Educaing all children – without exception

For the S’pore system to truly be for all, those with disabilities must not be allowed to fall through the cracks

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Education is one of the most important issues on Singapore’s national agenda: It takes up about one-fifth of the Government’s annual budget. The Ministry of Education invests a significant amount of resources in making the educational landscape a vibrant and creative one that maximises the potential of Singapore’s most important resource — its people.

To underscore its commitment, Singapore signed in 1988 the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, a legally binding international document that accords the full range of human rights to children, including the right to education.

We also instituted the Compulsory Education Act in 2000, which makes it a criminal offence for parents not to enrol their children in school and ensure their regular attendance.

Yet, there is a segment of children — those identified with physical and other disabilities — who fall between the cracks in Singapore’s educational system.

There are no public schools for these children; instead, many attend special education schools built largely by the MOE and run by voluntary welfare organisations. These schools receive more than 80 per cent of their funding from the MOE, have long waiting lists and charge fees on a means-testing basis.

Is education not a basic right? Representations on this issue were made to the MOE in 2004 by the Joint Committee for Compulsory Education for All in its April 2004 report A Case for the Inclusion of Children with Special Needs in Compulsory Education.

Of course, there has been much progress in the past few years. Ms Denise Phua, the MP for Jalan Besar GRC, is well known for her successful efforts to set up Pathlight School, the first autism-focused school that offers a unique blend of mainstream academic training and life-readiness skills.

With support from the Asian Women’s Welfare Association and principals of mainstream schools, the MOE built several schools for children with disabilities. In addition, some children from special schools received early intervention, worked their way into mainstream schools and are now graduates from our polytechnics and universities with responsible jobs.

Many inspire others with their achievements. Ms Grace Chan, who has Down’s Syndrome, is the author of a book, I am Human, Not Alien (2005), and holds a permanent job at Goodwood Hotel.

Singaporeans cheered when Ms Yip Xiu Pin, born with muscular dystrophy, won a gold medal and set a world record in swimming for the 50m backstroke at the 2008 Beijing Paralympics.

Mr Navin Nair, who had cerebral palsy, graduated at the top of his class from an Australian university with a degree in Business Administration and has just been hired as a Talent Attraction Coordinator by Adecco, a leading global Human Resource agency.

We can, and should, build on our nation’s educational achievements by ensuring that every child is given ample opportunities to reach his or her full potential. This requires that we address the needs of a small but growing number of children with disabilities in Singapore, who require early intervention services — which ideally should begin well before a child is three years of age.

Early intervention, when done well and in a timely manner, prevents and or mitigates physical, social and academic challenges that could exacerbate difficulties that emerge later.

A well-designed system of special education will not only ensure that young children have the requisite support to transition from infant care to primary school. Such a system will also include an ample supply of professionals with the expertise and resources to be able to work collaboratively.

These professionals must screen and evaluate children for early intervention, identify needs, create individualised education plans, implement them and monitor appropriate interventions that support the learning processes of children who demonstrate a variety of social and academic challenges.

In a country that prizes its only natural resource — people — Singaporeans with special needs are defying the odds and inspiring others, often without much government support.

If, in this wealthy nation, we are to live up to our commitment to give all our children the right to education, and to bring to life our national identity as “one Singapore”, then we owe it to ourselves to create opportunities for all Singaporeans to live a productive and high-quality existence.

We could start by extending Medishield coverage to children with special needs so that parents can access much-needed extensive therapies. Second, remove means-testing for Early Intervention Programme for Infants and Children and provide full subsidies, similar to those given every other Singaporean child who attends an MOE-administered school.

We could start by, first, extending Medishield coverage to children with special needs so that parents and families, already saddled with onerous medical expenses, can access much-needed extensive therapies.

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In the ‘90s, a lively national debate took place on the issue of whether our MRT stations should be made accessible to people in wheelchairs and, if so, who should pay for it. Today, we all recognise that in a civilised society, the elderly and infirm should be empowered to move around safely and efficiently and all our train stations are now wheelchair-friendly.

If the MRT system could be redesigned to ensure that individuals with disabilities can use it safely, then what about our system of education?

We believe that Singapore has the ability to light the way for the rest of the world and design schools that work for all its children. What we need is the courage and the will to be the example the world awaits.

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