

Education

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Aiding kids with special needs

by [jeannette goon](#)



The majority of children with learning disabilities will be able to make progress if they are given more support in mainstream schools.

THERE are many children who are born with some form of learning disability but not all of them need to be sent to special education schools.

Datuk Dr Amar Singh, president of the National Early Childhood Intervention Council is of the view that children have varying degrees of disability, however, that doesn't mean that they all have to be placed in "special" schools as many of them can cope quite well in regular or mainstream schools, if extra support is provided for them.

He added that there are three groups of children who enter the Malaysian school system. The first group that makes up more than 70% of the school-going population does not have any barriers to learning, while the second group which constitutes only a small percentage has severe learning disabilities. Children from this group need to be sent to special schools.

The third group makes up about 20% of school-going children. They usually have mild learning disabilities but are often enrolled in special schools.

“These children (with mild learning disabilities) are high-functioning enough to be placed in regular or mainstream schools, but because they can’t fit into the normal education system, they are placed in such (special education) schools,” added Dr Amar Singh.

“Being placed in such schools only frustrates them for they are obviously much ahead in all areas compared to their more challenged peers,” he shared.

On the other hand, there are children with learning disabilities who have not been diagnosed and they end up in the bottom or end classes at mainstream schools and are labelled as “stupid”, when in actual fact, they may have high IQs.

“I met a dyslexic boy recently who was unable to read or write, but I was able to converse with him on a range of topics,” said Dr Amar Singh. He added that support had to be provided for these students within mainstream education.

He said that of the autistic students that he worked with, 40% were able to attend mainstream schools with added support from teachers, school heads and other students.

He agreed that early diagnosis and intervention was important for these students and that parents had to “come on board” as well.

Dr Amar Singh said that there were three major groups of people with learning disabilities — physical, sensory and mental. Even within each of these categories are individuals with varying levels of learning difficulties due to conditions such as spinal bifida or physical disabilities due to accidents.

Others may have sensory disabilities like hearing or visual impairments. Yet, there are others who may have autism or other brain-related disabilities such as ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) and dyslexia.

“There are so many children and sub-categories of learning disabilities, that they are not diagnosed properly,” he said.

He added that healthcare professionals needed more training at an undergraduate level to accustom themselves in handling people with such disabilities. He said that besides prescribing the standard procedures such as physiotherapy or speech therapy, those in healthcare also had to act as “point people”.

“Parents need someone who can help them find resources,” he said.

ADHD expert Ben Glenn from the United States, agreed that there were students with learning disabilities who were able to function in mainstream school systems.

He explained that the main difference between a student with ADHD and an average student, was the way they processed information and behaved in the classroom setting.

“Students with ADHD struggle with impulse control, lack of focus, forgetfulness and hyperactivity. Students with ADHD often have other learning disabilities like dyslexia or dysgraphia alongside their ADHD that makes it even harder to learn at the pace of an unaffected student,” he said.

Glenn, who was diagnosed with a myriad of learning disabilities including dyslexia as a child, said that students with ADHD would be able to attend a mainstream school.

“Students with ADHD are able to attend and even be quite successful within a mainstream school system, if the school administrators and teachers understand what ADHD is and are willing and able to accommodate the students that have it.

“Provision of individualised programmes as well as sympathetic administrators and teachers, have allowed many ADHD students to thrive in mainstream classes,” he said.

National Early Childhood Intervention Council vice-president Khor Ai-Na said that children with mild disabilities were actually able to function within the mainstream education system.

“If given support, they will be able to manage their schoolwork and be more independent,” she said, adding that the reason for them to be seen as “non-performing” was because of the Malaysian mindset and the emphasis on achieving distinctions.

“We need to explore different ways to teach. These children are able to handle the same subjects but may process the information differently,” she said.

She added that one teacher may not be enough to handle a classroom of children with learning disabilities. Her suggestion was to have smaller classrooms as well as provide assistants for the teacher.

“The other alternative is to allow personal assistants hired by parents into the classroom so that they can assist the students,” she said.

Khor is also the honorary secretary of the Bold Association for Children with Special Needs, which provides early intervention for any child who presents delays in development.

However, they are unable to provide for school students because they lack the resources to run a school.

According to Autism Malaysia director Jochebed Isaacs, the largest part of its operating cost goes towards staff salaries.

The Autism Malaysia centre uses the Applied Behavioural Analysis Programme, which was designed by researchers involved in the Wisconsin Early Autism Project in the United States.

“In this programme, the children are given personal attention ... on a one-to one basis during the time they are at the centre,” said Isaacs.

She said 10 staff members were needed to take charge of seven children, adding that those who enrolled their children at the centre paid a hefty monthly sum of RM2,000 or more.

“There are also clinicians to supervise the individualised programmes,” she said. At the centre, different methods are used on different children to cater to the wide spectrum of behavioural traits.

Issacs agreed with the other experts, saying that children with autism should be able to go to school.

“What we do at the centre is to help the children develop the social understanding needed to get by in life.

“Much of the behaviour exhibited by children with autism is actually their way of trying to communicate,” she said.

Taylor’s College associate director Frank Meagher said that every student had the right to have a proper education that met their needs.

Prior to coming to Malaysia, he served for many years as superintendent of special services in Toronto, Canada where he was responsible for ensuring that programmes and services for special education were provided to all in the area.

He was also in charge of preparing the budget for the Canadian Education Ministry.

He admitted that the educational model was “not without challenge” as about 85% of the students who received special education support were placed in regular classrooms for more than half of the school day.

“This underscores the general philosophy of inclusion which calls for students with special needs to be placed in their community school, and as much as possible, in a regular class with their age-appropriate peers and be provided with the necessary academic support for success.

“It also means that regular classroom teachers require a high level of training and support to provide for the individual needs of these students within their classroom.

“In addition to specialised training, there is also the need for special education teachers and support staff assigned to each school, to augment and support the regular classroom teachers’ efforts.

“Class size is a critical factor in this educational model. In order for teachers to provide the individual coaching required by these students, numbers in each class must be reasonable. The average class size in both the elementary and secondary schools is 22,” explained Meagher.

He said that parent involvement was also necessary within this model.

“Another critical component of the model is the partnership with parents who know the strengths of their respective children. Each student who requires a special education programme has an Individual Education Plan (IEP) which is reviewed annually.”

Parents, he said, were required to participate in the development and revision of the plan and have a direct voice in its implementation.

Such plans had a legal component and schools were required to implement the IEP, he added.

“Each school is required to have a School Council, and representation on that council for special needs students is a requirement,” he said.

He admitted that a significant budget was required to ensure success of such an education model as not only academic teaching and support staff were required.

Psychometricians, psychologists, educational assistants, child and youth workers, social work staff, speech and language consultants were among the staff needed in ensuring the smooth running of the model.

“Public education in Canada provides such support and it is fully supported by the nation’s tax payers. Students with special needs in Malaysia deserve no less,” he said.