

# Education for All

**Navigating Shanghai's education maze is challenging at the best of times, but even more so for the parents of children with special needs.**

by **Laura Lofy**

**G**arrison Keillor, a humorist from my home state of Minnesota, sets many of his stories in his mythical hometown of Lake Wobegon. Keillor describes Lake Wobegon as a place "where all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average." As an educational psychologist living and working in Shanghai, I often feel that the international schools are designed for an expat community that is a similarly mythical place where all the children are above average. I know, however, that the reality is much different.

In addition to being a psychologist, I am the mother of three children, one of whom has special learning needs due to a visual impairment. When we got the opportunity to move our family to Shanghai, we were ecstatic. It was the opportunity of a lifetime. But, when we came for our initial "look-see" visit, we were confronted with a reality for which we were not prepared. As my husband and I sat in the admissions offices of several of the international schools, we were dumbfounded to learn that our visually impaired son, Qi Qi, would not be admitted. Despite beautiful campuses, well-trained staff, and healthy growing budgets, many schools informed us that they were not equipped to educate him due to his disability.

We eventually found a school that was willing to enroll Qi Qi, but our renewed excitement about living in Shanghai was short lived. On the second day of school, I gave the school an assessment summary report from the special education department of our local school district in Minnesota. I naively believed the school would use this information to better support my son. I was wrong. Within one week, my husband and I were called in to talk with the principal, and we were told that the school would have never accepted our son if they had seen this report. In truth, I had shared everything in the report with them verbally, but seeing my son's needs on paper changed their minds.

During the course of my work in U.S. public schools, I have sat on the school's side of the table many times. I have had meetings in

which I have shared bad news with parents about their child, but the purpose of these meetings was always to come up with a means of supporting the student in order to make him or her more successful at school. Now, here I was with my own son on the other side of the table, and I was not being asked to help problem solve, but rather being nudged out the door.

The school rejected our suggestion that it hire, or allow us to hire at our own cost, a paraprofessional to accompany our son throughout the day. In the end, he was put on something akin to probation and allowed to stay, but for the remainder of the year, we sat on pins and needles, hoping our son didn't "mess up." We didn't dare ask for more support even though he needed it.

Like many parents of children with special needs, we wound up changing schools. We enrolled all three of our children in a school that had a special needs department. Again,

there was a discussion with the school regarding the "goodness of fit" for my son, but he was eventually accepted. I breathed a huge sigh of relief once I realized that our conversation had switched from "will they accept him, to "how will they help and accommodate him."

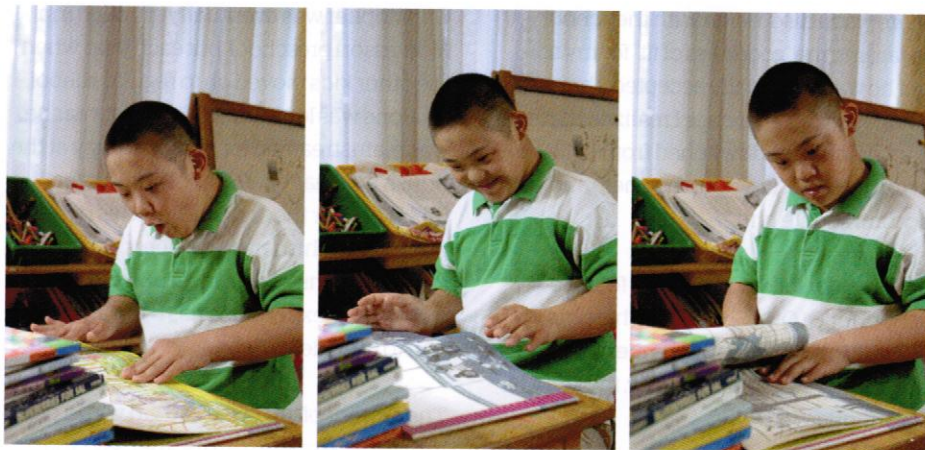
Fortunately for our family, we found a school for Qi Qi in Shanghai where his needs are being met and he is enjoying academic success. Unfortunately, my story is not unique.

Li Luan is an expat in Shanghai, and the mother of Christopher, a 10 year old boy with Down Syndrome. When he was five years old, Christopher was turned away from more than six international schools. Five years later, Li still recalls being brought to tears when she was told that Christopher could not be admitted by a school whose website claimed they aimed to celebrate all of their students as precious gifts. Wasn't Christopher also such a gift?

Christopher was eventually enrolled in a Montessori preschool, but each year when the other kids moved on to regular school, he alone was left behind. This past year he was mainstreamed for part of the day at the British International School of Shanghai (BISS), and for the first time took his rightful place beside his same-age peers. But Christopher's mainstream placement is still tenuous, and his experience has been an exception to the rule.

The mother of an 8-year-old girl with a pervasive developmental disorder says that the thing that makes her most angry is that when children are already in school and then found to have some trouble, the schools seem willing to help them. But if a child already has a diagnosis and the parents are open and honest about it at the time of enrollment, the doors close.

A few schools do have departments devoted to providing additional support to children with special needs, but in general



the range of needs they can accommodate is very limited, as is the ability to adequately adapt instruction. Other schools provide counseling services for children with social and emotional challenges but not learning disabilities or cognitive impairments. Creative Garden is one school in Shanghai entirely devoted to children with special needs, and it offers one option for these kids. It has specialized programs that support students' needs, delivered in a individualized setting. However, many parents want their children to be in a school in which they can socialize with and learn from typically developing children. A mother of a former Creative Garden student expressed gratitude that they were there for her daughter when no one else was, but she added, "I always believed she would do better in an inclusive learning environment." What's missing for many families is the choice.

Some may argue that inclusion of children with special needs into regular classrooms will compromise the quality of the education of non-disabled students. However,

research studies that have explored the influence of mainstreaming and inclusion on the outcomes of typically developing students have shown no ill effects in terms of teacher time, academic engagement, or achievement (Fishbaugh & Gum, 1994; Hollowood, Salisbury, Rainforth, & Palombara, 1995; Sharpe, York, & Knight, 1994).


Opening the doors and welcoming students with a wide array of disabilities is just the first step, however, because along with their acceptance comes the responsibility of educating them appropriately. To run a special education program, a school would likely need a well-seasoned special education coordinator, a small team of special education teachers, instructional assistants to accompany and tutor students, and on-site support services. The recruitment of these professionals would be similar to hiring of regular education teachers.

Here in Shanghai we're fortunate also that instructional assistants can be recruited from among the many highly educated trailing spouses who are looking for a

meaningful way to use their time. Dr. Aline Chan is a physician who works as an instructional assistant for a boy with high functioning autism at BISS, providing him with meaningful work along with the flexibility to care for her own children. When asked what has been satisfying about this past year, Dr. Chan replied, "Being part of a mainstream school has been a life changing experience for Marcus. He has achieved academic progress beyond the expectations of his teachers and his parents. Perhaps more importantly, he has developed social interaction skills that will allow him to become an independent, functional member of society. To be part of this process has been tremendously rewarding."

A wide array of supplementary services such as speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, physical therapy, behavioral consultation, social skills, and counseling services are already available in Shanghai through places like the Essential Learning Group, Shanghai Community Center, Klinoerth, and Olivia's Place. A few schools have already begun partnering with these groups to provide school-based services, but greater collaboration is needed in order to bring these services to where the children should be - in school.

Whenever I think about this topic, I am reminded of the famous quote by Maya Angelou who said, "You did what you knew how to do, and when you knew better, you did better."

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