

EDUCATION

ACCESSIBLE ACTIVITY

Everyone can access art. It's not like reading and writing where you leave out those who are minimally verbal. It's a blank canvas. Art shows that every child has a point of view... There's no right or wrong.



MS JEAN LOO, a community artist who leads Superhero Me.

EXPERIENCING DIVERSITY

It puts two groups of children together to have an experience. We've been teaching children about diversity but they don't have much opportunity to experience it.



MS JESSICA CHONG, principal of Capstone Kindergarten, on why she likes the concept of an inclusive art workshop.



In the two-hour art sessions, the children take part in activities such as drawing portraits and making "pizza" out of art materials. The workshop series takes on the format of a dinner party, hence its name - Who Is Coming To Dinner? About 800 children are expected to take part in these workshops, which receive funding from the Lien Foundation and the National Arts Council. ST PHOTO: LAU FOOK KONG

Inclusive art sessions draw kids together

NGO runs workshops to encourage children with and without special needs to interact

Amelia Teng

Last week, Kindergarten 1 pupil Jayden Sia went for a "dinner party" where he drew on a place mat, made pizza out of art materials such as fabric and bottle caps, and ate snacks with his friends.

He was one of 15 children from his school who joined an art session with 15 children with special needs from Rainbow Centre Yishun Park School, which caters to children with conditions such as intellectual and physical disabilities and autism.

"I liked making the pizza the most because I like to eat pizza," said Jayden, five, from Capstone Kindergarten.

In groups of about eight, the children drew and coloured portraits, decorated slices of "pizza" and exchanged wheatgrass plants they had grown.

The two-hour session, held at the Objectifs Centre for Photography and Film in Middle Road, was part of an "inclusive" workshop to encourage interaction between children with and without special needs.

Both schools took part in the workshop for the first time. It is run by Superhero Me, a non-governmental organisation that runs art programmes for children.

Superhero Me, which began in 2014 as a ground-up inclusive arts movement, was conceived by philanthropic organisation Lien Foundation.

About 800 children are expected to take part in the series of work-

shops, which receive funding from the Lien Foundation and the National Arts Council. They include more than 530 children from pre-schools and special education schools who join the two-hour art sessions on weekdays.

The art workshops held on the weekends have different activities, such as woodworking and making collages, and are open to the public.

Community artist Jean Loo, 33, who leads Superhero Me, said the workshop series, which started on Sept 16 and ends this Saturday, takes on the format of a dinner party, hence its name - Who Is Coming To Dinner?

She explained: "Everyone knows what it's like to have dinner, to sit at the table. Everyone can access art. It's not like reading and writing, where you leave out those who are minimally verbal."

"It's a blank canvas. Art shows that every child has a point of view... There's no right or wrong."

"A child's first impression of a child with special needs is formed from his first experience."

Ms Loo added that the workshops aim to help children learn that "abilities come in all shapes and forms".

The space the participants are in is decorated with artwork by children who attend Superhero Me's regular art programmes. These children come from schools such as Singapore's first inclusive pre-school Kindie Garden, Cerebral Palsy Alliance Singapore School and Minds Lee Kong Chian Gardens School.

For instance, there is a 3m-high

cake tower made up of cardboard boxes, picture books based on stories written by the children, and benches painted to look like dinosaurs.

There is also a "spaceship" - a makeshift structure with neon fairy lights, hanging papier mache planets, beanbags and cushions. It is meant to be a quiet place for any child who may experience a meltdown or needs some time alone.

Eight-year-old Javier Yeo, who has cerebral palsy and whose condition impairs muscle control, said: "I like to be in it because spaceships can fly."

Mrs Christy Lee-O'Loughlin, head of Rainbow Centre's family life services, said art is an avenue for special needs children. "It's an insight into their world, especially when their communication skills may not be as developed."

She added that at a young age, children do not pay much attention to differences. "The fun in coming together transcends any differences," she said.

According to a Lien Foundation survey last year, of the 835 parents of special needs children who were surveyed, four in 10 think their children spend too little time in the community outside of school.

Nearly half of those surveyed said their children do not have friends without disabilities.

Ms Jessica Chong, principal of Capstone Kindergarten in Telok Blangah, said she really liked the concept of an inclusive art workshop as "it puts two groups of children together to have an experience".

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