

Special needs gaps in 'every child matters'

Priscilla Goy

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The education of every child matters, regardless of his abilities and learning challenges. That is the signal sent by the milestone announcement by the Education Ministry (MOE) last month for special needs children.

MOE is making it compulsory for all children with moderate to severe special needs who are above six years old to complete six years of primary education at publicly funded schools before they turn 15.

Currently, such children are exempt under the Compulsory Education Act. But starting with the 2019 Primary 1 cohort, they will all have to attend a government-funded special education (Sped) school, unless they get approval to be exempted.

While the policy change affects a small number of children, it sends a strong signal for inclusiveness - requiring all special needs children to attend publicly funded schools, like all other children in Singapore.

About 440 out of 1,770 children with special needs in each cohort - about 25 per cent- are now exempt under the law. These children have moderate to severe special needs, such as autism, intellectual disabilities and cerebral palsy.

Nearly all go to Sped schools, though it is not a must. Under the new rules, they will be required to attend a public-funded school.

Only 2 per cent of the cohort, or about 40 children, do not go to any publicly funded school.

Supporters of the new rules said they have not been calling for compulsory integration of special needs children in mainstream schools. Indeed, Minister of State for Education Janil Puthuchery has said "CE doesn't mean we're going to force everybody to do one thing".

Still, given that Sped schools will come under the Compulsory Education Act, like mainstream ones do, there are several issues arising from this new "inclusiveness".

These are areas that could be addressed by an advisory panel that MOE has appointed to look at how best to put the new policy into practice.

One is fees. Mainstream primary schooling is technically "free" - though there are some small monthly miscellaneous fees. At Sped schools, it is not.

Funding for Sped schools is also an issue - should they now get more funding from MOE?

Then, there is the issue of the qualifications required for a Sped teacher, which are not as stringent as those required for mainstream teachers.

Their pay scales are also lower.

Fourth, what aspects of the mainstream curriculum should be commonly taught to special needs pupils?

Fees and Funding

A government-appointed panel recommended in 2012 that extending the Compulsory Education Act to special needs children should be made by this year. Doing so, it said, would "promote inclusiveness and ensure that resources are adequately available" for special needs children.

Now that the Act is, at last, to include them, if every child matters, and children in mainstream schools pay the same fees regardless of their intellectual abilities, why should special needs children - whose parents also pay taxes - pay a different amount?

Singaporean children in mainstream primary schools do not pay school fees, only miscellaneous fees that amount to about \$6.50 to \$13 a month.

Those enrolled in more than half of the 20 Sped schools pay about that amount too. But in some cases, involving more severe special needs conditions, Sped school fees can rise to as much as \$350, although needy families can apply for this to be waived.

MOE has assured that no special needs child will be denied an education because of a lack of finances, and there are financial aid schemes for low-income families.

But this is still unfair to middle and high-income families, said people in the social service sector.

Disabled People's Association executive director Marissa Lee said: "There are already increased costs that come with having a special needs child. On a more symbolic note, what does it say about inclusiveness when school fees are means-tested for pupils with severe disabilities, but not for those without?"

The discrepancy is felt more strongly when parents of special needs children point out that mainstream schools are technically "free", while Sped schools are not.

MOE states on its website that while "general education is almost fully subsidised by the Government", the payment of miscellaneous fees is to "instil the sense that parents must be responsible for the education of their children".

Some Sped school websites make a distinction between school fees and miscellaneous fees, but there is no indication that schooling is free the way it is in mainstream schools. Removing the disparity and making Sped education free would strengthen the message of inclusivity.

People in the welfare sector said Singapore has ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities - and both mandate that primary education should be made compulsory and free for all.

On school funding, MOE does offer Sped schools funding support and its annual subsidy for each Sped school pupil is 2 1/2 times that of a mainstream primary school pupil. The average cost of educating a mainstream primary school pupil was \$10,200 last year.

MOE funding amounted to around \$145 million last year, a spokesman said yesterday. This figure does not take into account additional funding from the community, which includes contributions from ComChest. "MOE will continue to partner the Sped sector and National Council of Social Service (NCSS), to ensure that Sped schools are adequately resourced to support students with moderate to severe special needs," the ministry spokesman said.

Some parents said they had hoped that MOE's policy change would see the ministry absorbing more of the costs involved in schooling a special needs child, such as transport and therapy.

Even middle-income families struggle with these costs. In a survey commissioned by the Lien Foundation this year, 43 per cent of 830 parents with special needs children aged nine and below said they did not receive enough financial help from the Government.

Six in 10 parents with a monthly household income of between \$7,000 and \$9,900 felt this way.

One cannot expect MOE to foot the bill for all the costs involved in schooling a special needs child - pupils in mainstream schools still pay school bus fees, and subsidies for medical and social services for other disadvantaged groups are generally means-tested.

But MOE should give a clearer signal of its commitment to provide learning opportunities for all children by increasing financial support for parents, even as parents should be primarily responsible for ensuring that their children attend school.

Pay and qualification of teachers

If every child matters, and every child should have access to quality education, then the teachers who provide that education should be treated equitably, regardless of whether they teach in a mainstream or Sped school.

There are 20 Sped schools with funding support from MOE. They are run by 13 voluntary welfare organisations (VWO) and their teachers are employees of the VWOs. MOE teachers can also be seconded to the Sped schools.

It is not a must for Sped or mainstream primary school teachers to have a degree from the National Institute of Education.

Different VWOs have different criteria in the hiring of Sped school teachers, but the panel that recommended changes to the law previously said the qualifications of such teachers are usually less stringent than those of mainstream teachers.

As Sped teachers do not come under MOE's purview, they also do not have access to the same salary scales and opportunities as their peers in mainstream schools.

VWOs are encouraged to follow salary guidelines by the NCSS, and some try to offer pay packages that are on a par with mainstream peers. But the general perception is that Sped school teachers have less recognition, and their pay packages are less attractive, even though their jobs are usually tougher.

Mr Victor Tay, president of the Association for Persons with Special Needs, which runs four Sped schools, said: "Typically, in Sped schools, teachers deal with more challenging behaviour from pupils."

Ms Anita Fam, who was on the 2012 expert panel that recommended the inclusion of special needs children in the Compulsory Education Act, suggested that the Government assume "full financial and hiring responsibility in the Sped sector".

She said: "I hope all Sped school teachers will come under the MOE employment system, and that they will be treated no differently from mainstream counterparts."

What is the goal?

After the changes were announced, Ms Rachel Yeo, in a letter to The Straits Times Forum last month, said: "Compulsory Education aims to give children a common core of knowledge and a common educational experience. Is it right to impose a common core of knowledge on a group of individuals so inherently different in the first place?"

Sped school pupils need not follow the mainstream curriculum or take the PSLE, but with this move towards inclusiveness, what is the common core of knowledge and educational experience among the two groups, then?

Institute of Policy Studies research fellow Justin Lee said: "There is a lack of consensus as to whether having a special education curriculum in mainstream settings or a mainstream curriculum in specialised settings is more preferable."

"For instance, if MOE thinks mainstreaming is the goal, then the policy directive is to equip mainstream schools to admit more special needs pupils."

Meanwhile, Mr Tim Oei, chief executive of AWWA, which runs a Sped school, said it is vital for parents to understand the benefits of sending children to Sped schools. A child can pick up skills that help him gain independence and prepare him for employment, he said.

At the least, even if special needs children do not learn alongside their mainstream peers, there should be more opportunities to play and eat together. This is currently done through partnerships between some Sped and mainstream schools.

But then, again, what if a special needs child cannot even get into a Sped school? MOE has pledged that there will be enough school places for all Singaporean children. Yet, some Sped schools have long waiting lists.

So, there is much for the MOE advisory panel to consider before 2019 comes around.

It is unlikely that all the issues parents and experts are concerned about - such as the disparity in fees and teacher qualifications - can be addressed by then.

Even so, the advisory panel and MOE would need to let them know just what the Government can do in the short term to narrow the gap between Sped and mainstream schools, and come up with a roadmap to address the other issues.