

In education, we should be asking ‘how can we become more inclusive?’

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We, of the National Early Childhood Intervention Council (NECIC), would like to respond to a letter from Jerrica Fatima Ann on “An Inclusive Education Minefield” where she suggested that the government “put away the roadmap to inclusive education until the state and civil society awaken to their responsibility”.

We would like to highlight constructive and workable solutions that can be implemented without waiting as our children cannot wait.

We recount real-life stories of children (names changed to protect their privacy) to show that inclusion is possible with caring teachers who are flexible. There are many similar stories happening in the country.

Jia Qi's story

Jia Qi is a girl with Down syndrome. Many people, including teachers, have doubts about the future educational prospects of anyone with “Down syndrome”. But there are many exceptions, and Jia Qi is one. When Jia Qi was five, she could read and write in two languages and outperformed her kindergarten classmates academically. This was possible because Jia Qi's teachers allowed her mother to sit in and support her learning.

Aisha's story

When Aisha started primary school, her father Ibrahim made sure that he communicated with her school principal and class teachers about her needs and strengths, as well as strategies on how to support and help Aisha in school. With help and compassion from her school principal, teachers and classmates, Aisha thrived in her primary school despite having autism.

Teacher Lina's story

When Lina's kindergarten managers announced their decision to integrate children with disabilities in their school ten years ago, she was worried, scared and stressed. She had no experience teaching children with disabilities and had minimal understanding and knowledge of disabilities. She was worried that she would not be able to manage unexpected behavioural challenges.

Her fellow teachers felt the same. Lina's kindergarten is now one of the few inclusive kindergartens in our country. The transition is successful because Lina's kindergarten received regular itinerant support from early intervention practitioners to make adaptations to children's needs and learning.

They also collaborated with doctors, therapists and parents of children with disabilities to foster understanding and acceptance within their school and community. Now when you talk to Lina, her eyes sparkle with joy and confidence when talking about the children in her class; especially so when she tells stories about children with and without disabilities helping each other and playing with each other. These children with disabilities are participating meaningfully and are truly included in the classrooms.

The true meaning of inclusive education

Inclusive education is never about “one size fits all”. Neither is inclusive education solely about educating children with and without disabilities in the same space – that is integration. Unfortunately, it is also the definition adopted by our education ministry.

Besides being a right to equal education for all children, inclusive education in its truest sense is about the continuous effort of responding to diversity, identifying barriers to participation, changing attitudes and improving teaching pedagogy so that all children can participate meaningfully.

Road to inclusive education

No doubt, there are still huge gaps and barriers in our education system to make inclusive education a reality.

None of us can make it alone – we all need support. As a nation, we need to work together to change the system, to support our schools and teachers to become more inclusive so that all children can learn together.

The question should never be, “When will we become ready for inclusion?” Instead, we should ask: “How can we become more inclusive?” That is when we focus on inculcating an inclusive culture where diversity is embraced, respected and valued.

We agree that in order to implement inclusive education with fidelity, there needs to be a lower teacher-student ratio, one teacher to six or eight children.

Considering most preschool classrooms of 20 to 25 children have two teachers, an interim solution is to have the support of a “teacher aide” (assistant), or like Jia Qi’s case, allowing her mother to be in the classroom.

Many parents and teacher aides are willing to provide such support to mainstream teachers. The reality is that few schools offer such support, and most are not keen to have a parent or teacher aide in the class. Flexibility in curriculum and classroom management allow the smooth running of an inclusive process, in particular, the use of reasonable accommodation such as extra time and use of adaptive devices.

At the same time, we need teachers who are trained with skills to teach and respond to the diverse needs of children in their classroom. On that note, all professional training of our teachers – both pre-service and in-service, must be underpinned by the inclusive perspective.

Principles and strategies of teaching to diverse pupils must be embedded in professional development courses so that inclusive teaching will become our teachers’ second nature. NECIC, Early Childhood Care and Education Council (ECCE) and other non-governmental organisations have started working on the in-service, hands-on training for preschool teachers to make inclusive preschool a reality.

Besides producing sufficient numbers of qualified teachers in early childhood education, we also need to recruit the best talent to teach our children. Teaching is a work of heart and is a profession with great intellectual, physical and emotional rigour.

Teaching should never be a job that puts the bread on the table. Neither should early childhood education tertiary programmes be the “leftover” choice of our secondary school-leavers. In fact, we should be encouraging the high achievers to pursue teaching as a career of their first choice.

The roadmap to inclusive education must continue at all levels of education and must begin from early childhood education.

Jia Qi and Aisha are not the exceptions, many similar children who attend mainstream preschools thrive and grow exponentially in the environment, so much so that they continue to attend mainstream primary and secondary schools.

We have also witnessed the positive impact they bring to their preschools, where teachers improve their teaching skills, and all children, regardless of their disabilities, gain better literacy, communication and math skills, becoming more caring and respectful.

As the late Jean Vanier put it (Man & Woman, God Made Them, 2006): “A society which discards those who are weak and non-productive, risks becoming a society without a heart, without kindness – a rational and sad society, lacking celebration, divided within itself and given to competition, rivalry and, finally, violence.”

We cannot emphasise enough — include children with disabilities in the regular classroom, physically as well as educationally. We must progress towards the inclusion of all children, with different abilities and needs, into our education system so that they will be accepted fully as part of our society.

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