INCLUSIVE education is something that academician Dr P. Donnie Adams, 32, is passionate about. The idea is that students of varying abilities attend school and participate in activities with one another— to learn, play and grow together.

But, Dr Donnie Adams feels, the structure of the current school system is a disadvantage to children with special educational needs. As such, inclusive education will remain a fancy term, if there are no adequate monitoring systems and supportive supervision.

He asks: "What do schools prioritise? The key performance indicator (KPI) evaluation system or inclusive education?"

The KPI evaluation system, which goes on the basis of students' grades, is preventing children with special educational needs from being accepted into mainstream schools. They are allegedly even denied the chance to sit for public exams as they are perceived to bring down the school's average scores.

In Dr Donnie Adams' observation, teachers in mainstream schools and special education teachers differ in their perceptions on whether children with special educational needs can be taught alongside their normal peers.

Dr Donnie Adams aims to foster greater inclusion and well-being for students with special educational needs. — LOW LAY PHON/The Star

A senior lecturer at the Institute of Educational Leadership, Faculty of Education, in Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Dr Donnie Adams obtained his doctorate in Educational Leadership from UM. He is an alumnus of the Akept Young Scholars Leadership programme. Also, he completed his PhD on UM's Bright Sparks scholarship.

He first got involved in leadership in special education as part of his doctoral research. "I was 30 when I obtained my doctorate. It had been my goal to complete my PhD by then," he says. For completing his PhD in less than three years, he received UM's Excellence Award in 2016.

To be exact, he completed it in just over two years, which is the minimum duration set by UM for a doctoral degree.

He says: "What drives me is pure determination, resilience, persistence and prayer to achieve a set goal."

Power of sports

According to teachers in mainstream schools, he says, children with special educational needs should be taught in special classes or special schools. On the other hand, special education teachers feel that if those children have the capacity and capability, they should be offered an opportunity to study in mainstream schools.

So Dr Donnie Adams carried out research on a successful inclusive classroom and found that it requires collaborative interaction between teachers and parents. In his findings, sports is also a powerful, low-cost means to foster greater inclusion and well-being for students with special educational needs.

The buddy support system (aka the Buddy Club programme), he
was launched in Malaysia in August 2013. It was aimed at helping such students to better interact with their peers through fitness and sports. This initiative, too, has been successful in creating social interaction between mainstream students and those with special educational needs. It was observed that the latter group also improved their psychomotor skills and gained confidence and self-esteem through sports.

Dr Donnie Adams has published four International Scientific Indexing (ISI) journals. He is also the first author of The Special Education Handbook Of Therapeutic Exercises For Sensory Integration. “It is for parents of children with special educational needs, and has fast facts, interactive figures and pictorials,” he says. The book can be obtained from UM’s Institute of Educational Leadership.

Learning can be fun for children with special educational needs, with interactive classroom lessons and student-centred activities, says Dr Donnie Adams. He shared Special Experience For Special Education via virtual and gamification technologies, at EdConex International, Singapore, last year. The idea revolves around manipulative and movement activities that provide 21st century interactive learning experiences. It won gold medals for Best Delegation and Most Influential Idea for the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Dr Donnie Adams chose to specialise in leadership in education for many reasons, among them, his belief that “every child is our future” and we should “teach, lead and show them the beauty they possess inside”. His goal is to set up a one-stop educational and therapy centre for special educational needs, in 2020.

Finishing well
He remembers that his journey towards a PhD was fraught with many challenges. He recalls: “Firstly, I didn’t have a Masters. Therefore, the transition from a first-class bachelor’s degree to PhD wasn’t easy, with little background on research and thesis writing. I had to do a lot of self-learning, attend many research seminars and workshops, and a lot of reading.

“At times, the challenge was so great, I felt like giving up. I had to make many sacrifices such as reduce my leisure time, often burning the midnight oil, and save money wherever I could to attend research seminars and workshops.” But he persisted, and has attained his goal, staying true to his Bukit Mertajam high school motto: “Accomplish or do not begin”. 
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