

A Case for Inclusive Education — A Mother's Voice



By Joyce Ajlouny

our daughter won't be the smartest in class"; "your son has Down Syndrome"; "she's autistic"; "he won't be able to walk without a brace"... these are among the most heartbreaking words for parents to receive from their child's doctor. Hopes for a healthy and happy baby are suddenly shattered, leaving a heavy load of uncertainty, fear, and worry as to the future of their child. Parents react differently to such devastating news. Despite the understandable denial that some initially go through, the majority eventually come to terms with it; however, their attitude and approach will prove to have the greatest impact on their child's life.

My son Nader was diagnosed with Williams Syndrome (www.williams-syndrome.org) twenty years ago at age two. While it was devastating news to receive, our family's quick acceptance and embracing of his unique self, made all the difference in what he has achieved today. Our reaction following the initial shock was grounded in a pragmatic approach that focused on extending our knowledge about our son's syndrome, making sure he always receives the best

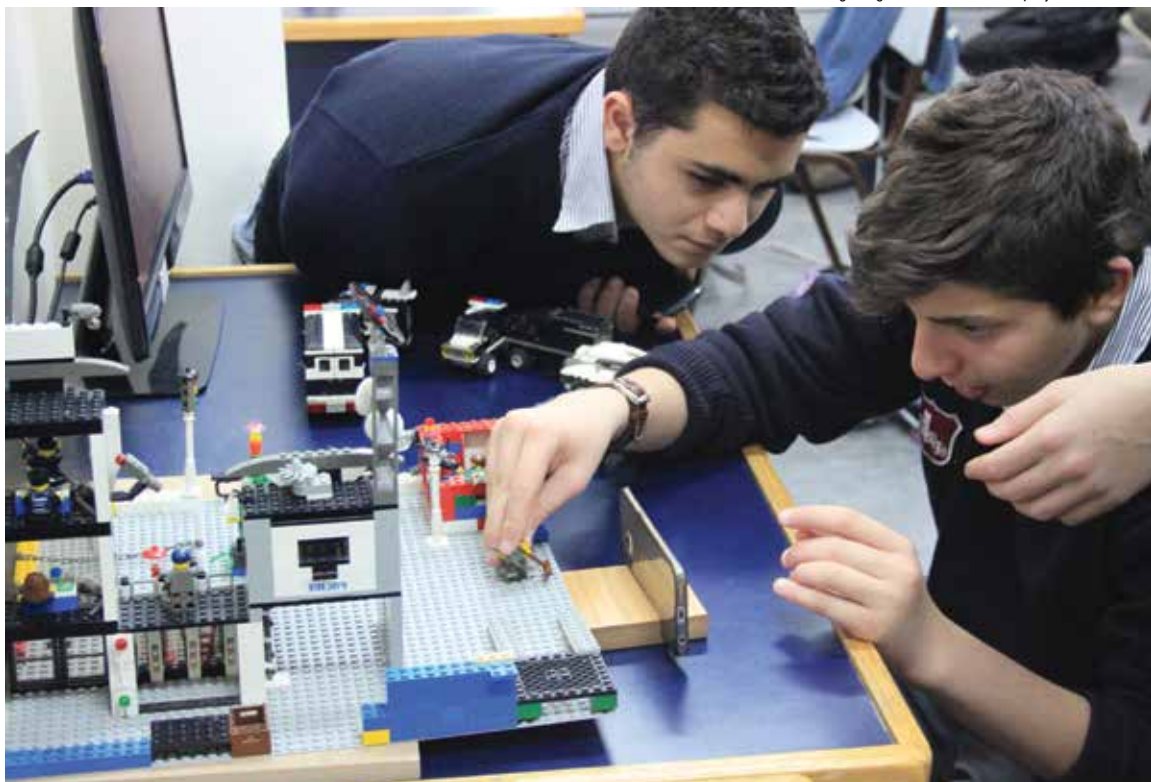
opportunities and care services, taking it day by day and not fretting about the unknown, and lastly and most importantly, ensuring his inclusion in the society and his happiness at all times. I promised myself that I would do my best to offer him as "normal" a life as possible, despite some serious challenges.

Our first major milestone following some medical challenges was his schooling. We fought for his admission at age five to the Ramallah Friends School (RFS), and despite some initial and understandable hesitation, he was finally accepted with special and additional care provisions. In 1998, my son, Nader became one of the first special-needs students to be admitted to the program. Thanks to the commitment of amazing staff who stood by us (*I was not working there at the time*) and did everything in their

power to provide him with the best care possible — Nader thrived. Their creativity, diligence, and love shined, and as a mother, I was comforted and reassured that he was in exceptionally good hands. The decision to admit him to RFS was a major turning point in his life.

Very much as a result of its longstanding Quaker ethos and traditions that uphold the values of equality, diversity, and tolerance, the RFS has adopted an inclusive education program that is one of a kind in Palestine; accepting children with varying disabilities from pre-kindergarten until graduation. Today, the school considers itself privileged to serve over 60 students with identified needs (autistic spectrum, Down syndrome, dyslexia, cognitive disability...), all of whom have enriched the school community on many levels. Two decades of

Nader getting involved in a school project.



experience in this program provides for the advantage and ability to review the impact that such an initiative has on the lives of the students. While the radical transformation of the lives of these special students can be clearly witnessed, it is more intriguing to observe the impact that such a program has had on the entire school community. Meaningful friendships have formed, starting at the kindergarten level, and acts of kindness are extended every day. The school community of both students and teachers has become more tolerant of differences and is embracing diversity with open arms.

I am able to comfortably and confidently reach such conclusions not only as the school administrator who has been an avid advocate and supporter of this program for the past 12 years, but also as the mother of a child who benefitted from the exceptional services provided at RFS. Nader (22) attended RFS from kindergarten, graduating in 2012. Nader has many gifts both musically and socially but is challenged cognitively and academically, reading

and writing at a 2nd grade level today. His personality and life would not be where they are today if it weren't for the extraordinary team that believed in him and capitalized on his gifts, challenged him, and cared for him every day of his 14 years of schooling. Nader grew up among his "typical" peers. He attended their birthday parties and they attended his; they helped him with his homework, he showed immense care in the event that any one of them showed signs of distress, and he laughed and played football with them. In other words, they became true friends despite their abilities and interests being so far apart. From within the boundaries of the RFS campus walls, my son experienced humanity as it ought to be – a heterogeneous community in its makeup, yet a place that is safe and welcoming for all.

In Palestine, I have seen too many parents who are embarrassed to share the news that their daughter/son has challenges and with that, they decide to keep them home or send them to an institution that excludes them from

their community and labels them as invalids. Reassuringly, I have also seen parents on the other side of the spectrum – those who seek as normal a life as possible for their children and fight with all their might to provide them with all possible opportunities. I often encounter those parents in my office. They come with insistence, and often with tears, requesting that we admit their child, knowing that the Ramallah Friends School is the only fully *inclusive education* program available to them. Such parents, although a minority, have found the courage to not only accept and dearly love their children, but to celebrate their unique personalities and abilities, and sacrifice much to provide them with an improved quality of life.

It is important to make the distinction between "inclusive education" and "special education" as they are distinct approaches. The latter's main premise is having the student in a "special" classroom or institution, normally with little integration with their typical peers – this is the model most prevalent in Palestine. The RFS

Today, living in the United States, Nader has a job he loves and he commands the respect of his community. He possesses the skills, the personality, and the confidence to find his way in real life – jumping off one bus and hopping on the next, attending to his own personal needs, and striving for independence. This would not have been possible if he had grown up within the confines of the special-needs community, which tends to exclude its members from the real world. He therefore would not have the life he has today without a school program that embraced him, respected him, served his unique needs, and believed in his capabilities as a productive member of his community.

Children embracing a child with disability with no inhibitions. Photo courtesy of Friends School, Ramallah.



inclusive model is noteworthy in that teachers and aides alike work hard to find ways to adapt the programs to respond to particular needs of the student. For example, if a 7th grader is not reading at grade level, the class reading assignment is adapted whereby the teacher will produce an abridged and much simpler text for the struggling student. The student will also have his/her own set of homework assignments. During class time, however, when there is discussion, the student feels included and participates actively as a full-fledged member of her/his class. This does not prevent learning-support teachers from working independently with the student, which is more necessary in higher grades if mathematics and sciences become too complex for a



Nader during his RFS graduation.

cognitively challenged student. With these arrangements in place comes the need for active collaboration between class teachers, learning-support teachers, and aides. Most challenging is the need to ensure that the effort of adapting the curriculum becomes a shared responsibility and that class teachers participate actively in the learning experience of the student and not rely solely on the learning-support staff. This continues to be a work in progress even at RFS. This level of collaboration and effort will not succeed without the full and active participation of parents who are involved from the start in setting their child's individual goals and working closely with the teachers to monitor progress and adjust the plan throughout the year.

It is obvious, and I know firsthand, that running this program is a costly endeavor, often requiring one-on-one support for some students. RFS employs eight learning-support teachers and aides to serve the

community of over sixty students. This is made possible through donations, but also through subsidies received from the entire parent population through tuition fees. Parents are proud of their direct contribution to the efforts that are transforming the lives of so many young and able Palestinians. Moving beyond RFS, the efforts of the many local and international organizations that provide educational and vocational services for the special-needs population in Palestine are indeed commendable, however, more effort needs to be exerted towards their *full inclusion* in schools, universities, and the job market throughout the country; knowing very well that inclusion may not be the answer for everyone. We have seen admirable inclusive education policies by the Ministry of Education, but we have yet to see them translated into services that are widespread throughout the country. The leadership of public and private schools and institutions alike need to make difficult decisions if they are serious about the principle of *education for all*.

My family has seen what a blessing like Nader can do to transform the lives of the people and communities they touch. We need more schools to courageously model inclusion and encourage parents and the community not to shy away. Perhaps only when these young women and men are welcomed in their schools, have access to dignified jobs, and gain the respect of their community will we see a mindset shift, and all parents – not only those who come to RFS – will let go of deeply rooted stigmas and start fighting for equal opportunities and more dignified lives for their children. Only then can we start to celebrate our true inclusive society. Let us not let them down.

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