



THE INCLUSIVE LINK

Issue 08 / March 2012

REVISITING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

We have entered the third year of publication. Since 2010, we have printed and distributed a total of seven issues of The Inclusive Link to about 250 preschools in Penang and over 100 preschools in Sibu. As stated in our very first issue, our aim is to promote inclusion in preschools. Hence in every issue, we included various strategies for helping preschool teachers cope with their children, particularly those who may have special needs.

In this first issue for 2012, we would like to revisit the topic of inclusive education. What is inclusive education? Why do we want to promote it in schools?



Inclusive education is a universal philosophy, practice and approach of educating children in schools. It calls for a society where children with special needs are not being educated in separate classrooms or special schools, isolated from their peers. A society where children with special needs and their peers without special needs can learn together, as well as from each other in the same classrooms.

There are two strong beliefs underlying this philosophy. Firstly, ALL children are educable although they may learn at different rates and volumes. Secondly, ALL children can benefit from an inclusive program regardless of their differences. These beliefs lead us to the reason for promoting inclusion in schools. Many studies have found that children with special needs showed improvement in their communication and social skills when placed in mainstream school settings. Additionally, there were reported gains in maths skills, general knowledge and social independence. For typical developing children, having a peer with special needs in the classroom provides an opportunity to learn about and value differences. Research has shown that these children often grow up to be more accepting of people with special needs. Children who help to peer coach their special needs' friends are likely to master their academic work and show improved self-esteem.

Although the rationale for promoting inclusion is clear, its success lies ultimately with the TEACHER. For inclusion to be possible and successful, teachers need to feel positive about it and must want to include the child with special needs in their classrooms.



Quote for Thought

*As a teacher, I possess tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous.
I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration.
I can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal.*

In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated, and a child humanized or de-humanized.

– Haim Ginott



SOME STRATEGIES FOR INCLUSION

Structure and Routines

Most children, particularly those with special needs, thrive in learning environments where there is a fixed structure to the physical layout of the classroom as well as to the class routine. For example, a child with autism feels more secure if the class seating arrangement stays the same or when activities are being conducted in the same rooms each time. He may find it disturbing or be distracted by new elements, for example if music lesson is suddenly being held in the hall instead of the music room that he is familiar with.

Teachers must be ready to expect disruption to children's learning behavior when they make changes to the class layout or routine, and as much as possible prepare their pupils in advance for these changes. Visual schedules are useful for communicating transition of tasks/activities. When children are familiar with their surroundings and know what to expect, transition of activities becomes smooth, on-task time is increased and challenging behaviors are reduced.



Lesson Modification

Sometimes the child with special needs may not be able to take part in some lessons/activities in the same way as his peers. This should not result in him not being given the opportunity to participate! The child can still be included if teachers are willing to make modifications in their teaching materials, teaching methods and their expectations of the child's learning outcomes. For example during maths lesson, if the workbook used is too difficult for the child with learning difficulties, the teacher can prepare separate worksheets according to his number skills so that he can still learn during maths time although at a different level from his peers.

For challenging tasks, *task analysis* is useful for breaking down broad learning tasks into simple components. By changing their expectations, teachers can allow the child with special needs to learn these simple components one at a time until the broader task is mastered.

Peer Acceptance

Teachers have the crucial role of fostering peer acceptance and friendship for the child with special needs. As role models, teachers can encourage peers to value and support the child with special needs. This may involve highlighting the child's strengths to his peers and valuing his contributions by giving him achievable group tasks. When the child shows challenging behavior or behaves differently from others, teachers need to offer explanation in a positive manner to his peers.

For children who have difficulties with communication and social skills, teachers are important facilitators as well as models for peer interaction. For example, the teacher can help interpret the non-verbal expressions of a child with speech delay, or she may model appropriate responses for the child with poor social skills as well as his peers. To encourage peer interaction for the child with poor social skills, teachers can start by facilitating simple turntaking games in small groups of 2-3 children.



(References: *Down Syndrome News & Update* 6(1); Loreman, T., Deppeler, J. and Harvey, D. (2005) *Inclusive Education: A Practical Guide to Supporting Diversity in the Classroom*; Fox, G. (1998), *A Handbook for Learning Support Assistants*)

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For more information, please contact:
227 Jalan Pemancar, 11700 Penang
Tel: 04-6585396 Fax: 04-6593780
www.asiacommunityservice.org

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