



falling between the gap

Many parents are finding that their children with special needs just don't "fit in" to a specific school, for a number of reasons.

MARC DE CHAZAL investigates.

Patricia is a single mom from Joburg struggling to raise a child who has cerebral palsy. She cannot afford the R4 500 per month required to get her five-year-old daughter into a private, special needs school and the corporates she has approached for funding have all turned her down. To make matters worse, a government school also declined her application because her child, who is not toilet-trained, is considered physically and mentally challenged. It's not the best solution, but Patricia has managed to get her daughter into a stimulation school that runs from 7am to 3pm for a substantially lower cost, freeing her up to find employment.

Patricia is not alone. Many parents of children with special needs are running from pillar to post because their children allegedly don't fit into a specific school – they are either not special needs enough or not remedial enough. New private schools are popping up in suburbs as a result, likely started by parents intent on a tailor-made service for their own child with special needs. These facilities can become successful businesses, but they need to be registered with the Health and Education Departments. It's only a solution for some children, however, as these schools and centres are usually privately run and the costs are picked up by the parents, indirectly marginalising people like Patricia who cannot afford it. They're also faced with the same challenges when it comes to who fits into their school. Needs-specific schools tend to cater to a particular group of children, such as autistic, Down's syndrome, cerebral palsy, physically

challenged or cognitively delayed, and they require specialised staff with a higher staff-to-pupil ratio.

slow march to inclusivity

The White Paper 6 on Inclusive Education provides the framework to fulfil the right to quality education for children with disabilities, points out Liezl Schlebusch, a PhD student who has visited numerous schools and interviewed staff about parents' journeys in finding the right school for their children. "The policy's goal is to develop an inclusive education system that will recognise and accommodate the diverse range of learning needs," says Schlebusch, "but the implementation is slow. Currently, mainstream government schools are required to admit learners with special needs where it is 'reasonably practical'."

Sue Fowlds, principal of Wiggles & Squiggles School in Randburg, admits that inclusive learning environments are growing, but believes inclusion is complicated. "There will always be 'that child' who is too distracting, too boisterous, needs too much attention, is not keeping up with the group or is not coping with sitting, listening and responding appropriately in a mainstream class," says Fowlds.

Are teachers in mainstream schools simply out of their depth when it comes to handling children with learning barriers? Sue Fowlds thinks so. "Teaching children with barriers to learning requires more specialised training and experience to meet their holistic educational needs. The child with special needs often throws a spanner in the works in

a conventional classroom environment," she says.

A child with special needs may be admitted into a mainstream school, but they still need to find their place in the school's existing system, points out Schlebusch. "Instead of focusing on changing the learner to fit into a specific educational system, the focus of inclusion is on removing the barriers to learning so that all children can reach their full potential," she explains. Fowlds agrees wholeheartedly.

It seems that we're still a long way from achieving this. Children who use wheelchairs or crutches for mobility require ramps, suitable bag racks and wider aisles between desks. Learning environments need to be adapted to accommodate them. According to Fowlds, many schools prohibit parent-employed caregivers from accompanying learners and it doesn't seem likely there will be budgets for state-provided support staff in the near future, which means that affected families of children with learning barriers must find a suitable remedial school – "a very long, tedious and often lonely journey," she says.

onwards

So, what's the way forward for frustrated parents at their wits' end because they are being turned down continually when trying to enrol their children at schools recommended to them?

"We need teams of professionals to have a clear understanding of suitable schools in their vicinity that cater for children with a variety of learning needs," advises Fowlds, who would like to see all of the specialised schools catering

for children with special needs on a central database with the Department of Education. "This will improve accessibility for the growing numbers of parents looking for the right school for their child," she says. "I also believe teachers and facilitators need ongoing training in order to identify symptoms and behaviours, as there are numerous interventions available when something out of the ordinary is noticed. Teachers and support staff are not qualified to offer a diagnosis without a medical qualification, but they can suggest appropriate strategies for the child or refer parents to the right professionals, if they have the necessary training."

The right to quality education can and should be realised for children with special needs. Schlebusch is of the opinion that improved interaction with others and a suitable environment will enable children with special needs to "reap the social, emotional and cognitive benefits provided to all children in learning environments". But the most important goal for these families is that their child is happy in a school environment, says Schlebusch. "Inclusion is more than just attending a school, though. It starts in our homes and in our community. By focusing on the strengths of a child with a disability and providing supporting environments that enable them to participate, we can create a truly inclusive society and achieve quality education for all."

"It's time that our special needs families – 'the invisibles' – were a bigger part of the community and their children more widely accepted into all areas of society," adds Fowlds. □

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