过崎岖艰难的道路，一切的不稳定让智明深深体会唯有不变才能应万变，所以他以这句话为理念，坚强走下去。

智明仍然在调整自己的生活方式，扩大社交网络和圈子，把自闭症抛到脑后，努力过着像一般人的生活，希望有一天能从自闭的门扉走出来，破茧而出。
【人物专访三】
自闭症学前教育教师黄一玮
她是自闭症儿童的灵魂工程师（3676 字）

上课时间，学生不专心听讲，时而发起脾气乱扯老师的头发。老师试图阻止这些学生在课堂里捣蛋，却招来他们的“拳打脚踢”。尽管得到如此“暴力”对待，学前教育教师黄一玮仍坚守岗位，一干就是 7 年。

40 岁的一玮不是普通的教师，她教导的是一群患有自闭症的孩童。这些孩童都在 7 岁以下。

7 年前，一玮在机缘巧合之下进入了学前教育的行列。当时她接到了朋友的一通电话，告诉她一间学前教育中心有职位空缺；她也想改变工作环境，看看学前教育是怎样一个不同的领域，但只持观望态度，不知自己能不能应付，因为她了解到照顾小孩并不容易，更何况这群孩童更需要长辈从旁细心呵护。

在踏入学前教育领域之前，一玮是一名在中学执教的数学和音乐教师，有将近 9 年的教学经验。可她坦言，教导自闭儿童与指导中学生简直是天壤之别，所以一切的培训都得重头开始，除了内部训练和在职培训外，她也出席研讨会和工作坊，从而掌握专业的自闭症儿童教学知识。

一玮说：“这并不是个令人沮丧的工作，上手后也不会很辛苦。”不过，如果孩子的学习进度没有进展，她反而会感受到无形的压力，影响情绪。所以很多时候，一玮会自我辅导，进行反思，让自己了解自闭症儿童的困境并以宽容和耐心的心态面对他们、帮助他们。
改变方式，改善沟通

只要一踏入位于四美的新加坡自闭症协会（Autism Association（Singapore））属下的自闭症儿童学前中心（Autism Children Centre），就可听到小孩子的欢笑声和哭闹声。

上课的时候，一玮似乎没有一丝一毫教师的威严，反而更像是儿童的朋友，与他们玩乐。她和学生坐在地板上，带领着他们念故事书：她的表情夸张逗趣，眼睛时而睁大，语气变得卡通般滑稽，吸引了学生的注意力。学生乖巧地坐着，思绪像是磁铁般完全被吸入栩栩如生的故事情节中，不哭不闹也不乱跑。一会儿，他们开始和一玮有了互动，在故事中穿插自己的童真想法，过程欢乐无比，根本看不出这些孩童都患有自闭症。

除此之外，一玮也在课堂上播放音乐，双手跟着音乐的旋律摇摆，学生也跟着舞动起来。其中一名学生突然捂住耳朵停止摆动，一玮发现了，马上把音乐的声量调低，这名孩童也放心开始参与。

一玮说：“在孩童面前，我会改变和他们沟通的方式。因为他们是孩童，不是因为他们患有自闭症。”她也会对他们比较细心照顾，不会忽略学生的小动作和反应。教学目的最重要是鼓励学生放得开，勇于表达自己。

以图代文，强调连续

患有自闭症的儿童学习速度比一般孩童慢，没有办法独立思考、使用简单逻辑处理事情，并较难吸收刻板的内容。所以教导自闭症孩童必须用另一套教法，也就是“结构性教学法”（structured teaching）。

一玮带着我们参观中心内的课室，她指向课室墙上和桌子上的小“告示”，说：“这些都是我们老师为孩童设计的结构性教材，用视觉辅助来帮助学生的学习过程，
深化概念。”即使是简单的“认识身体部位”的教学，都是以图片取代文字，让孩童能够更容易吸收。

大多数自闭症患者在视觉感应方面略显得强一些，所以结构性教学也是根据他们的这一强项而设计的。

中心除了在学习上给予指导，也教导自闭症儿童一些简单的生活技能。其中一间教室就让孩童扮起“家家酒”。但这些对一般孩童来说是轻而易举、发挥想象的游戏，自闭症儿童却不能完全掌握，对眼前的“厨房”、“冰箱”和“餐具”无动于衷。因此，教师都会在墙上或游戏卡上贴满图片步骤指示，让自闭症儿童“依样画葫芦”，如扮厨师炒菜、烘面包等。

因为自闭症儿童的特殊需要，教师与学生的样子很高，可以是一对五、一对四、一对二，甚至一对一，都按孩童的个别情况和自闭症的严重性而定。自闭症儿童学前中心的教师透露，如果资源允许，他们会尽量给予学生一对一的照顾，从旁指导他们正确的技能学习步骤。

就连厕所的墙上也贴有帖子，教导儿童完成清洁双手这件事的规划技能。步骤一：打开水龙头，步骤二：洗手，步骤三：用毛巾抹干手。

虽然这样的教学固然能让学生掌握技能，但这是否会造成强烈的依赖性？

一玮说，自闭症儿童需要花很长的时间才能把一个概念固定吸收。但最大的问题是他被告在学习上的连续性。“在中心里，这些孩童有指示牌提示他们每一个事项的步骤，可是回到家就没有指示牌，他们就没有办法进行这些活动了。”

一玮说，连续性能够给孩子强化和养成对某些活动步骤的习惯，从而巩固技能发育和培养独立性格，这是初期矫育课程（Early Intervention Programme）——综合了教育、行为与游戏治疗——的重要环节之一。
但是她感叹，大部分的时候，在中心的孩童回到家就没有持续使用指示卡，断断续续的学习过程，使孩童花更长的时间才能进展到更高层次的学习阶段。这往往也是因为家长担心指示卡会造成孩童的依赖性，而产生的顾虑。

一名自闭症儿童的母亲卓梅华（47岁，信息科技经理）以自己抚养自闭症孩子的经验，撰写了一本关于自闭症的书籍。她在书中就提到：“一个不具备生活自理能力和沟通能力的自闭儿，即使他的智商再高，学业成绩再辉煌，他也只能继续向你要‘鱼’，而成不了‘渔人’。”

这更强调了基本生活技能连续性训练对自闭儿的重要性。

三管齐下，协力配合

7年的经验让一玮有一套应付自闭症儿童的方法，通过图像、动作和音乐吸引学生的注意力，与他们互动。但间中还是会有让她难料的“状况”产生。她忆述：“有一个孩童，她在这里上课快3年了，可是她还是不会说话，像个婴儿。我们老师都很着急，不知道到底发生了什么事情。”

这名自闭症女童的双亲都是上班族，平日由祖父母照顾。但是女童往往被忽略，就连日常的卫生也没有照顾好。一玮向女童的家长沟通后发现，女童其实有很多方面都需要看护者的呵护。此外，她的情况也没有改善，经常自我封闭、不会与他人沟通、不了解自己所看到的东西，脑子一片空白。

一玮认为，家庭成员给予自闭症儿童的鼓励和支持是至关重要的。有些家长因为不了解孩子的情况，勉强把孩子送入主流学校或让女佣全权照顾，延误了治疗时间，结果孩童的病情每况愈下。

与自闭症的对抗是“长期的战役”，但不仅是教育工作者在“孤军作战”。一玮解释，最理想是要家长、教师和职业治疗师协力配合，三管齐下，才能达到一定的
治疗效果。她也很鼓励家长能够和孩子一起上课，了解孩子的进度，这对他们是有好处的。

卓梅华了解到疗程是否有效，很大程度上取决于家长参与的程度，于是辞去了工作，全情照顾患有自闭症的儿子，并参与他的疗程。她说：“自闭症儿童很需要母亲的陪伴，我的参与让他有安全感，也因此激励他有更大的内在驱动力去突破障碍。”

她也特别关注孩子在学前教育中心的进展，6次转校为的是找到一间能够照顾到孩子特殊需求的学前教育中心。卓梅华的苦心最终有了“回报”：儿子在训练有素的学前教育老师的细心浇灌下，逐渐开窍，能够融入主流学习生活。“我的儿子最大的改变是变得很有自信心，语言表达能力也有明显的进步。”

**支援不足，有待增加**

目前，自闭症患者的辅助资源及提供方式由教育部、社会发展、青年及体育部、国家福利理事会和民间福利组织多方合作制定。

过去 5 年，教育部拨出了 1500 万元调派特殊需要专员（Special Needs Officer）到主流学校，主要协助患有自闭症和阅读障碍症的学生在技能学习、资源扩充、班级辅导等方面的发展，让他们能够跟上主流教育的步伐。资料显示，至今有 20所小学和 12 所中学具备提供自闭症学生的支援。

此外，政府也安排新建的特殊学校设置在主流学校附近，通过共同上课或共用设施的方式促进特殊学生与主流学生的交流，为他们日后融入社会铺路。目前与特殊学校合作的主流学校包括崇文中学、励仁高级中学与美廉初级学院。

虽然自闭症支援服务在过去几年有了改善，但是自闭症资源中心（Autism Resource Centre）主席潘丽萍认为还是有许多欠缺的地方，而且“一些必要的服务应该得到更多的政府帮助”。自闭症支援服务一路来由慈善机构带领，不过自闭症群体
在初期矫育、特殊教育、职业辅导和配对等方面仍需要明确的指导方向，而这些都有待专业人员的领导和更多资金的注入。

婴儿及儿童初期矫育课程自2006年开始必须经过支付能力调查（means testing），才可得到拨款。只有足够的资金来源，慈善福利机构才能把精力放在提供更完善的儿童教育和治疗援助，让患者从中受惠。

**与“毕业生”保持联络**

一到学校假期，一玮会约一些毕业的学生到自闭症儿童学前中心，与他们和家长叙旧。孩童推开中心的玻璃门，一进去就到处跑着找一玮，想跟她打招呼、玩耍。

一玮说：“在假期的时候，我们都会有个小聚会。这些是我们之前的学生，现在已能够掌握简单的生活技能，并在主流学校念小学，都适应得还不错。”

虽然一玮是自闭症儿童的“灵魂工程师”，但她仍谦虚表示自己还在学习的过程中。“我本身不是家长，所以我没有办法告诉家长‘我了解你的心情……’。通过跟家长的沟通，我学到了许多幼儿教育知识，更了解这群自闭症儿童。”

她认识到教师并非一直都在学生之上，或是权威性的人物，而是可以成为学生和家长之间的桥梁，了解孩子心中在想什么、学习的进展等，然后传达给家长，让他们参与于孩子的成长过程，回到家里也能够延续教导和观察进度，以在适当的时候做出适当的指导调整。

在互相配合下，以孩童为中心，自闭症儿童才能尽快走出崎岖坎坷的自闭道路。

两小时的课结束了，学生们围坐在课室里的一张桌子，桌上放了“再见”的告示牌。学生们拍着双手，跟随着节奏，唱起了《下课歌》。走出课室，学生们对一玮挥手说再见，他们脸上灿烂的笑容，一玮也开心地露出微笑。
【人物专访四】

职业治疗师
她是打开自闭心灵的希望工程师（3554 字）

一名大约 6 岁的自闭症男童无视旁人和治疗设备的存在，在治疗室里自顾自地奔跑。他的治疗师不知该如何吸引他的注意，于是也跟着他跑；他躺在地上，她也照样模仿。过一阵子，原本和她没有眼神接触的男童，突然转过身看着她，把手放在她的肩膀上，像是欢迎她走进他的世界。

秉持着一颗单纯想为特殊儿童改善未来的心，24 岁的职业治疗师张莉娇在初院毕业后，选择了非一般的升学道路。就在同学个个升上大学时，她到南洋理工学院，修读本地唯一提供职业治疗教育及训练的专业文凭课程。

完成 3 年的课程后，莉娇在职场累积了 1 年的工作经验，然后到澳洲继续深造 1 年，顺利获得学位。因为喜欢跟儿童接触，尤其是看到他们出乎意料、富有童趣的反应，莉娇的职业生涯于是在自闭症儿童和其他有特殊需要儿童的一片欢笑声、哭喊声和无邪的童真中起航。

因材施教，打开心扉

由于大部分的自闭症患者对外界的事物都不感兴趣，莉娇初次与自闭症儿童碰面时，往往从他们身上得到的是冷漠、不理睬和心扉紧闭的反应。

有一次，莉娇负责治疗一名自闭症女童，女童从原先自我陶醉地奔跑、唱歌及不听从指示的情况，进步到 1 年后懂得与莉娇进行有意义的对话，甚至捉弄她。知道女童将来能够像普通人一样正常社交，莉娇面露亲切的微笑说，非常有满足感。
莉娇的身躯娇小，长发飘逸，笑容和举止富有亲和力，感觉她比较像是在儿童世界里钻进钻出的大姐姐。她说话的语气温柔，不急不缓，仿佛一丝带有暖意的春风沁入心脾，颇有安抚情绪的魔力。顿时，带着黑框眼镜、扎起头发、身穿白袍的严肃治疗师刻板印象，瞬间烟消云散。

虽然身为职业治疗师，莉娇主要是负责引导自闭症儿童融入一般人的世界，但她不急于求成，而是因材施教。先让自己成为他们的玩伴，努力了解他们的心理和生理状态，再通过量身制定的治疗，慢慢打开自闭症儿童的心扉。

一名自闭症儿童在发育的道路上，会接触到老师、职业治疗师、语言治疗师、行为治疗师和心理医生等专业人士，为他们提供治疗与协助。虽然莉娇一般上与自闭症儿童相处的时间只不过是短暂的 18 个月左右，而她也许只是他们生命中的过客，但她与他们的互动，以及她授予家长的知识，却足以改变他们的一生。

**发掘优势，建立信心**

写字、玩玩具、扮“家家酒”和控制力气的大小，都是一般儿童能够轻而易举、理所当然完成的任务。但对于自闭症儿童，这些精细和粗大的运动技能并非与生俱来。他们必须付出比同龄儿童多出几倍的时间和努力，慢慢训练和学习。

精细运动技能指的是涉及细小肌肉群组的运动技能，如需要手眼协调的写字和画画。粗大运动技能则是涉及粗大肌肉群组的技能，如需要平衡感的走路和爬楼梯。

职业治疗的目的，除了是帮助患者掌握基本的运动技能，协助改善发育上的障碍，更大程度上也是增强体能和心智功能，让他们能够自我照顾，应付日常的生活及社交。
莉娇的职责就包括发掘自闭症儿童的强项，授予他们自力更生的技能，并担任自闭症儿童的提倡者。

在她接触的自闭症儿童当中，有的拥有与生俱来的记忆力，有的毅力刚强，有的则有特出的视觉学习能力。她举例说，一名自闭症儿童能够将1年的阅历背下来，只要告诉他日期，他就能说出当天是星期几。

一般家长得知孩子患病时，往往会感到绝望及彷徨。老师和其他治疗师也可能忽略个别自闭症儿童拥有的上述未发掘的优势。因此，莉娇扮演的角色，就是通过对个别儿童的观察及了解，让家长、老师和其他治疗师知道该如何给予儿童支持，从而建立起他们对儿童的信心。

数月前，莉娇负责主治的一名女童听不懂指示，家长即难过又担心。治疗期间，她发现女童的视觉学习能力很强，于是用图片指示她完成任务。现在，女童的家长比较容易跟她沟通，他们也会告诉老师，视觉教育方式比较适合孩子。

对症下药，统合治疗

自闭症儿童接受的职业治疗主要有三种——感觉统合治疗（sensory integrative therapy）、地板时间治疗（floor-time therapy）和音乐治疗。

感觉统合治疗是通过物理活动，增强儿童的运动技能和感官功能。在地板时间的治疗中，治疗师会跟随儿童本能的玩耍态度及兴趣，引导他们互动。音乐治疗则是通过传送入大脑的旋律，增加儿童的注意和集中能力。

莉娇面对的挑战之一，就是吸引自闭症儿童的注意，让他们听从指示，投入治疗游戏。另外，她在向家长解释儿童的情况时，也曾因为他们的不解，遇到困难。
她说：“很多家长最初带孩子来治疗时反映，他们知道孩子的行为有问题，带
孩子看医生，医生却说等孩子长大后就无大碍。”

经过进一步了解，莉娇发现孩子行为其实与他们的感觉处理能力有关，不是
单靠药物或等长大后就能改善。但一些家长会以为是孩子为了气他们，才故意不听话，
乱发脾气。例如，有些自闭症儿童出门时，会坚持父母走惯常走的路，不能绕道，否
则就会大哭大闹。

“这类讨厌变化的特征，还有反复跳跃和上下摆动双手等机械性的动作，不仅
只是表面上的行为问题，其实另有原因。”

善于运用感觉统合治疗的莉娇说，除了大家普遍认识的五个感官——视觉、听
觉、触觉、嗅觉和味觉，其实人体还隐藏着两个不为人知的内感官——本体感
觉（proprioception）和前庭平衡觉（vestibular）。

本体感觉传达一个人对肢体的位置与动作，以及肌肉张力的感觉。前庭平衡觉
指的是动作与平衡感。

莉娇说，每个人，即使是普通人，都有感觉处理能力剖析量表（sensory
profile），不同在于感觉敏感或防御程度的大小。

她举例：有些过动儿天生爱追求大量的感觉刺激，所以在紧张或兴奋时会特别
好动，而奔跑、跳跃的动作，能帮助他们缓和情绪。不知变通的自闭症儿童感觉防御
性则较强，认为变化难以预测，使他们缺乏安全感，无法接受因变化而带来的新感觉，
所以一定要依照惯例行事。

而触觉、本体感觉和前庭平衡觉低的孩子，因为皮肤对一些材质如沙和浆糊非
常敏感，也不晓得该如何运用肢体，所以丧失了最基本的动作计划能力，无法像一般
儿童开心地玩沙、堆沙堡，或剪剪贴贴做手工艺品。
为克服家长的不解，莉娇经常通过简单的比喻向他们解释：我们每天早上起床会自然而然伸腰，那是因为我们的身体需要本体感觉的输入。就如一些自闭症儿童需要大量的前庭平衡觉输入一样，如果阻止他们跑动，压抑许久的他们会一时变得很动。

治疗自闭，持之以恒

自闭症儿童接受的治疗是长期性的，一般为期 12 至 18 个月，严重患者则需要更长时间，并非几次疗程就能见效。不论是职业治疗或是其他有助于自闭症儿童发展的治疗，每次的私人疗程费用是 1 小时约 100 元左右，一星期一次，单是一种治疗 1 个月估计要花费约 500 元。加上学前教育的费用，是相当可观的一笔数目，不是每个家庭都负担得起。

尽管治疗费用昂贵，莉娇仍看见一些家长把患有自闭症的孩子，当作手心里的宝尽心养育，给予孩子最好和不间断的治疗。

她语气充满热情，双眸闪烁着钦佩的眼神说：“一些不很富裕的家长会不顾一切把所有的钱拿出来，因为他们在孩子的身上看见正面的疗效，不希望因经济能力有限而阻碍了能帮助孩子成长的途径。”

其实，经济拮据的家庭可以向活力中心（Centre for Enabled Living）申请初期矫育课程或看护者训练课程等援助金。此外，在2009年10月份在本地成立的特需信托机构（Special Needs Trust Company），也为有特殊需要的人士提供信托服务，帮助他们规划经济安全网，让他们也能够在经济方面有所保障，同时获得所需的关怀互助。数据显示，在此计划下为自闭症患者而设的信托基金占总申请者的39%，是弱势群体当中最多的。
携手努力，共建希望

曾为新加坡自闭症协会举办家长教育工作坊的莉娇发现，过分重视不幸人士的缺陷和瑕疵，是本地社会的现象之一。

她说：“很多人，甚至是家长，可能不相信自闭症儿童能正常生活，也看不见儿童有哪些能力，反而很在意其他儿童能做到但自己的孩子却做不到的事。”

莉娇前年到澳洲留学一年时参观了当地一所特殊需要的学校 Bell Primary School，学校不把学生看作残疾者，而是视他们为普通儿童，提供足够的辅助资源。当地的家长对孩子的病况也有充足的知识，很清楚要为孩子打造一个怎么样的未来，因此懂得如何寻求援助，给孩子一个支持他们成长的环境。所以那里的特殊儿童个个都有自信，也能很自在地和一般人交流。

相反地，一些新加坡家长带着有特殊需要的孩子出门时，会显得没有自信。莉娇的语气有些沉重地说：“当自闭症孩子在公共场所做出一些怪异的动作，家长会丢脸地低头，叫孩子停止。儿童会渐渐地意识到自己异于常人，自尊心也会降低，没有勇气面对人群。”

新加坡国立教育学院幼儿与特殊教育学部的谢国辉博士说，家长除了为孩子寻求治疗以外，也应该鼓励孩子与普通的小孩交流，让更多人认识自闭症。“最终，治疗师的帮助是有限的，最关键是要为孩子挺身而出，协助他们，更要相信他们没有因自闭症而‘失去’孩子。”

英国著名的唯物主义(materialism)哲学家和科学家弗兰西斯・培根曾说：知识就是力量。莉娇就犹如自闭症儿童的“希望工程师”，她用细微的观察为他们找出生命的意义与价值，并传授家长和老师与自闭症儿童相处的知识，赋予他们力量，一同为这些儿童的未来建筑希望。
精选人物照片

自闭症患者“钟智明”坦诚社交能力差，但他正努力走出自我的“避风港”。

为更好掌握儿子的学习进度，俞佳莹选择身兼母亲和老师的角色，自己在家教育儿子。

学前教育教师黄一玮放下老师的威严，当起了自闭症孩童的朋友，与他们玩乐。

职业治疗师张莉娇因为喜欢跟儿童接触，职业生涯于是在自闭症儿童和其他有特殊需要儿童的一片欢笑和哭喊声中起航。
Ms Choo Kah Ying, parent of son with autism  
8163 4509 / kchoo7@gmail.com

Mr “Chong Chee Meng”, individual with autism  
Contact details removed to protect his identity

Ms Christy Wong, special needs pre-school teacher  
9686 0643 / ris_wongyw@yahoo.com

Ms Elisa Chong, occupational therapist  
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Ms Denise Phua Lay Peng, President of the Autism Resource Centre (Singapore)  
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Multimedia journalism deals with the different aspects of visual, audio and text reporting. Therefore, every component requires a specialized skill set and the amount of effort and contributions made to each part of the multimedia production is tremendous. With only two members in the group, they tapped on each other’s expertise to make this multimedia feature work out.

**Han Weiding**

He was the solo man behind the website, dealing with the web programming, design and architecture of the website. Tapping on his experiences working with online media, he manages all the multimedia content and the technicalities involved in web streaming, optimization, layout and user interactivity. He was also the videographer and video editor of most interviews, taking care of the technicalities involved in the visual and audio aspects. He wrote two of the stories and was the producer of these stories and other supplementary multimedia clips, as well as subtitling for the multimedia content. In addition, he was the photographer for this multimedia feature and worked closely with editorial on how best to visual represent each of the four stories.

**Wong Hui Foon**

She handled all the external liaisons with the interviewees and authorities. Tapping on the experiences she had with print media, she manages all the editorial content, ensuring they are of quality and in focus, with the entire package falling into place and executed accurately. She was also the primary interviewer in most interviews, making sure that significant content was gathered from the interviewees. She wrote two of the stories and also took on the roles of videographer, video/audio editor and producer of these stories and other supplementary
multimedia clips. She also gave conceptual ideas on the presentation and navigation of the website, and worked closely with the photographer to produce relevant news photos’ captions.

D: PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

Han Weiding

When we decided to work on our Final Year Project revolving around the issues on autism, it hit me that this is going to be a tough one. Mental disabilities are always sensitive topics of discussion and as a matter of fact, individuals with autism do face discrimination in the society. I foresee getting them to open up and tell us their stories would be a great challenge.

Nevertheless, we take things as they come and our interviewees were very helpful to be part of our project as we share the same vision — to bring more understanding on autism. Many a time we tend to take things for granted, therefore in retrospect, looking at the lives those individuals with autism lead, it made me appreciate how fortunate we are, and it is time we lend a hand to this group of unfortunate people. I am glad to have taken this opportunity to work on such a social issue and bring more awareness to this group of people, who is often neglected in our society, through our stories. Talking to people with autism, spending a few hours with them and the people around them through the course of our project, I got a little emotional at times, pondering over how much these people are struggling and remaining helpless at times.

Embarking on a multimedia feature with only two members in the group is no easy task. However, we tapped on each other’s specialisations and strengths to make the final output possible. The support that we gave each other is of utmost importance to make this
project possible. Having interned at SPH’s Chinese new media department, it has helped me a lot in processing and producing the stories, in terms of skills or structure, as we have to take several issues into considerations when doing our stories, and how well we can interact, engage and empower our readers through the various interactive elements — video, audio, photos, user interface — on the web.

As we put a closure to our project, I hope this would be another beginning— with more aid given to individuals with autism, and that the society will understand them better. I strongly believe in the power of journalism and the media. As much as we deliver heartwarming stories to our readers, I hope our efforts would be able to create a change for the better.

**Wong Hui Foon**

I remembered during the process of brainstorming for suitable topics for our project, I intuitively had an adrenaline rush upon the mention of autism. After a brief read-up on the topic and understanding the plight of individuals with autism, I was excited to venture into this unknown issue I had little knowledge of. Although writing on a sensitive topic is yet another hurdle, it is also the reason that keeps me moving because I believe with every new challenge, I grow and mature. The fruits of success will not be sweet without hard labour. Indeed, the completion of this project has proved to be pleasantly satisfying.

In retrospect, the interactions with our interviewees have left a deep impression in me. Ms Choo Kah Ying’s staunch belief in her autistic son’s ability, her courage to stand up for him when he was bullied in the public despite strange or dirty looks, her ever-supportive attitudes towards him and changing her lifestyle for him all build up to become a respectable image of a noble mother that serves as a good role-model for me. Through her eyes, I also learnt to be contented and appreciative of the moments I spend with my family, no matter
how insignificant the moments can be. After all, kinship is an affinity and cannot be bought by money.

From Mr “Chong Chee Meng’s” perspectives on his plight, I felt strongly for the need to be advocates for individuals with autism. Hearing from a sufferer of stigmatisation made me constantly remind myself not to make snap judgments on people whose actions I do not understand. There is a dire need to see the big picture. Also, every human has the right to quality life and should not be denied of love and happiness. Every time I see individuals with special needs in the public, I will give them a friendly smile if they look at me. Once, a mother nodded back at me with a grateful look — that was when I first experienced how true it is that all individuals with special needs and their families yearn for is actually friendliness and empathy from the public.

Professionals Ms Christy Wong and Ms Elisa Chong taught me that knowledge is power, and that facing problems with courage will always yield better results than avoiding them.

I am also inspired by Ms Densie Phua, Dr Noel Chia and Dr Kenneth Poon’s devotion in helping this community. Ms Phua’s favourite line — don’t complain but get our hands dirty and be part of the solution — will always be a friendly reminder whenever I lament about insufficiencies.

Working closely with my team mate Weiding has also been a fruitful experience. His disciplined, diligent and organised attributes make him a good role model for me to learn from and a reliable and efficient person to work with.

I always have had the dream to produce a media product that consists of text, visual graphics and audio components. I am glad the dream is materialised. While I was able to tap on my print journalism experience to ensure the quality of the editorial content, videography
and post-productions of the vodcasts and podcasts gave me the chance to hone my skills in broadcast journalism and expand my capabilities as a journalist.

This seven months journey, filled with moments of elation, apprehension, hurdles and sleeplessness, has come to an end. I truly enjoyed every bit of it and I hope our readers and individuals with and related to autism will benefit from our news feature. It was a journey worthwhile, and definitely one that will be fondly remembered and reminisced.

Every end is a new beginning. As I finish my little contribution to the autism scene as a documenter, I may welcome the start of my contribution in another form — as a volunteer at any autism organisation.