Seeing double to improve inclusivity in the classroom: new research

Well-intentioned people are failing to see the entire child and that child's immense potential because they see the child's disability first, according to an inclusive education researcher.

Dr Melissa Cain is an inclusive education researcher and lecturer at Australian Catholic University (ACU). She is also mother to a 12-year-old son with a rare genetic vision impairment.

Her son attends a mainstream high school which has taken positive and proactive measures to cater for his disability.

Remarkably, Cain's research partner, Melissa Fanshawe, not only carries the name 'Melissa', she is also mother to a 12-year-old son, with the exact rare vision impairment.

Fanshawe, who is an inclusive education researcher and a maths lecturer at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ), said, "In my work with students with vision impairment, I have learnt that students are children first with their own talents, interests and passions. The vision impairment impacts the way they access things, not who they are."

Vision impairment can be classified as damage or disease to the eye or visual system and is considered a disability when it cannot be corrected with the use of glasses or medication.

In Australia, it's estimated there are around 3000 school-aged children with a vision impairment, and 300 have a severe vision impairment or blindness.

Although some children with vision impairment may have other disabilities and attend special education units, the majority of students with vision impairment attend mainstream schools throughout all geographical areas of Australia. Creating a culture of inclusive, safe, and supportive environments is not just best practice, it is now an ethical and legal requirement for all educational contexts in Australia.

Inspired to remove barriers, Cain and Fanshawe have quite literally doubled their efforts to research ways to improve the mainstream schooling experience for those students with a vision impairment.

It's easy to imagine the boys' disability could result in an over-protective parenting style but Cain and Fanshawe explain that developing the boys' independence is key to a self-sufficient future.

"Parents of children with a vision impairment need to advocate for their children more than parents of sighted children but this approach is essential, particularly at the early childhood level. The parents' advocacy builds confident children who are resilient and capable and they then learn to advocate for themselves," Cain said.

The two experts agree that students with a vision impairment should be held to the same academic, social, and behavioural standards as students who are sighted. But they explain that vision impairment is a low-incidence disability which means many teachers are unaware of how to cater for these children's needs.

Depending on their level of vision and their location within the classroom, students with vision impairments may find it difficult to see the whiteboard. Glare from the windows may impact their viewing of books, computers, or the whiteboard. Trip hazards may exist with chairs and bags that are in pathways and can't be seen.

But for those with a vision impairment the future is actually looking very bright.

Due to technological advances on speech-text software, there are a range of software devices that are built-in to mainstream devices as well as specific tools to assist students with how to 'read' the documents on their screens.

The two researchers say that students with a vision impairment also find novel solutions to navigating the environment and are usually only hampered by others who place restrictions on them.

"With some assistance, children with a vision impairment can do everything that everybody else can," Cain said. "However each student has individual needs, depending on their unique qualities and interests, and whether they were born blind or have acquired sight loss."

Fanshawe concluded, "Ultimately we want parents to know that independence is the best skill you can give your child. It's easy to want to do everything for them and have teachers provide everything, but for future employment and interacting in the community, they need skills to access information through adaptive technology and play sport, travel independently and have social groups."

"These skills take a lot of time, perseverance and some tears, but ultimately social and community participation and inclusion is the goal."

Cain and Fanshawe have been researching the voices of students with vision impairment and their parents and teachers to see what works best in the classroom. The research is intended to be used to assist teachers, preservice teachers and health professionals to embed evidence-based practice.

Students with a vision impairment, parents or teachers who would like to be involved in the research can email: melissa.cain@acu.edu.au

ACU researcher/lecturer Dr Melissa Cain and USQ researcher/lecturer Melissa Fanshawe are available for interview.

Photo of the group available on request.

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