



HOW PRO-DIVERSITY MINDSETS AND PRACTICES BENEFIT CHILDREN.

One of the key recommendations from the Inclusive Preschool Workgroup (IPWG)¹, formed in 2019, was to enhance inclusion by providing early intervention services within preschools. The IPWG's vision is for children with developmental needs to learn, play and participate meaningfully alongside their typically-developing peers in preschools and in society.

Welcoming this vision, Ms Michelle-Lynn Yap, Course Chair, National Institute of Early Childhood Development – Ngee Ann Polytechnic (NIEC/NP), observes: "Valuing diversity goes beyond simply opening classroom doors and accepting all children. To ensure children with diverse needs have effective access to learning, a total environment is required. This includes considerations like (a) making inclusion an organisation-wide belief and commitment, (b) creating a physical environment that embraces the principles of Universal Design for



“All children should have equal access to educational opportunities and be valued and respected.”

MS NUR AHIRAH HJ TAMBY, 45
Principal, Al-Muttaqin Mosque Kindergarten

Learning, (c) hiring qualified staff who are knowledgeable and skilled in inclusive education, and (d) having defined best practices and relevant support resources in place.”

Moreover, inclusion extends beyond children with developmental needs to encompass diversity in various forms. This includes embracing different family backgrounds, learning styles, races, languages and religions. *Beanstalk* speaks to Ms Yap, educators and parents to explore strategies for promoting a culture of inclusivity in our preschools.

EDUCATORS, WHAT DOES DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION MEAN TO YOU?

Nur Ahirah Hj Tamby: All children, regardless of background, abilities or needs, should have equal access to educational opportunities and be valued and respected.

Jenny Chen: It is about accepting and respecting learners who come from different backgrounds and have special needs and learning styles. For instance, when I present information to a child on the autism spectrum with strong visual memory, I use more drawings or pictures to aid his understanding.

¹ The IPWG is a cross-sectoral workgroup formed to study and develop recommendations to better support children with developmental needs in preschools. It is co-chaired by the Minister of State for Social and Family Development, Ms Sun Xueling, and Dean (Education Research) of the National Institute of Education, Professor Kenneth Poon, and comprises members from the health, education and social service sectors.

Michelle-Lynn Yap: The concept considers all children and their families, regardless of their background or circumstances. However, it is important to recognise that being inclusive does not mean all children are supported equally. Children must be placed where their needs can be best met — emphasising equity rather than equality.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT FOR PRESCHOOLS TO CATER TO DIVERSE NEEDS AND ABILITIES?

Nur: It helps children develop a more open-minded view of the world. It teaches them life skills such as how to communicate and collaborate with others, while accepting, understanding and respecting those different from them.

Jenny: Our preschool also has children from Vietnam, Myanmar and the Philippines as well as children of mixed heritage. When some of them first enter our preschool, they may not be able to converse in English. I have observed conflicts arise because of language barriers, particularly when one child takes the toy another wants to play with. A third child, who empathises with the child from a different culture, will step in to negotiate. In this way, inclusive practices foster children's development of problem-solving and perspective-taking skills, as well as the ability to advocate for others.

PARENTS, WHAT DOES DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION MEAN TO YOU?

June Lim: It is about understanding and respecting differences in any community. I would want my son Zephyr to demonstrate values such as tolerance and acceptance of others.

“I would want Zephyr to demonstrate values such as tolerance and acceptance of others.”

MDM JUNE LIM, 41
Pharmacist, mother of Zephyr Wong, 5



Ms Michelle-Lynn Yap

READING LIST

One of the best ways to introduce children to diversity and inclusion is through stories. Ms Michelle-Lynn Yap from NIEC/NP suggests these books to kickstart the conversation.

- *We All Belong* by Nathalie Goss and Alex Goss
- *Understanding Singaporeans* series by Edmund Wee
- *When Charley Met Emma* by Amy Webb
- *My name is Nadia. I have Autism.* by Huda Patel
- *Wonder* by R. J. Palacio
- *Kindness Makes Us Strong* by Sophie Beer
- *All Are Welcome* by Alexandra Penfold and Suzanne Kaufman

Muhammad Iqbal Bin Khirudeen: Being able to look past our different backgrounds, races, cultures and religions fosters tolerance and harmonious living in a multicultural and diverse society.

EDUCATORS, HOW DO YOU AND YOUR CENTRE CREATE AN INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENT?

Nur: Our lesson plans integrate skills and values. For example, during Music & Movement sessions, educators play different types of music — ranging from Korean pop songs to traditional Malay tunes — and introduce instruments from around the world. On Racial Harmony Day, a Japanese mother lent a kimono for the children to try. These activities help children understand that the world is very diverse.

Inclusive learning also extends beyond the classroom. We organise visits to homes for seniors, where older children work on arts and crafts with them. These interactions help children develop empathy for others.

Jenny: Differentiated instruction helps create a more inclusive environment. For instance, in non-standard measurement activities, children use non-standard units such as paper clips and cubes to measure the length of various objects. I divide the class into small groups or pairs to carry out these hands-on activities. This enables me to provide more personalised attention and support their diverse learning needs. For the children, it creates opportunities for peer learning and to work together.

Parents, too, play a part in building a respectful and inclusive preschool culture. When I share with them how I accommodate diverse needs and abilities in my classroom, they can in turn talk about it with their children. This cultivates understanding and respect for differences.

Michelle: Give all children access to learning opportunities and minimise physical barriers as best as possible. For example, use an adjustable table that accommodates a child in a wheelchair to work on activities with her classmates. Observe children when they are interacting with their peers. It allows educators to understand their individual preferences and support the learning and interactions unique to each child. There also needs to be regular communication among parties

— centre leaders, administrators, educators and caregivers — to ensure that the right support is provided to the child.

HOW CAN EDUCATORS ENGAGE CHILDREN IN CONVERSATIONS TO RAISE THEIR AWARENESS OF DIVERSITY?

Nur: Encourage children to ask questions about diversity and differences. At our centre, we have a child with developmental needs who has behavioural challenges. The educator asked the children for suggestions on how to help him, which they have since put into practice. For example, when the child experiences a meltdown, they comfort him by patting him on the back. When he wanders around the class during lessons, a buddy kindly reminds him to stay seated. This approach not only supports the child with special needs, but also cultivates understanding and empathy among the children.

Jenny: The children and I watched a documentary in class about autism. We then had in-depth discussions which helped them understand the challenges faced by children with autism and their families. My preschool also engages children and families in community fundraising projects to support low-income families and individuals with Down syndrome. Parents appreciate these activities as they help children learn about diversity, and that giving and sharing is a way of taking care of others.

PARENTS, HOW DO YOU NURTURE EMPATHY, OPEN-MINDEDNESS AND RESPECT FOR OTHERS IN YOUR CHILD?

June: I try to be a role model to Zephyr. We often encounter a visually impaired busker who sells tissues, and I occasionally contribute by putting money into his collection box. Zephyr once asked, "Why is the uncle selling tissues?", so I explained there could be

“Differentiated instruction helps create a more inclusive environment.”

MS JENNY CHEN, 25
Educator, Averbel Child Development Centre



several reasons. When we talk about different races and cultures, we start with aspects such as different types of foods and clothes. While he may be too young to fully understand the concept of diversity and inclusion, it is never too early to teach him that our community is made up of different people and that showing respect is important.

Muhammad Iqbal: We talk about diversity and inclusion with our daughter Nur Inaaya whenever the opportunity arises. For instance, when we travel on the bus and witness the bus captain arranging for wheelchair users to board first, I talk about how we can help people with disabilities. I try to cultivate empathy in Nur Inaaya by modelling inclusive behaviours such as allowing people in wheelchairs or on personal mobility devices to take the lift while we wait for the next one.

Michelle: Children learn by observing their parents. When parents show respect, empathy and understanding towards others, children will grow up doing the same. Allow children to ask questions, for example, if they are curious about why a peer looks or behaves differently, or why their friend has only one parent. Even if you do not have all the answers, you can still have a conversation on respecting others.

WHAT ARE SOME CHALLENGES EDUCATORS FACE WHEN TEACHING CHILDREN WITH DIVERSE NEEDS AND COMPETENCIES?

Nur: There may be language barriers. We have children at our centre who cannot speak English as it is not their first language. We encourage the parent who is more fluent in English to speak it at home. In class, we use visual aids and learn some of the terms in the child's native language so that they feel supported.

Jenny: Disruptive behaviours can affect classroom dynamics and learning. We set rules to guide children with behavioural issues, and designate calming and safe spaces where they can go to regulate their emotions. How adults perceive diversity can also influence children's behaviour. In my experience, when parents of a special-needs child are open to sharing more about their child and the challenges faced, it helps other children become more understanding and empathetic.

Michelle: Educators must be aware of their own biases and learn to manage them. This means addressing preconceived stereotypes, such as the assumption that children with autism cannot make eye contact or are prone to extreme meltdowns. Each person with autism is unique. Another challenge is the lack of knowledge or skills to deal with different learning styles, strengths and/or needs simultaneously. Educators may also face barriers such as working in a physical environment that does not incorporate the principles of Universal Design for Learning, or where access is limited to typically-developing children.

HOW CAN EDUCATORS WORK WITH PARENTS TO SUPPORT CHILDREN'S INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES?

Nur: To help children with weaker writing skills, for example, we recommend at-home activities such as playing and singing phonics songs. For children with special needs, we organise group meetings with parents, educators, and a professional therapist from the Early Intervention Programme for Infants and Children (EIPIC) to discuss how we can work together to help the child.

Jenny: Communication is key to building a trusting relationship with parents. Educators must respect that parents are the first teachers in a child's life and know their child the best. Discuss with parents to jointly develop strategies for use at home and in preschool. Take photos and videos; it is a way to assess a child's progress. Meet regularly with parents to review the child's progress and strategies used.

Michelle: Share the responsibility of supporting children's holistic development. Educators can invite parents and caregivers to observe lessons or participate in preschool events to gain insights into their child and the learning environment. Hold regular and open discussions so that both parties have a better understanding of the expectations and goals, and how the child behaves in different contexts. Engage community partners such as family service centres, parent support groups and experts. They can conduct talks or give additional support services for children and their families, which helps strengthen their support network.



“We talk about diversity and inclusion with Nur Inaaya whenever the opportunity arises.”

MR MUHAMMAD IQBAL BIN KHIRUDEEN, 39
Trade Compliance Professional, father of Nur Inaaya Binte Muhammad Iqbal, 2

FOCUS ON STRENGTHS

Ms Janice Leong, Deputy Director (Early Intervention Services) at Rainbow Centre and a new ECDA Fellow, outlines approaches in fostering an inclusive preschool culture.



The expansion of early intervention (EI) services — such as Development Support-Plus (DS-Plus) and the Development Support and Learning Support Programme (DS-LS) — has further enhanced the accessibility of EI support for children with developmental needs in preschool settings, enabling our centres to be more inclusive.

Here are some dos and don'ts when fostering inclusive practices in the preschool classroom:

- DO...**
 - ✓ Recognise the child's strengths and not their deficits.
 - ✓ Understand each child within the context of their family and actively seek parents' perspectives.
 - ✓ Acknowledge that intervention is most effective when integrated into the classroom's daily routines, rather than in a separate room.
- DON'T...**
 - ✗ Label a child by their diagnosis.
 - ✗ Make assumptions about a child based on their inability to speak. They can express what they know and are capable of in other ways.
 - ✗ Differentiate learning just for the child with developmental needs, but for all children.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

- **Do not assume EI educators have all the answers.** Children with developmental needs are all unique. EC and EI educators should discuss what is practical in the classroom context. Strategies carried out in a one-to-one EI session may not be applicable within classroom routines.
- **Set aside time for planning.** Lesson planning allows educators to discuss insights and strategies with different team members. This ensures more robust and consistent support to meet the child's learning and developmental requirements.
- **Group children in multiple ways.** Grouping them solely by ability may impact learning outcomes and self-esteem. It is important to start by observing each child to understand them better. Depending on the nature and purpose of the activity, children can be grouped by abilities, interests, friendship pairs or learning styles.

VALUING ALL CHILDREN



HOW CAN EDUCATORS CREATE AN ENVIRONMENT WHERE ALL CHILDREN ARE SUPPORTED, REGARDLESS OF ABILITY? PROFESSOR KENNETH POON AND MS TAN PENG CHIAN SUGGEST THE WAYS.

Inclusion occurs when all children in the classroom get a chance to participate and learn. Most children with developmental needs can be included without much additional materials or equipment. Here are some strategies.

1 CREATE A WELCOMING SPACE

Classrooms can be intimidating and confusing if children are new to them, or if they have developmental needs which may pose challenges in participating in activities. Make classrooms more welcoming by giving children personal spaces such as cubby holes, or by adding everyone's name label and photograph around the room. Designate a quiet corner, consider the use of pictures instead of words, and create more space for children in wheelchairs.

2 MANAGE TRANSITIONS

When children are still getting to know classroom routines, use a visual schedule to illustrate the sequence of activities. Consistent words or cues can also prepare them when activities are ending. Use transition routines, such as pairing children with the same buddies when queuing up or incorporating transition songs, to facilitate movement between activities.

3 USE POSITIVE LANGUAGE

Affirm appropriate behaviour by describing what the children are doing (e.g., "I see you are standing on the footprint" instead of "You are a good boy/girl"). Recognise what the children are good at and describe these strengths as you observe them.

4 KEEP ALL CHILDREN ENGAGED

Children who are engaged and participate in classroom activities are less inclined to behave disruptively. As everyone may not be able to participate in an activity in the same way, consider different ways to engage them. For example, divide the class into smaller groups and provide them with a choice of appropriate activities or play materials.

5 ENCOURAGE FRIENDSHIPS

Create opportunities for children to form friendships by pairing them up. Bear in mind that children with more developed cognitive skills may not necessarily be the most nurturing. Always have an adult nearby to facilitate interactions or provide scaffolding suggestions where needed.

Inclusion does not simply happen when we put typically-developing children and children with developmental needs together. Educators must intentionally plan for inclusion throughout daily classroom activities to make it happen. This involves creating an environment that fosters diversity, understanding and respect, and consistently working to improve and enhance inclusive practices. The benefits of inclusion become apparent when positive social-emotional changes are seen in all children and adults in the class.

PROFESSOR KENNETH POON

Dean (Education Research) and Director, Centre for Research in Child Development, National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University

Trained as a clinical psychologist and early interventionist, Professor Poon's research primarily focuses on children with developmental needs and how child development can be facilitated by families and schools. He is a member of the Ministry of Social and Family Development's Advisory Panel on Parenting.



MS TAN PENG CHIAN

PhD student, National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University

Ms Tan began her career at KK Women's and Children's Hospital, specialising in developmental delays and disorders. She is currently pursuing a PhD under Prof Poon's supervision, focusing her research on preschool teachers' beliefs and classroom practices when including children with developmental needs.

