

Right to education

Learning alongside their non-disabled peers is an important education process for children with intellectual disabilities.

By LEE SOO HOON

IT WAS a typical kindergarten class. Eleven lively five-year-olds talked noisily and occasionally demanded the teacher's attention as they went about colouring. Seated next to the teacher in front of the class, a chubby wide-eyed girl was more interested in watching her friends than completing her task.

When a boy brought his completed work to the teacher, the girl pointed to a blank space on top of the page and said, "Date!" The teacher smiled as the boy had not written the day's date. She then reminded the boy, while praising the girl for her sharp eyes.

The little girl, Molly, has Down syndrome, a genetic condition caused by an extra chromosome which results in cognitive disabilities ranging from mild to severe.

"Despite her condition, I treat Molly like a normal child. I will scold her if she is naughty or does not do her work," said Mrs Chan, the class teacher.

She added that although Molly was slower in completing her tasks, she was able to do most of them independently with proper guidance. Molly followed the same lessons and was given the same work as her peers. To give her closer attention, Molly was seated next to the teacher along with another boy who showed learning difficulties.

Kasturi, who taught Molly in nursery class last year, said Molly had made much progress since she started preschool last April.

"Her reading has improved. She loves stories. She talks more and has learnt to share her things with her peers."

Mrs Wong, the kindergarten principal, attributed Molly's progress and positive inclusion in the kindergarten to her teachers' commitment.

Molly's mother, Ling, noted that she had seen positive changes in Molly since she attended kindergarten last year.

"Sometimes she surprises me by saying words or phrases which I never thought she knew. By mixing with the other children, she has learnt

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a lot by imitating them."

The above case of the successful inclusion of a child with special needs in a regular preschool programme is not common.

It is difficult for parents of children with special needs to find regular preschools which will accept their children.

Asia Community Service recently published a book entitled, *Inclusive Preschool Education in Malaysia: A Comparative Study of Present Situation and Future Direction*. The publication is based on a recent survey by the organisation on inclusive practices among 191 private preschool operators in Malaysia.

Although a total of 1,473 survey forms were distributed, only 14% of the forms was returned. This shows that disability issues continue to generate low public interest and non-committal attitudes.

Most of the respondents had had contacts with parents of children with special needs as 81.7% had received enrolment enquiries for these children. This reflects the overwhelming demand for regular preschools to accommodate children with special needs.

At the point of the survey, 55.5% of respondents had enrolled children with special needs, with slow learners being the largest group enrolled.

Teacher limitations was the most common reason for non-enrolment of children with special needs in the past. Nevertheless, the lack of qualified teachers did not hinder a good number of respondents from accepting children with special needs.

The study revealed that preschool children with special needs in Malaysia were often not included but instead integrated into the preschool programme. These children were not being accepted unconditionally in the spirit of true inclusion. They were being accepted as long as their conditions were manageable.

More often than not, children with special needs had to fit into a list of criteria which stressed the child's



Being included: Children with special needs have a right to play and learn among their peers.

readiness for formal schooling (for example, the ability to follow group instructions and sit still).

In reality, academic competence is often not the main aim of parents who send their child with special needs to preschool. They want their child to socialise with his/her peers, and to be accepted and included in the same activities. In many situations where there is inclusion, the first step is teacher and peer acceptance of the child with special needs.

Traditional institutionalisation of people with disabilities has long been criticised and replaced with community care and support to ascertain a decent quality of life. Since the 1990s, the universal disability movement has been advocating equal opportunities and full participation. Lately, a stronger move to promote an inclusive, barrier-free and rights-based society has emerged. It is important to ensure that the Malaysian mindset on disabilities progresses with the movement.

The survey identified people's attitudes as one of the greatest barriers to inclusive education. Even if societies do not pro-actively embrace inclusion, it is vital that they do not hinder it. Positive attitudes are crucial for key people involved in making inclusive education possible, such as policy-makers, special educators, teachers and parents of children with special needs. No less important are the attitudes of peers, their parents, the school community at large and the general public.

Under the Ninth Malaysia Plan (2006-2010), the government has allocated RM327.3mil to expand the national preschool programme. This will involve the provision of 3,143 preschool classes, including special education preschool programmes, in 2,626 schools. With the above allocation, it is hoped that as many as 76,000 chil-

dren above the age of five will receive schooling by the year 2010.

The government has made large allocations for the provision of preschool education under the Plan. The Education Ministry, through the National Education Blueprint, has made a strong commitment towards educating all students as Malaysia strives to become a developed nation by 2020. These policies and other government initiatives in the pipeline promise more, and hopefully, better education opportunities and provisions in the next five years.

The challenging task now lies in ensuring that the needs of children with disabilities are not overlooked in the implementation of future education projects and policies. The responsibility of educating children with special needs does not end with the provision of education. Steps must be taken to ensure the adequacy and quality of these provisions in meeting the children's special educational needs.

The government must channel sufficient allocation into the recruitment and training of skilled teachers and specialised professionals in special needs education. Steps must be taken to facilitate the inclusion of children with special needs into mainstream classrooms.

Children with special needs have the right to be educated, and to play and learn alongside their peers with and without special needs.

■ All names have been changed to safeguard confidentiality. Asia Community Service (ACS) is an NGO servicing children and young adults with intellectual disabilities in Penang. To purchase the publication entitled *Inclusive Preschool Education in Malaysia: A Comparative Study of Present Situation and Future Direction*, please contact ACS (☎ 04-658 5396 or e-mail acspen@po.jaring.my).

One Voice is a monthly column which serves as a platform for professionals, parents and careproviders of children with learning difficulties. Feedback on the column can be sent to dignity@tm.net.my. For enquiries of services and support groups, please call Malaysian Care (☎ 03 9058 2102) or Dignity & Services (☎ 03-7725 5569).