

Turning Challenges to Opportunities

A Study on Early Intervention Professionals and their Attitudes on Inclusion

24 Apr 2018

Study Background

Commissioned by Lien Foundation to support the inaugural Early Intervention (EI) Conference 2018, a ground-up initiative jointly organised by ten EI service providers to share practices and raise greater awareness of the importance of early intervention.

The study aims to shed light on ways to better support the aspirations of such professionals as Singapore ramps up efforts towards a more inclusive society, and is believed to be the first survey of its kind to be made public.



Understanding Early Intervention

01



Early Intervention Programme for Infants & Children (EIPIC)



Introduced in 2003 to provide developmental and therapy services for children with moderate to severe disabilities

02



Aimed at maximising their developmental potential and minimising the risk of secondary disabilities developing



21⁽¹⁾ EIPIC Centers, run by
10 Voluntary welfare organisations (VWOs)



3,200⁽¹⁾
places for children in EIPIC centres in 2018



Less than 5 months⁽²⁾ is the average waiting time for enrolment in EIPIC centres in 2018, a reduction from 6 months in 2016

Source:

(1) <https://www.msf.gov.sg/media-room/Pages/Clarifications-on-EIPIC.aspx>

(2) As reported by the sector insiders

Methodology: Mix of Qualitative and Quantitative Research

PHASE 1: QUALITATIVE



EI LEADERS (N=14 In-depth Interviews)

Objective:

- To gather feedback from the EI leaders, uncovering their perspectives on the sector's development and key issues it is facing

Who we spoke to:

- Leaders of EI organisations, including school principals, policy makers, and directors in social service associations

PHASE 2: QUANTITATIVE



EI PROFESSIONALS (N=423 Online Surveys*)

Objective:

- To validate the qualitative findings with a larger pool of respondents, examining the issues from the grassroots' point of views, and deep-diving into specific areas of interest

Who we spoke to:

- Professionals currently working in EI sector including private and public EI centers and other supporting organisations

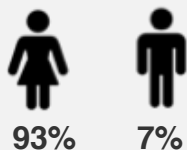
**Margin of error: 3-4% at 95% confidence level*

Profile of the EI professionals we surveyed

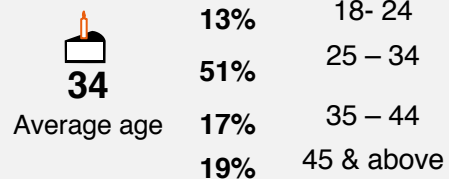


Demographics

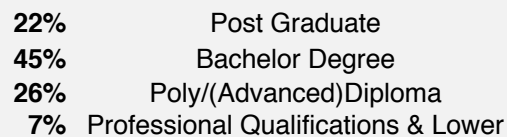
Female Skewed



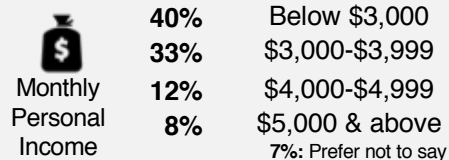
Relatively Young



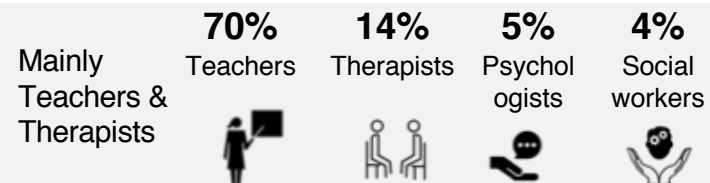
Well-Educated



Moderate Income

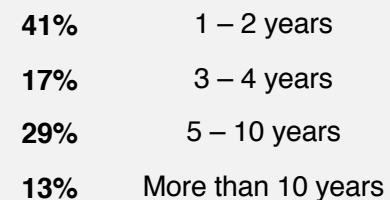


Experience in EI Sector



7% Include other occupations such as doctors, nurses, admin staff, etc.

Good Mix of Newcomers & Experienced Professionals



Top 3 Special Needs Covered

Work in Various Areas



The EI sector has made considerable progress in the last decade



92%

EI professionals acknowledge that the sector has progressed in the last 5-10 years



EI leaders share similar sentiments:

- Formalised setup of EIPIC in 2003 has brought about structured growth, more effective channelling of resources and positive attitudes towards early intervention
- Stronger branding of the sector and various initiatives such as the Enabling Masterplan, Purple Parade and ECHO Framework have probably given EI the needed traction
- However, some leaders do feel that the sector has yet to achieve its full potential

Generally there's a **heightened awareness**, people are **kinder**

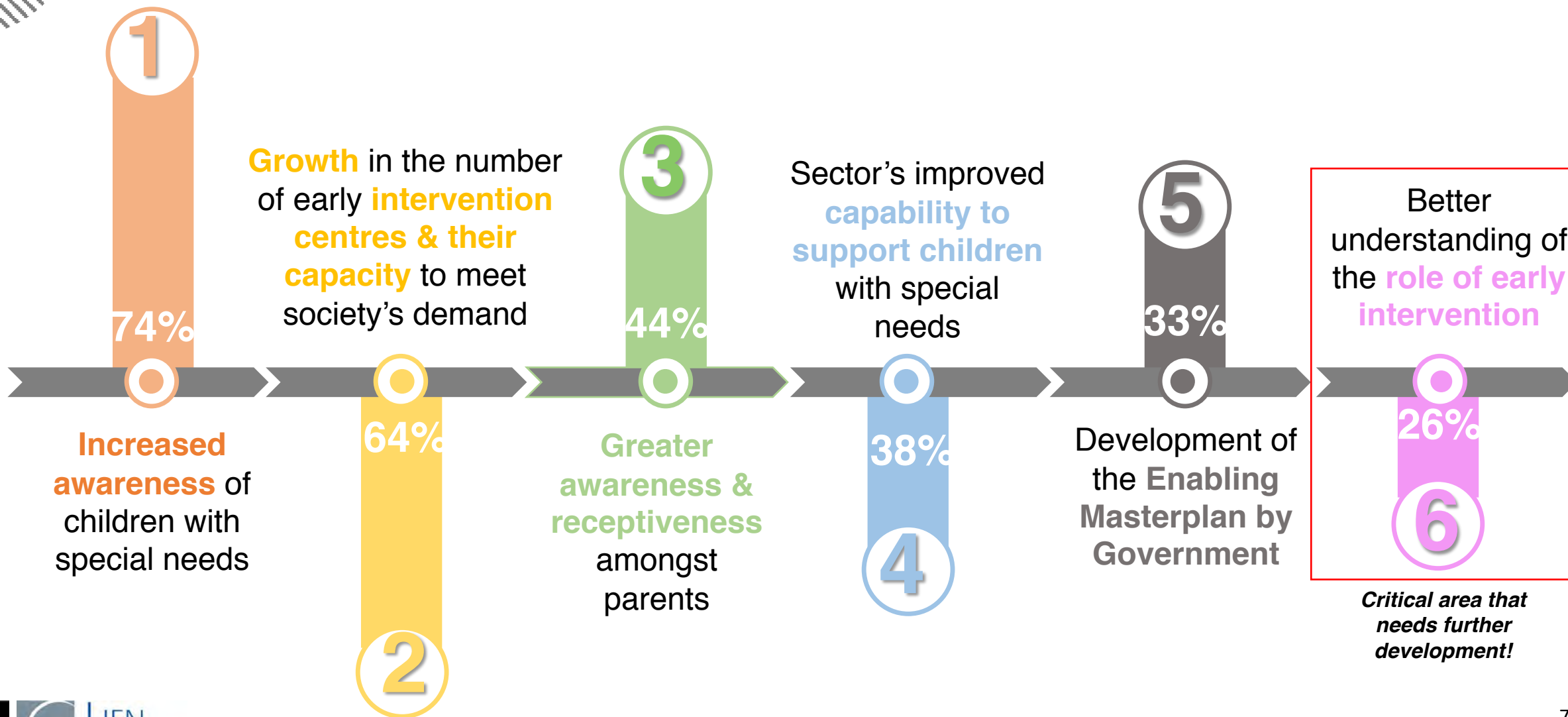
PM Lee's speech 'Let's make Singapore an inclusive society' was a **turning point**.

There seems to be **more attention** paid to the **accomplishments of special education schools**

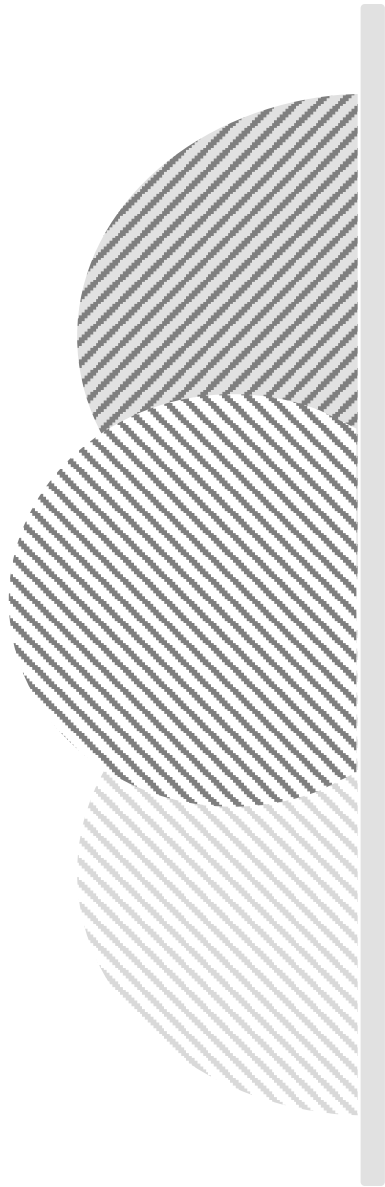
We're **not at the steady stage yet**. I think we're still trying to find a **sustainable service model...**



Increased awareness and growth in sector's capacity perceived as key achievements by EI professionals



Critical area that needs further development!



1. What Motivates Early Intervention Professionals?
2. Deep-diving Into Key Challenges Faced By EI Sector
3. Reviewing the Government's Role
4. Moving Towards An Inclusive Society

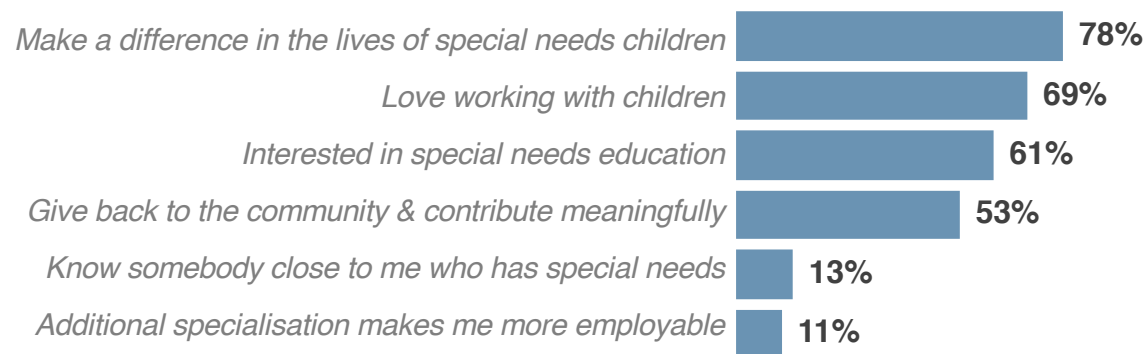
1. What Motivates Early Intervention Professionals?



What motivated you to join the Early Intervention Sector?



“Make a difference in the lives of children with special needs”



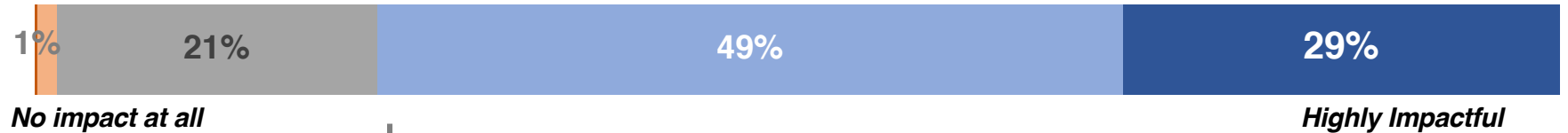
8 in 10




How impactful is your work?



“My work is making an impact on the lives of children with special needs”



Neutral Impact 
21%

- Concerned that EI was only conducted for a few hours per week & not extended beyond the schools' boundaries.
- Work could also have been more impactful given proper outcome measurements and feedback.





How satisfied are you with your work situation?



All Professionals

 **63%**

are **satisfied** with their current work situation

70% *Average satisfaction in Singapore's service sector**



76%

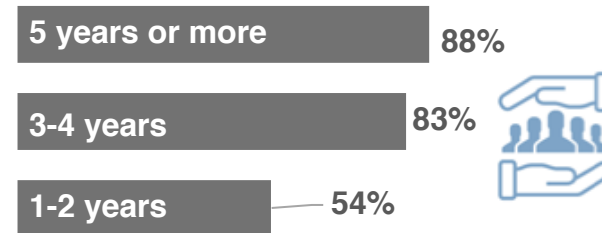
plan to stay in EI sector for 3 years or more

By working experience

Satisfaction is significantly higher amongst the more experienced professionals



Likewise, the experienced professionals are more likely to stay in the sector



The background of the slide features a collection of school supplies. In the center, a white plastic cup is filled with numerous colored pencils in various colors like blue, orange, yellow, and green. To its right, another white cup contains more pencils, including a prominent pink one. In the bottom right corner, a grey mesh pencil holder is partially visible, containing several pencils. In the top left, a grey mesh container holds a pair of pink scissors. The background is a light, neutral color with a faint cartoon illustration of a girl with brown hair, wearing a yellow and white striped shirt, holding a pencil. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

2. Deep-diving Into Key Challenges Faced By EI Sector

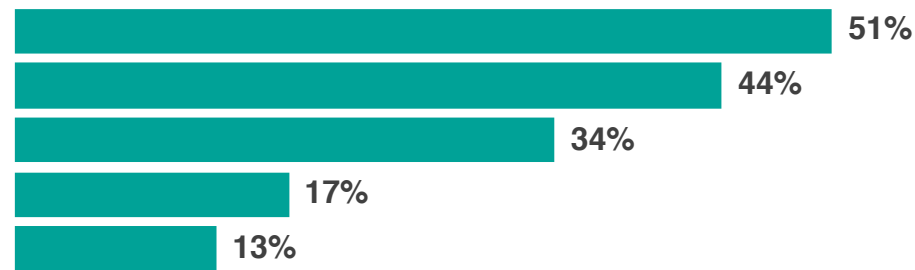
Overview of key challenges perceived by EI professionals



HUMAN RESOURCES



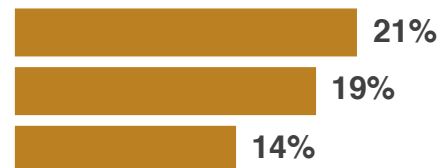
1. Quick burnout
2. Unattractive salary & benefits
3. Manpower shortage
4. Lack of training & development
5. Lack of development opportunities



CROSS - CENTRE ISSUES



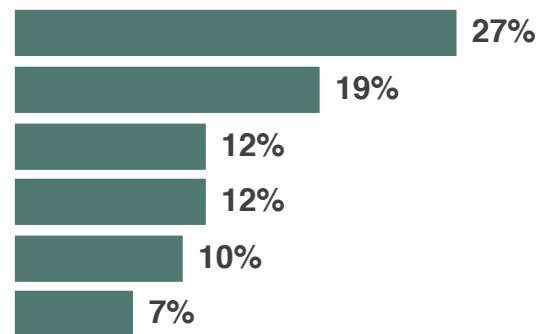
1. Weak organisational integration
2. Wide quality & capability gaps
3. Insufficient knowledge sharing



GOVERNMENT/ POLICY ISSUES



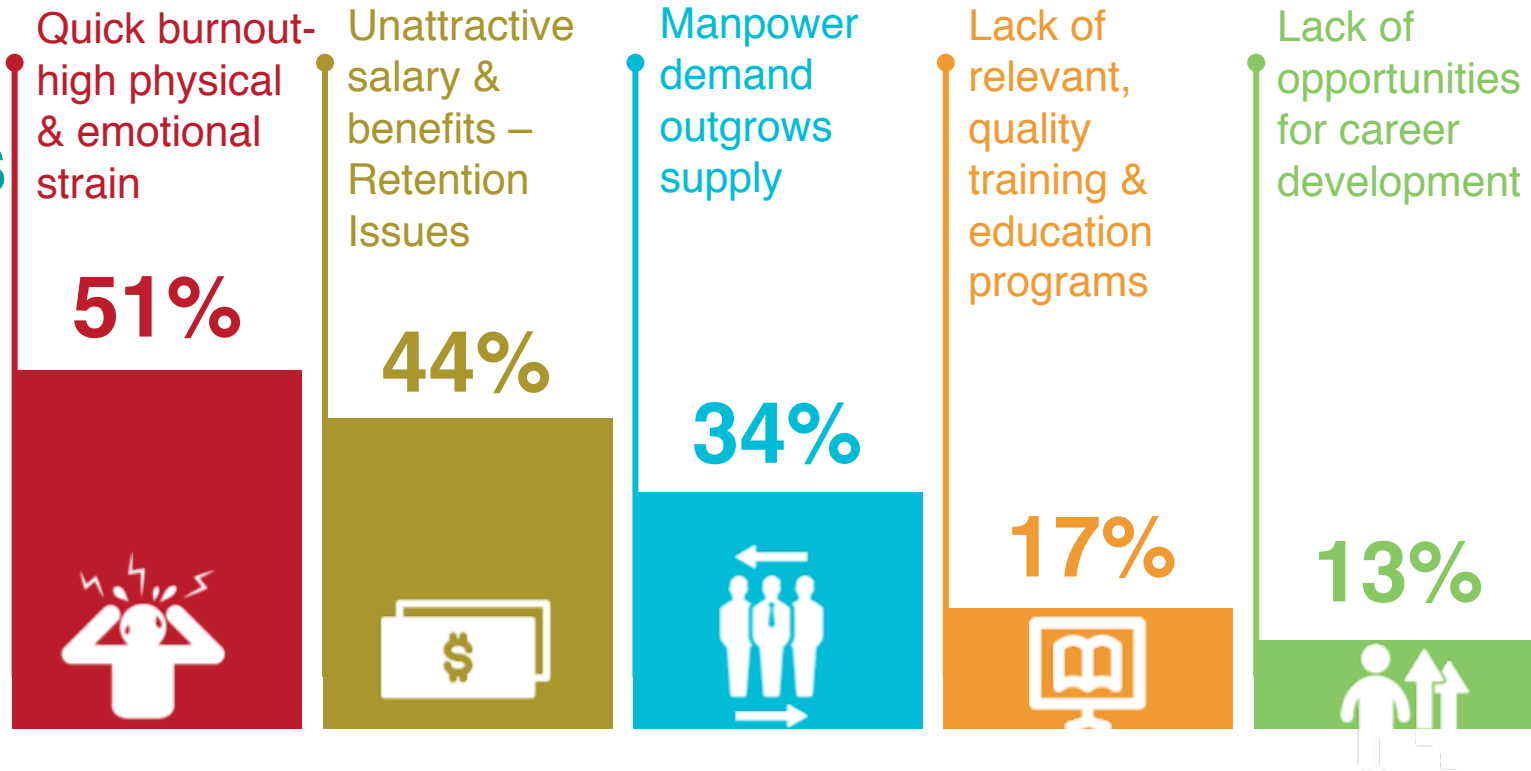
1. Insufficient funding
2. Lack of central authority
3. Absence of assessment framework
4. No outcome measure
5. Lack of sector branding
6. No common vision





Quick burnout and unattractive benefits recognized as key challenges for EI sector in Singapore

HUMAN RESOURCES ISSUES



EI leaders acknowledge the challenges faced by the EI professionals as well as recent efforts by the government



HUMAN RESOURCES ISSUES



Better pay & work-life balance

"The staff burn out quickly as caseloads are high and paper work is a lot, the private sector pays better, and can hire more manpower"

Recent Efforts: Increase in salaries up to 12% as per the new pay guidelines by National Council of Social Service's (NCSS)*.

More Recognition & career development plans

"To train and keep young people, we need to give them something to stay for, apart from pay and it is career advancement"

Recent Efforts: Several initiatives have been rolled out through NCSS for professionals to hone capabilities, gain exposure and experience and grow leadership competencies

Manpower Shortage

"If therapists, even experienced foreigners want to practice here, they have to work under supervision for a year... this makes it very difficult."

Recent Efforts: NCSS is building capacity & capability for the sector, through its 3 pronged holistic approach of Talent Attraction, Talent Development & Talent Retention

*Source :
<https://www.msf.gov.sg/media-room/Pages/Enhanced-Salary-Benchmarks-for-Social-Service-Professionals.aspx>
<https://www.ncss.gov.sg/Social-Service-Careers/Sector-Salary-Guidelines/Salary-Guidelines>

Suggestions to improve key HR issues by EI professionals and leaders

Manage the Workload

 EI Professionals



Implement **assistive measures** such as teacher aides



Digitalise documents & adopt more online admin tools



A **smaller class** needed for **severe cases**

Attract EI Talents

 EI Professionals



Increase awareness about the merits of working in EI sector through mainstream media



Provide more educational opportunities for interested candidates

 EI Leaders



Need to emphasis on **good leadership and culture** across organisations to be able to sustain and motivate the staff

Support Professional Growth

 EI Professionals



Develop **mentoring programs** to guide new staff



Provide **ongoing training & education** with higher emphasis on the junior staff

Define Career Path

 EI Professionals



Implement **multiple pathways** for EI staff to grow



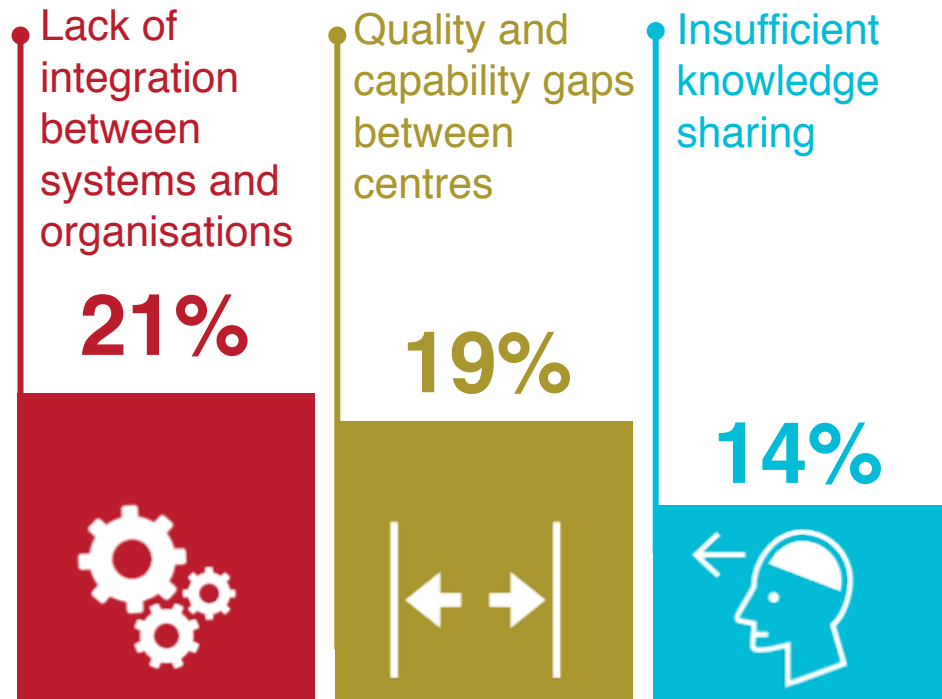
Outline **clear career tracks and KPIs**
Allow flexibility in development

Besides HR, there are cross-centre issues to be improved on



Perceptions of EI Professionals

CROSS CENTRE ISSUES



Perceptions of EI Leaders

*When we look for funding for therapists, we **don't know the real demand and supply... Data is missing to convince the funders of our needs.*** Lack of integration

Quality and capability gaps *Bigger centers have more synergy and resources whilst **small centers struggle more with retaining therapists***

*There's disability network that meets quarterly, but you still have to **find your own core group of people that you can talk to*** Insufficient knowledge sharing

Suggested solutions to cross-centre issues by EI leaders & professionals

Improve Collaboration



EI Professionals



Define clear roles amongst agencies and organisations



Incentivise cross-agency collaboration



EI Leaders



Develop a **central database** that is accessible to all relevant parties

Bridge Quality Gap



EI Professionals



Develop standard practice guidelines in receiving, supporting, and graduating children across centres



Create a **pool of shared resources** so that organisations can tap on when needed

Enable Knowledge Sharing



EI Leaders



Create more **informal platforms** for knowledge sharing



Develop an **internal instrument**, e.g. newsletter that shares materials on leadership, best practices in the sector

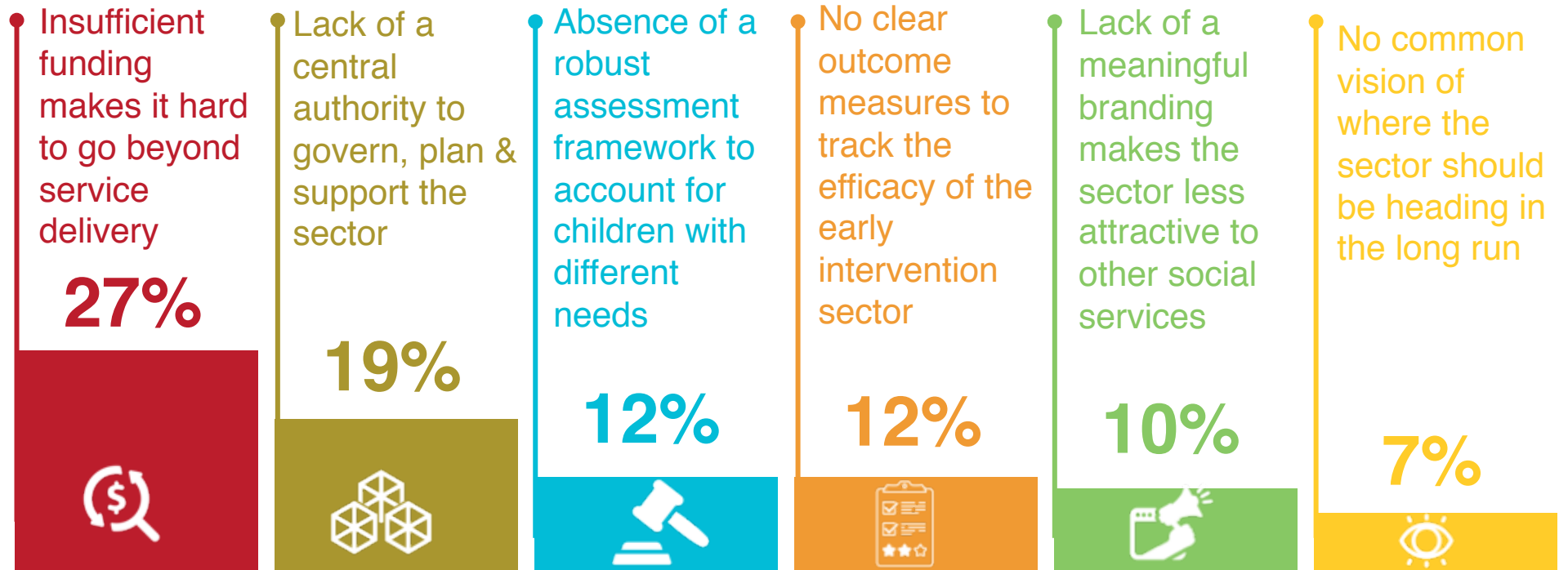


CROSS -
CENTRE
ISSUES



Among policy-related challenges, EI professionals pay most attention to funding

GOVERNMENT / POLICY ISSUES



3. Reviewing the Government's Role



EI leaders acknowledge government efforts to improve the sector, but agree more can be done to streamline efforts



The government has gotten a lot more involved. We're now at the 3rd Enabling Masterplan.

*To their credit, the **salary scale** of EI teachers has increased*

They (MSF) have been very open to suggestions and funded a lot of things

However, an **over arching system to streamline efforts** or a **central authority** seems missing

*Most leaders felt that MSF needed stronger integration and engagement to have more impact. They believed there should be a **similar agency like the Early Childhood Development Authority (ECDA)**, which serves as the regulatory and developmental authority for the early childhood sector in Singapore, **to oversee the EIPIC sector**. Some EI Leaders feel that **MOE has a stronger foundation to oversee EIPIC** since SPED is already under its purview.*





There is a strong call by EI professionals for one central authority to support the sector

The Need for One Central Authority

75% 

Avoid confusion, streamline process, enhance collaboration & resource allocation & facilitate transition from EI to mainstream schools

"Yes, even we are confused with the service provided by the different sectors"

"...there is minimal control of the standards & quality of services, VWOs pursue their own agenda instead of adhering to a common one"

6% 

More important question is how different authorities/agencies can improve communication and collaboration

"Dependent on the clarity of roles, ease of collaboration and specific expertise contributed by the various agencies."

"Centralised means clearer guidelines and being more easily manageable. However, it becomes rigid and in this field of work, being inflexible means being inefficient. So, I can't decide whether I support this idea or otherwise."

11% 

Having multiple parties involved means more flexibility in addressing the sector's growing needs & a bigger pool of ideas

"Currently the agencies have good communication & planning. At the moment there may not be a need for a central authority"

"Should leave it to the constituency and community to formulate their own meaningful outcomes and a variety of programs"


"It's okay to have different agencies as long as everyone works together and are on the same page"

8%: no comment/not applicable



EI professionals have varying opinions on who should oversee the sector



Should EI fall under MOE instead of MSF?

57% 
Ministry of Education
SINGAPORE

Better allocation of resources & fairer chances for special needs children

“Yes. If it can ease the funding and manpower issue, it will definitely improve the quality of service.”

“Yes, MOE should start the intake to make sure that all that work with these children are qualified in handling...”

21%  
Ministry of Education
SINGAPORE MSF

Collaborative Approach

Whilst MOE can help to raise the education quality, MSF plays a critical role in addressing other social needs of the children & their families

“...children with special have social needs that need to be addressed as well. It takes a community to raise a child, so MOE and MSF should be working together.”

19% 
MSF MINISTRY OF SOCIAL AND FAMILY DEVELOPMENT

Various reasons: EI is more than just education, the standardized education imposed by MOE might not suit EI, equal education opportunities should not depend on which ministry EI falls under

“Early intervention should be about building up family’s understanding of the child’s condition(s), the family’s problem-solving abilities, and quality of family life.”

3%: no comment/not applicable

Suggestions by EI leaders and professionals to shape the future of Early Intervention

1. Set Clear Definitions of Disabilities



Need for more clarity around the **types of disabilities** (not just mild/ moderate or severe) and a more **structured approach** to address their needs.

2. Conduct Proper Assessment of Needs



There are still misdiagnosed cases, especially for non-physical disabilities. A **more holistic approach** to diagnosing should be adopted

3. Define Outcome Measures



There are concerns that output is deemed as a measure rather than outcomes. Current measures are not sufficient to indicate the actual progress or milestones of the child.

4. Create Stronger Branding of the Sector



A **strong brand identity** is seen as important for the sector to **gain the visibility** it needs to attract the right skill set and passion.

5. Establish Long-term Vision & Goal for the Sector



There is a need for a **common goal** to be established and then **clearly communicated**, not just within, but also outside the sector.

6. More Funding



More funds to be allocated in building resources for intervention as well as hiring staff.

A collection of colorful pencils in various containers, including a mesh pencil holder and several plastic cups, set against a light background. The pencils are in shades of blue, orange, green, pink, and brown. One pencil has the text 'CLASSIC' visible on its side. In the background, there is a mesh pencil holder with pink scissors and a white container with a cartoon girl illustration.

4. Moving Towards An Inclusive Society

EI professionals are more pessimistic about the situation than other stakeholders



Agree that 'Singapore is an inclusive society'



11%



28%



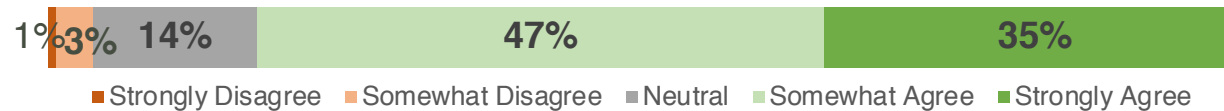
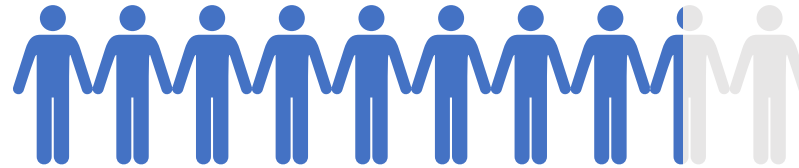
30%

EI professionals probably have higher expectations of Singapore society given their constant exposure to children with special needs and understanding of the situation in other countries. Moreover, they might have a clearer understanding of inclusion which is different from physically integrating children into common spaces.

Inclusive education perceived to play a critical role in creating an inclusive society

Agree that 'Inclusive education is the stepping stone towards an inclusive society'


EI Professionals
83%




EI Leaders

Would love to see that there's no longer early intervention centers, and children are supported in mainstream schools

If we want inclusion to take place, it has to start from preschool level

I'd like to see my kids grow up with someone who's very different from them and in their inner circle... A real milestone of inclusive society is when people realize they can step in and help

EI professionals strongly believe that both sides will reap benefits from an inclusive education



When typically developing children and special needs children attend the same class...



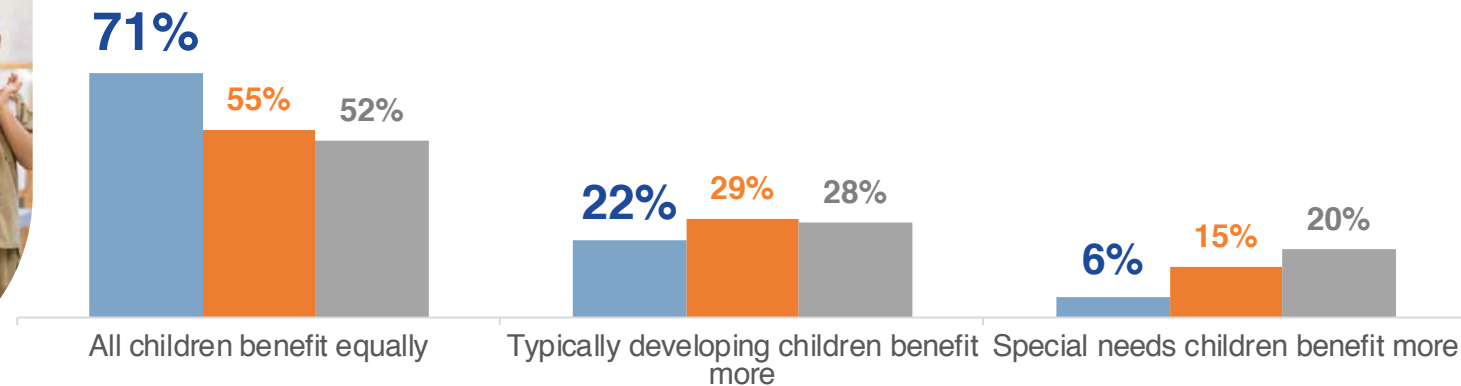
EI Professionals



Parents of special needs children*

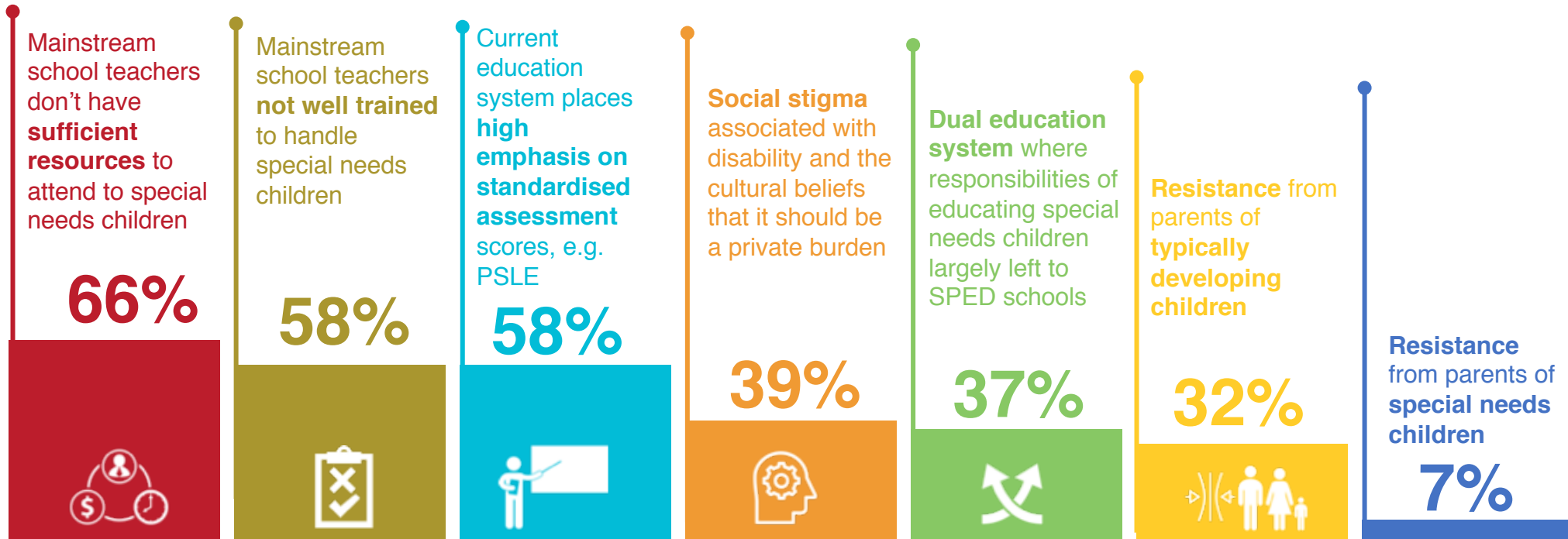


General public*





Nevertheless, there are various barriers to develop inclusive education in Singapore



The sector may **not be ready** for all early childhood education center to be inclusive. There need to be **sufficient quality training and resources** for the early childhood educators and practitioner

When students with special needs attend EIPIC & preschool, most of the time the preschool teachers are **ill equipped** to handle our students and **advise parents to find another school.**

Our education systems is **rigid & exam based**, such that our mainstream students are having huge problems with the system, let alone our children with special needs

A summary of challenges facing the EI Sector



Human Resource

Most professionals are satisfied with their work and believe it is making an impact on the lives of children with special needs, however

Challenges Exist



Quick burnout
(51%)



Unattractive benefits
(44%)



Manpower shortage
(34%)

Solutions Proposed



Assistive measures



Raise awareness about working in the sector



Provide scholarships



Support professional growth and clearer career pathway



Cross-Centre Issue

There are various organisations operating in and authorities supporting the sector. However,

Challenges Exist



Lack of integration
(21%)



Quality & capacity gaps
(19%)



Insufficient Info sharing
(14%)

Solutions Proposed



Define clearer roles



Standardise guidelines



Create pool of shared resources



Develop informal platforms/ comms tool



Government/Policy

EI leaders credit the Government's active role in advancing the sector, however concerns exist regarding

Challenges Exist



Insufficient funding
(27%)



No central authority
(19%)



No robust assessment framework
(12%)

Solutions Proposed



Set clear definitions



Conduct proper assessment

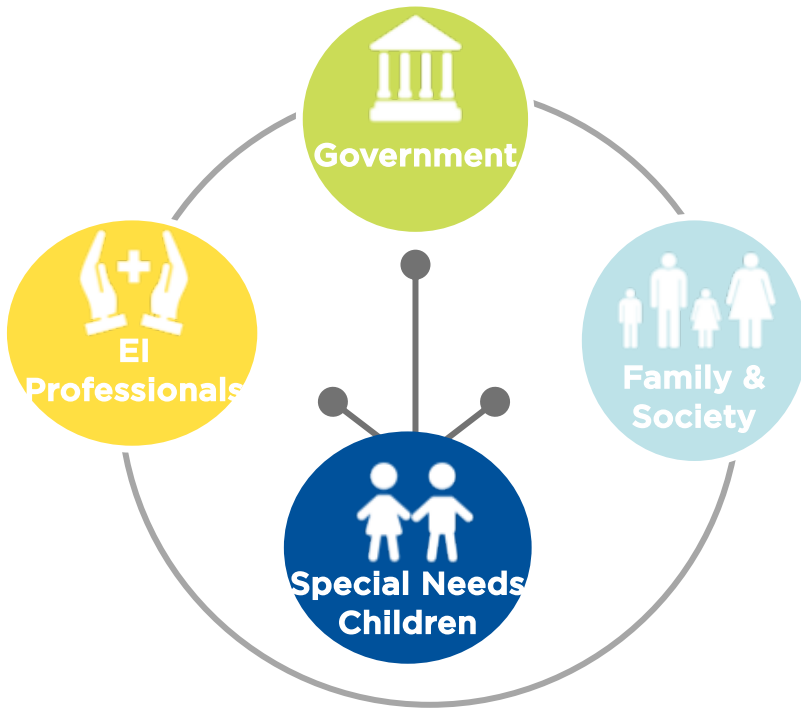


Define outcome measures



Create stronger branding

Moving towards an inclusive society



Singapore is far from inclusive

11% of those polled think Singapore is an inclusive society



83% EI professionals believe: **Inclusive education**

plays a critical role in creating an


Inclusive society



Challenges Exist


Lack of resources for school teachers (66%)


High emphasis on standardised assessments (58%)


Insufficiently trained teachers (58%)



“

Having able-bodied and persons with special needs in an institution does not mean it is inclusive. More importantly, we need to adopt a culture of inclusion, which entails embedding inclusive values such as having one's identity affirmed, accepted and valued for oneself.

Mr J R Karthikeyan
Senior Director, AWWA Disability and Inclusion, who oversees
Kindle Garden, Singapore's first inclusive preschool.



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and their Attitudes on Inclusion

ANNEX A: APPENDIX

Key challenges perceived by EI professionals



	Total	1 – 2 years	3-4 years	5 years or more	Teachers	Therapists	Others*
Quick burnout	51%	55%	53%	46%	56%	38%	41%
Unattractive salary & benefits	44%	49%	51%	37%	48%	37%	36%
Manpower shortage	34%	41%	37%	25%	32%	44%	32%
Lack of training & development	17%	19%	13%	17%	16%	15%	20%
Lack of development opportunities	13%	15%	10%	11%	14%	10%	10%



	Total	1 – 2 years	3-4 years	5 years or more	Teachers	Therapists	Others*
Weak organisational integration	21%	15%	21%	27%	16%	38%	29%
Wide quality & capability gaps	19%	14%	19%	23%	18%	13%	24%
Insufficient knowledge sharing	14%	14%	13%	14%	13%	17%	15%



	Total	1 – 2 years	3-4 years	5 years or more	Teachers	Therapists	Others*
Insufficient funding	27%	23%	29%	31%	26%	27%	33%
Lack of central authority	19%	17%	16%	22%	20%	17%	18%
Absence of assessment framework	12%	9%	10%	15%	12%	8%	13%
No outcome measure	12%	14%	6%	12%	11%	12%	14%
Lack of sector branding	10%	9%	19%	9%	11%	10%	10%
No common vision	7%	7%	4%	9%	7%	13%	4%

Base: N=423

Base: N=175

Base: N=70

Base: N=178

Base: N=280

Base: N=52

Base: N=91

* Include other occupations such as social workers, psychologists, doctors, admin staffs, etc.

Highlights of In-depth Interviews with Early Intervention Leaders

Recommendations



Need for faster growth than witnessed in the past 3 decades

- Prioritise building a strong **brand identity** for EIPIIC to gain visibility and attract the right skill set and passion.
- Establish **clear goals** that would help channel resources in the right direction, minimise duplication and increase pace of sectoral growth.
- More **upstream work**, i.e. policy-makers recognising on-ground realities, the real needs of the child, family, caregivers and EI professionals.
- Continue to work on **addressing sector manpower issues**.



More avenues for efforts in the sector to be consolidated and developed

- Stakeholders/leaders to continue to engage in efforts to address issues within their purview by spearheading **new projects**, setting up of **pilot programs**, etc.
- More **advocacy** and **mobilising of organic groups** to make various initiatives gain visibility and encourage funding, without having to rely on government backing each time.
- There is also a call to open up the boundaries of the sector, i.e. create **more awareness** among the general public.



Leveraging on global know-how

- Make aware and encourage adoption of well-established models and systems from countries like Australia and the US that already have highly evolved EI services.
- EI professionals to be given **opportunities to learn/ borrow** from the full-inclusion based models, more rigorous diagnosis and data management systems, integration and collaborations to facilitate growth in the sector



EI professionals' attitudes on inclusion



EI Professionals
11%

Agree that 'Singapore is an inclusive society'



There is no inclusion in Singapore; if one wants to absolutely insist, there is just **physical integration**. There is **no acceptance**, there is merely **tolerance at best**

It's a **long-term idea** for Singapore to really carry it out across everybody **mind and practice.**

Singaporean community has this mindset that **being special is different in a negative light**. There is **no openness** in the community even though Singaporeans think that they are ready"

By working experience

1-2 years

3-4 years

>=5 years

11%

13%

11%

Base: N=175

Base: N=70

Base: N=178

By occupation

Teachers

Therapists

Others*

10%

12%

14%

Base: N=280

Base: N=52

Base: N=91

Similar perception observed amongst EI professionals, regardless of their experience in the sector and occupation

* Include other occupations such as social workers, psychologists, doctors, admin staffs, etc.