

THE National Early Childhood Intervention Council (NECIC) would like to highlight the plight of children with special needs who are denied access to inclusive education in our country.

We recount real-life stories of children (names changed to protect their privacy) who struggle through an education system that marginalises them on the basis of their disabilities.

Ibrahim's story

Ibrahim is a delightful boy who has autism. Autism is a condition where the child has difficulties with communication and social interaction.

Most children with autism have a normal IQ and the potential to succeed in school. Ibrahim is a good example.

He is currently in Form1 in a regular government school.

Unfortunately he is repeatedly misunderstood by teachers and peers.

They keep saying that he is "inattentive" and does not focus on the teacher. Hence he receives "demerits" and is sometimes physically punished.

This is despite repeatedly writing to the school and explaining his situation to his class teachers since primary school.

They still fail to understand that he is not ignoring the teachers or being stubborn; Ibrahim has autism.

Recently the school authorities referred him back to the Paediatric Specialist Clinic again, requesting that Ibrahim be registered as OKU, so that he could be transferred to the special education class.

It is important to note that Ibrahim was placed 130/240 in the entire Form 1 examinations!

Out of sheer frustration, we requested the school to send all the other children who scored lower than Ibrahim (all 110 of them) to be registered OKU, before we consider registering him.

Murali's story

Murali is a cheeky young man with Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy (DMD). DMD is a muscle wasting condition, affecting boys, which usually presents around five to seven years of age, with progressive muscle weakness. Most children will need to use a wheel chair by 12 years and die around 18 - 25 years of life.

Why they are special

Despite knowing what his future holds, Murali's parents have worked hard to ensure a reasonably good quality of life for Murali, and that his needs are met both at home, and in the school.

This has meant carrying him into the class, buying the aids he requires, taking him to the toilet at school, etc.

Recently Murali sat for his PMR. We wrote to the Education Department requesting that he be given a little extra time as his hand muscles have, by now, also been affected.

Murali is no longer able to lift his arms, and his ability to write has been impaired. Despite these difficulties Murali scored 3 A's and 4 B's in the PMR examination!

This is indeed remarkable, considering the sad fact that the invigilator refused to grant Murali extra time, despite the obvious handicap he was facing.

Worse still, when Murali needed to go to the toilet assisted by his parents, the invigilator refused him, and Murali wet himself while doing the examination paper.

It is hard to understand such uncaring teachers but look at the unyielding spirit of this child. Imagine what results he could have achieved if he was supported just a little.

Often the rationale behind this refusal is - "we have to be fair to every child" - despite the fact that a child like Murali did not have "fair chance" to start off with.

Amanda's story

Amanda is a five-year-old girl with Down Syndrome. Of course, as soon as 'Down Syndrome' is mentioned, many people, including teachers, have doubts about future educational prospects.

But there are many exceptions, and Amanda is one.

Despite being born with Down Syndrome, Amanda is functionally better than many children her age.

She can read and write in two languages and out-performs her kindergarten classmates academically.

You may wonder how this happened. Well, Amanda has teachers

who allow her mother to sit in and support her learning.

The problem is how will this work out when it's time to move on to primary school?

Amanda does not belong in a special education class; she is well able to cope with the regular classroom curriculum provided, of course, she is given the appropriate support.

What Amanda needs is a system that will take into account her learning needs, supporting her, and including her in every sense of the word, i.e. an inclusive system.

This may mean being in a class with a low student-teacher ratio which is able to provide better personal attention to individual students.

It would be ideal to have the support of a teacher aide or else allowing Amanda's mother to be in the classroom.

The reality is that few schools offer such support and most are not keen to have a parent/teacher aide in the class.

Educating children with special needs in segregated settings contradicts the Persons with Disabilities Act 2008 which stipulates that "these children shall not be excluded from the general education system on the basis of disabilities".

The recent National Education Blueprint clearly reiterates an inclusive education policy for children with special needs.

As our stories illustrate, just a little support would have gone a long way in helping these children realise their true potential.

Ibrahim, Amanda and Murali are not alone, there are many children with similar special needs in every class and school.

Helping or pitying one or two of these children with intermittent financial gifts won't help much. We need a system that involves all who surround special needs children to be supportive, to make the school environment more supportive.

But we want to close on a more positive note - the success story of another child, Sarah - that illustrates how easily a supportive school environment can be created.

Sarah's story

Sarah is currently in Standard 6 in a regular primary school (normal class). Sarah has a normal IQ, is reasonably functional, and has autism.

However, she does have social impairment and does not fully appreciate all the social situations she is faced with.

So what made the difference? Sarah's headmaster is a gem. As soon as he became aware of Sarah's condition, the headmaster rallied support around her.

Teachers and classmates were made aware of her needs, helping her with the daily routine of school life, like helping her to copy down her assignments correctly, helping her to articulate her needs, etc.

Not surprisingly, Sarah is doing well academically, but what is more important, she has found a home in this school.

There are teachers and headmasters like Sarah's in our education system but they are always not supported well by their peers.

None of us can make it alone - we all need support.

It is not the child with special needs who need to change; rather it is the system and the teachers who surround the child who need to change.

We cannot emphasise enough - include the child with special needs in the regular classroom.

This inclusiveness is not just physical but also educational. The teacher aide training programme to support a child with special needs in normal class is long overdue. 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.

Datuk Dr Amar-Singh HSS (President & Consultant Community Paediatrician)
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National Early Childhood Intervention Council (NECIC)

> Let's be clear

Food being sold openly in pasar malam should be banned immediately in view of the worsening haze. Local authority should take immediate step to wipe out illegal food stalls.

The haze is so bad. Why open-air hawker stalls are still allowed to operate? -dimobi

Pls pls help Muar. Do cloud seeding. Tq.

API reading in Muar has hit 746. Topsy-turvy here. People feel choked, suffering from breathing difficulties & sore throat. Indonesia govt must come down hard on those companies.

The haze season is back. Every year, there will be talks, meetings, advice to stay indoor, buy mask. But when will all this end? - MSJ

> Follies of man

Haze is man-made problem caused by the greed of man.

The haze shld b a lesson 4 us 2 never take clean air 4 granted. Strive 4 more but appreciate d basic things in life as well.

> Note to Indonesia

Asean is more than 40 years old. Why is it so difficult to coax Indonesia to ratify the transboundary haze agreement? - RAMS ACHARLES

Indonesia is free to punish any company, Malaysian, Singaporean or Indonesian, for the open fires. Has it done anything?

We promote danger of smoking here but allow our neighbour to choke us every yr wt d haze. Why? - MSJ

> Do it right

Rakyat wants 2 c constructive n critical debates in Parliament meeting. No childish, emotional or personal attack behavior. Replies from ministers must be detailed and factual.

> Check on them

MPSP, pls check huge t'port lorries plying along rds @ Tmn Keenways, BM. They pose a danger to road users & residents.

Parking lots 'reserved' by hawkers daily

WITH car ownership increasing and the dearth of parking lots, getting a parking lot during peak hours in the busiest sections of residential townships is getting increasingly difficult. Lately I noticed an increasing number of vans selling various types of food and fruits occupying these prime parking lots.

I have no qualms about them earning an honest living. That's their right and they have every right to do business.

But my concern is on the payment of parking fees. Parking rules should be adhered by all but not so by this group.

Some come early in the morning to reserve the same parking lot day in and day out.

These inconsiderate vehicle owners are unwilling to either pay parking fees on a daily basis or rent the particular lot on a monthly basis.

They only pay parking fees when enforcement officers are on their rounds.



Other vehicle owners who want to run some errands in the area would gladly pay the parking fees if the particular lot was made available to them.

Unfortunately the turnover of parking lots occupied by the vendors is almost nil which translates to less revenue earned by the local authorities.

The whole idea of providing parking lots is to make it convenient for motorists to find a parking

lot to run their errands nearby and then they are off.

Economists term this as short-term parking and results in a win-win situation where motorists find it convenient to locate a parking lot and the local authorities earn higher revenue as the same lot changes 'hands' many times. To discourage day-long parking, the parking rates should increase every subsequent hour.

My suggestion is the local coun-

cils jointly conduct a study on how practically feasible is it to implement this 'win-win' concept.

In fact, the time has come to conduct a comprehensive study to review the current parking rates in the busiest sections of mature and emerging townships.

For the short-term, I suggest that the city councils request these vendors to pay a monthly fee for occupying the particular parking lot.

But the number of such lots should be limited; otherwise the flood gates might open and every prospective businessman would then be applying to occupy more and more parking lots to sell their wares all day long!

And finally for nearby residents, please take a walk (use an umbrella if it is too hot) and not compete for a parking space. Walking is good for health.

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