



Teachers should study inclusive education and practices in their course.



INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Start practising it the right way

A FRIEND who is in the United Kingdom sent me an article through Facebook about how the headmaster of a national primary school in Bukit Mertajam, Penang, allegedly humiliated a Year One pupil by dragging him to the front of the school, and beating him on his buttocks and back.

I am not sure how the headmaster is going to defend his act, but the most serious issue here is inclusive education and how it is or is not practised in Malaysia.

Our delegates participated in all the United Nations' conferences towards inclusive education in 1990, 1993 and 1994, respectively.

Later, inclusive education was introduced in the Education Act 1996.

What does inclusive education

mean to ordinary people like us? Based on the Unesco Salamanca Statement and agreement by many nations, including Malaysia, inclusive education concerns the necessity to recognise the urgency of providing education for all children in the regular system. It includes the notion that children with special educational needs must have access to regular schools.

Many schools have abided by it to include into the mainstream students with disabilities. They have prepared specially-trained teachers, special rooms and a conducive environment for these students to be part of the education system and process. However, there are concerns that these students still feel excluded in the inclusive education system.

In the Bukit Mertajam incident, the parent of the Year One child had every right to send her child to

a national primary school. And if what was reported in the media is right, the headmaster had no authority to ask the parents to send their child to a special school.

On top of that, teachers, who are supposed to be educators and models of the nation, had no right to shout or insult the poor mother who is already shouldering the responsibility of caring for a special needs child.

I am not going to judge anyone just based on news reports, but based on my current exposure to inclusive education and practices around the globe, I have to share views of what it is, especially in a multicultural nation like Malaysia.

First we have to understand that inclusive education invites us to think about the nature of the world that we live in. Disability is a social construct which educators and school administrators must be ed-

ucated in. We cannot treat someone who does not follow the norm by naming or categorising them as the "others" or that "particular group".

I might have a disability, but I am not a disabled person. A child who has Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) might be hyperactive, but it is not his fault nor his parents' fault, nor is it okay for society to judge him and enclose him in a special class and label him for what he is. We all might look "normal", but who knows what disabilities we have within.

Primary pupils might have several types of disabilities. Some of them might have ADHD. With early intervention, such disabilities can be treated. But are we going to label these children and isolate them? If so, Malaysia should never have signed the Inclusive Education Treaty or included the inclusive policy into the Education Act.

If the same headmaster in Bukit Mertajam who beat up the child had been in a developed country, treating the child with such crudeness might have resulted in him having to face the legal authorities and be convicted accordingly. But in a nation like ours, where tolerance is the name of the game, forgiveness would be asked and

the case would be closed.

It is with great shame and humility that I have to say that many of our students who have disabilities have not been identified at a young age, and they are traumatised by school and the education system.

They would drop out by early secondary school and, not having the right guidance, end up doing odd jobs or, worse, being involved in immoral occupations.

It is time that the Education Ministry look seriously into inclusive education and practices to ensure that special needs students are given the social justice they deserve, as no one asks to be born with disabilities.

Their parents should provide them with unconditional love, and get help from government and non-government bodies. They should create partnerships that can open doors in future.

Teachers at all stages should study inclusive education and practices in their course to ensure that the Bukit Mertajam incident is not repeated.

Dr Vishalache Balakrishnan, senior lecturer, Department of Educational Foundations and Humanities, Faculty of Education, Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur