



Shilpa and Aisyah in preschool.

I am 13 years old and I would like to talk about Aisyah, who has Down Syndrome. I was five years old when I met her. I liked her a lot as she would always tag along with me. Although we were the same age, she was unable to speak. Her looks were different. She needed diapers and a bottle for her milk. Still, she was not treated any different from my other friends and me. We were in the same class for two years. I then moved on to primary school and still kept in touch with her as our mums were friends.

Our friendship brought me pleasure, comfort, and distress. Most importantly, it taught me a lot about growing up in a social world. Aisyah endured painful experiences like being teased or shamed, but I found her so unique. She was born with a distinct social talent that simply allowed friendships to form, while others have to be taught how to relate. I felt good when I had the opportunity to assist Aisyah or to defend her. I felt like a teacher. Friendships like ours cannot happen in a typical classroom. But in an inclusive classroom all children learn to respect differences in each other.

When I was ten years old, Aisyah was enrolled in the same school as me again, but we hardly saw each other. She was in a special class, in a different building far away. The teachers were not keen on her joining the 'normal' class. Every time there was an event, the whole school was invited except the students in Aisyah's special group. Now that was totally unfair! They were students, too, and wanted to participate in their own way. And this creates awareness among all students about special needs. I felt very sad that the teach-

ers could not see the bright side of Aisyah. She is loving, fun, funny, and, when guided, she is able to do her work.

When I see Aisyah and some of her classmates now, I feel that our preschool benefited us well. I have learnt so much from students like Aisyah: patience, kindness, love, and tolerance. Some of these you can only learn when you are faced with them. We learned the basic need for communication and appropriate social skills. Aisyah had interaction with typically developing children and was accepted by her peers as a 'normal' individual who can learn with special help. My wish is that all children can experience a program like ours. This experience would certainly help future generations accept people with special needs in their community.

Aisyah and I recently attended a get-together for students, families, and teachers from our preschool. I want to thank my teachers for organising this gathering and the next project, the 'Walk of Hope,' which will be carried out in silence. The silence is to signify the voice that is not heard in terms of advocating for the rights of people with special needs.



Shilpa Lazarus attended Children's World preschool in Malaysia. She is currently a student at SMK Seafield. She loves baking, having sleepovers, and spending time with her four dogs. Her ambition is to become a veterinarian, a model, or an actress.

Inclusion: A Student's Perspective

by Shilpa Lazarus

"I believe that all children with special needs really deserve something special in their lives. Everyone does."