

Pre-school teachers learn to help kids with special needs

Lien Foundation project at kindergarten will expand to two PCF pre-schools next year

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Education Correspondent

For a long time, the job of supporting young ones with special needs has been left to staff trained in early intervention, as most pre-school teachers do not know how to help these children.

Hence, parents of kids with special needs would be familiar with the daily shuffle between pre-schools and centres which provide early intervention.

Philanthropic group Lien Foundation wants to change this, by bringing both worlds together.

It is funding a three-year pilot programme, called Making Every Pre-school Inclusive (Mepi), in a bid to bridge the pre-school and early intervention sectors.

The pilot, which started in July last year, involves training educators at St James' Church Kinder-

garten (SJCK) to work with early interventionists from Rainbow Centre to meet children's diverse needs in a mainstream setting.

This is the latest effort by Lien Foundation in developing models of inclusive education. It had earlier set up Kindle Garden, Singapore's first inclusive pre-school.

The Mepi initiative will be extended to two PAP Community Foundation (PCF) pre-schools next year, with possibly two more later. For a start, four early intervention staff, 26 PCF teachers and 15 children with diagnosed needs will be involved.

As part of the pilot, two early interventionists from Rainbow Centre are based at SJCK's Harding campus in Dempsey four days a week, where they teach alongside the pre-school teachers.

Lessons are co-planned and reviewed fortnightly. The team also designs activities that all children in a class can take part in, as well as



Dr Jacqueline Chung, academic director of St James' Pre-school Services, said inclusive education should happen as early as possible. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

more customised support for those with needs like autism.

Several of the six children with such needs in SJCK also receive support at Rainbow Centre, which offers early intervention for those aged six and below.

So far, 18 SJCK teachers have received training and the aim is to get more on board next year.

Dr Jacqueline Chung, academic director of St James' Pre-school Services which runs SJCK, said the hope is that through regular interaction, pre-school teachers will be more equipped to handle children with special needs.

For a long time, the early childhood and early intervention worlds existed separately, she

said. "Whenever in the past there were issues with children, we would then literally say, you get help over that side, because we do not know what to do, and we can help only up to a certain extent."

Two trips to Finland and British Columbia in Canada with the Lien Foundation in the past two years changed her perception.

Dr Chung and Ms Tan Sze Wee, Rainbow Centre's executive director, had taken the trips to see how schools in those countries carry out inclusive education.

Dr Chung said they saw how early intervention and mainstream school could work together. "The intersection (of the two worlds) is just a mirror of what a healthy society should look like. And it should happen as early as possible... because that's when attitudes, value dispositions, beliefs are shaped," she added.

Singapore is beginning to pay more attention to inclusive education. Last year, the Ministry of Social and Family Development set up a workgroup to explore how to integrate children with special needs in regular pre-schools.

It introduced a programme, which enables suitable children with mild to moderate developmental needs to get support at a mainstream pre-school.

Ms Tan said parents are seeing the benefits of placing their children with special needs in mainstream pre-schools.

Dr Chung said SJCK had enrolled children with special needs before, but most teachers felt inadequately trained to help them.

Now, the co-planning of lessons helps pre-school teachers apply early intervention strategies to engage different types of learners, instead of resorting to guesswork as to what works, she added.

The Mepi team plans to develop a training manual and course to guide similar partnerships between early intervention centres and pre-schools.

Lien Foundation chief executive Lee Poh Wah said: "Mepi has demonstrated that teachers, early interventionists, therapists and parents can learn to work together for improved children, teacher and family outcomes."

"We have bridged 'mainstream' and 'special' education to broaden the repertoire of skills, practices and capabilities in schools to deal with diversity more effectively."

Much has been done by the Government and community to support inclusive education in the early childhood system, he noted, and the primary school system can build on these efforts further.

Ms Tan said teaching norms should change to meet the needs of more diverse learners, whether or not they have diagnosed needs.

"Maybe as an early childhood educator, (you think) it should be normal to accept that all children sit down and attend lessons," she said. "We are hoping to stretch that, and challenge that actually it is the norm for our kids to be running around, but it is normal for educators to be learning how to engage every type of learner."

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Thriving in a regular setting, thanks to targeted aid



Amos Tham, who has Down syndrome, with his teacher Tryphena Oh (right) and early intervention therapist Stephanie Lee at St James' Church Kindergarten in Harding Road last month. His teachers worked with early interventionists and found targeted ways to help him better handle transitions. ST PHOTO: GAVIN FOOT

Seven-year-old Amos Tham used to plunk himself on the floor in school when he did not want to take part in certain activities, or when he had to move from one class to the next.

His teachers at St James' Church Kindergarten (SJCK) in Harding Road would try to coax him to go along with the rest of his class, while unsure what more they could do to encourage him to join his peers.

But after working together with early interventionists from Rainbow Centre, they found targeted ways to help Amos, who has Down syndrome, to better handle transitions in the past year.

Ms Tee Yi, a senior early interventionist from Rainbow Centre, said the teachers would inform Amos of the next activity 10 to 15 minutes beforehand and remind him about it every few minutes, with the help of a personal schedule printed out for him.

Instead of trying to persuade him to join every activity, his teachers learnt to understand his cues better and present options to him, she added.

When he was tired, for instance, they would ask him if he wanted to rest his head on a table or take a break on a chair for a few minutes.

He became more active in class activities, and his mother, Mrs Sandra Tham, saw improvements in his communication and cognitive skills.

"The targeted help he got in school helped him to focus and participate better in class," said the 38-year-old housewife.

"It could be that his oral motor muscles are getting stronger as he grows up. It's also the peer influence at St James', because he likes to mimic his friends," she added.

"One recent phrase he learnt is 'That's cool'."

Mrs Alice Lock, principal of SJCK Harding campus, said that in co-planning lessons, her teachers identified activities in which they struggled to engage children with special needs.

Having worked with early interventionists, the teachers' mindsets have changed, she said.

"They realise that they just need to change a little bit of their teaching strategies or classroom management, (and) children with additional needs have the potential to achieve something," said Mrs Lock.

Another parent, Madam Chris Goh, said the tie-up between SJCK and Rainbow Centre has been timely.

She had not been able to find a suitable pre-school for her five-year-old daughter, who has suspected autism, but the 35-year-old, who works in the telemarketing sector, still wanted her daughter to attend a regular pre-school.

"The real world is not going to be like in the early intervention setting where everything is customised for her and where everyone is so caring," said Madam Goh. "I want her to socialise with peers, cope with emotions and deal with unpredictable scenarios."

Amos' mother said she initially had reservations about placing him in a regular pre-school.

"He had low muscle tone, wasn't speaking and was tube-fed up to three years old. When he joined St James', he was still walking unsteadily and not speaking at all. We had to tell teachers to use sign language," recalled Mrs Tham, whose older son, aged nine, attended the same pre-school and is now in Primary 3 in

a mainstream school.

"The teachers were very willing to take up the task. They loved and accepted him, and his classmates also stepped up to the role of helping him," she said.

"He has come a long way. It encourages us as parents to see Amos able to learn alongside his neurotypical peers... We hope that this can continue."

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MAKING GOOD PROGRESS

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MRS SANDRA THAM, Amos' mother

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