

“On Second Thought” column

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Plea for all pupils, including those with special needs, to learn together

All pupils learning together on a caring campus promotes understanding

Wallace was a Primary One pupil. Diagnosed with dyslexia, he found reading and writing difficult. His classmates made fun of and bullied him. Faced with her son’s deteriorating self-esteem, his mother requested the school to give Wallace some extra help, but they told her that doing so would be unfair to other pupils.

Cases like Wallace’s are being brought to the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) far too often. In commemorating the International Day of Persons with Disabilities today, we must remember those with special educational needs such as Wallace, who are still struggling for equal learning opportunities.

Their struggle is exacerbated by inadequate resources and support for inclusive education. According to an EOC study released last month, only about one in four principals have attended special-education training courses, and nearly half of teachers have no training in inclusive education.

A lack of awareness on the value of inclusive education further complicates the situation.

According to our study, six out of 10 parents feel that students with special educational needs disrupt the learning of others. Nearly two in five feel that they take up too much of the school’s resources.

In reality, inclusive education provides real benefits, and not just for those with disabilities. A case in point is the Kowloon Bay St. John the Baptist Catholic Primary School, whose inclusive-education programme is supported by expertise from the Jockey Club Sign Bilingualism and Co-enrolment in Deaf Education Programme at Chinese University.

Students with and without hearing impairment learn side-by-side, with the assistance of bilingual teaching in both spoken and sign languages.

The positive impact of this programme is evident and encouraging. A number of students with full hearing became fluent in sign language, increasing their skills set.

Many said that the programme taught them better communication and empathy, as they focus on the abilities of their peers with hearing impairment, rather than their disability.

The children with hearing-impairment in the programme got significantly higher test scores than those who studied without support in mainstream schools.

The programme's success dispels the lingering myth that pupils with special-educational needs are disruptive.

Rather, the experience of all students learning together, including those with different needs, equips all of them with the ability to communicate despite their differences, and promotes understanding and compassion.

Yet even now, many students with disability have to leave mainstream schools due to the lack of support.

So what should be done to advance inclusive education? In our study, the EOC made a number of recommendations, including early identification of pupils with special-learning needs, providing more training for teachers and principals on equal-opportunity values, and creating a caring campus with the adoption of an anti-bullying policy.

The Government must lead the charge to increase both manpower and resources, and adopt a framework in which enhancing inclusion is one of the fundamental goals of policymaking.

We cannot afford to continue to leave Wallace, or others like him, behind in their quest for education, especially when we see what we are capable of achieving.

The time to act should have been years ago. Please, let's not wait any longer.

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