

Study on Equal Learning Opportunities for Students with Disabilities under the Integrated Education System

Executive Summary

Background

1. The Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) has commissioned the Centre for Special Educational Needs and Inclusive Education of The Hong Kong Institute of Education to conduct a research project “Study on Equal Learning Opportunities for Students with Disabilities under the Integrated Education System”. The study aims at eliciting the stakeholders’ understanding of Integrated Education¹ (IE) policy and attitudes towards integrators, discerning the stakeholders’ perception of difficulties encountered with respect to students with different categories/ degrees of disabilities, and collecting opinions from the stakeholders towards allocation of resources, provision of professional training and support from the community.
2. The fieldwork which consists of questionnaire survey and case study was undertaken from September 2010 to November 2011. Various stakeholders including principals, teachers, professionals (e.g. social workers, counselors, therapists), students with special educational needs (SEN), regular students, parents of SEN students, and parents of regular students were involved. In the quantitative questionnaire survey, 230 schools comprising 139 primary schools and 91 secondary schools completed the questionnaires, and a total of 5,136 stakeholders participated. To collect qualitative data, 475 stakeholders from 20 schools were interviewed in the case study. These 20 schools have adopted the New Funding Mode² to care for their SEN students.
3. Even though IE program has been implemented for over a decade, there is still room for attaining the ideal that 100% of the mainstream schools will admit SEN students and provide equal learning opportunities for them. The findings show that among the 230 schools participating in the questionnaire survey, only 192 schools (83%) have admitted SEN students. Of these 192 schools, 48% of them have adopted the “whole-school approach” in caring for SEN students. The data show that 75% of these schools have no more than 10% SEN students. The types of SEN students include: Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorders (ADHD), Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD), Communication Difficulties (CD), Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (EBD), Hearing Impairment (HI), Intellectual Disability (ID), Physical Disabilities (PD), Specific Learning Difficulties (SLD), and Visual Impairment (VI). The number of types of SEN students commonly ranges from 4 to 7 in each school.

¹ Integrated education is generally linked to a process of placing students with special educational needs in ordinary schools which constitute the majority of so called “mainstream/mainstreaming schools”, whereas inclusive education is defined by UNESCO in 2009 as a process of strengthening the capacity of the education system to reach out to all learners. The Education Bureau of HKSAR adopts the term “integrated education” in its official documents but the research team adopts the idealation of “inclusive education” that is commonly embraced by educators.

² The Government introduced the New Funding Mode plan in 2003/2004, under which schools were granted subsidies according to the number of SEN students in each school and the severity of the problem of individual students.

Key Findings of the Quantitative Questionnaire Survey

4. As for the 192 schools which have admitted SEN students, about 70-90% of the respondents opine that implementation of inclusive education mainly comes from the government, parents of SEN students and the general public. However, most parents of SEN students speculate that teachers are the key stakeholders to expect schools to implement inclusive education. In contrast, only about half of the principals and teachers agree that the momentum comes from teachers themselves, which shows a big gap in aspirations from what parents expect.

5. The numbers of trained principals and teachers in schools of inclusive education are not satisfactory. The percentage of teachers without special education training³ is high. Some schools do not meet the policy requirement of having 10% of teachers with special education training. Nearly 40% of the interviewed teaching staff (particularly teachers) lack knowledge about inclusive education. Around 10-20% of the principals, teachers and professionals do not agree that SEN students can participate in all kinds of activities and that they should be provided with accommodation measures. Furthermore, taking heed of inadequate training and resources provided for school personnel, 30-50% of the respondents disagree with accepting and supporting students with severe disabilities.

6. Interviewed schools offer different support measures in enhancing the development of SEN students. These support measures include making special arrangement in examination (88%), providing professional therapy/counseling (82%), providing additional tutorials after school (77%), parent education (73%), writing up an individual education plan (IEP) (70%), and appointing teaching assistants (67%). As for learning and teaching for different types of SEN students, the principals, teachers and professionals consider that there are difficulties in teaching students with ID (24%), EBD (23%), ADHD (21%) or ASD (20%). Although efforts are made by schools in the arrangements of learning and teaching, more than 20% of the parents of SEN students show dissatisfaction. In this respect, the teaching practices in schools have not come up to the expectations and demands of parents of SEN students.

7. With respect to academic performance, 37% of the respondents (principals, teachers and professionals) generally consider SEN students having different learning difficulties, including grasping learning skills (44%), learning on their own (43%), being motivated to learn (41%), understanding what teachers are teaching in the classroom (36%), performances in examinations meeting expectation (33%), and developing multiple intelligences (23%). In relation to academic performance of different types of students with disabilities, approximately 80% of the principals, teachers and professionals show greater agreement about academic performance of students with HI, VI or PD. Most respondents are concerned with academic performance of students with ID, SLD, EBD, ADHD and ASD.

³ Special education training courses are offered in relevant undergraduate and post-graduate programs which are catered to teachers who work in mainstream schools (for implementation of inclusive education) or special schools.

8. Nearly half of the SEN students (48%) reveal that their examination results are not satisfactory when compared to 26% of regular students. Approximately 30% of SEN students cannot grasp a range of learning skills (e.g. note-taking, problem-solving) and learn independently whereas 17% of regular students do so. About 20% of SEN students indicate that they cannot understand what teachers are teaching in the classroom, while 11% of regular students do so. Furthermore, many parents of SEN students (46%) indicate that the academic performance of their children does not meet their expectation. Up to one-third to a half of the parents think that their SEN children are not concentrated in the classroom for grasping a range of learning skills and what teachers are teaching, and it is hard for them to learn actively and independently. This reflects that parents of SEN students who commonly embrace higher expectation tend to have more negative comments on their children's academic performance.

9. Notwithstanding there are non-hostile views, many parents of regular students still comment on behaviours of SEN students including disturbing others' learning (59%), occupying so many school resources (39%), having special arrangements (30%) and bullying other students (27%). Parents of regular students in secondary schools have more negative views about inclusive education than those in primary schools, probably because secondary school students have to face with the challenges of public examinations and their parents are therefore under stress. These parents might not comprehend how the schools care for the needs of SEN students and are worried about their own children's learning being dragged by SEN students in class.

10. As for social performance of various types of SEN students, principals, teachers and professionals generally opine that SEN students have peers and social activities. The majority of principals, teachers and professionals (around 90%) show positive views on emotional performance of students with HI, PD and SLD. However, about 30-70% of respondents consider that students with EBD, ADHD, ID and ASD cannot concentrate on learning in class, disturb classmates' learning and possess negative self-concept. As regards "relationship with staff", "relationship with peers", "interaction with peers" and "academic, social and emotional performance", most SEN students think that they have poorer performance than regular students in various aspects.

11. Regarding relationship with peers, over 80% of SEN students consider that their classmates are friendly to them. They will help and learn from each other, and appreciate individual differences. However, around 30% of SEN students indicate that they are bullied (26%) and teased (31%) by their classmates. For regular students, 18% and 24% of them indicate that they have the same experiences, respectively. It shows that more SEN students than regular students are bullied and teased in schools and the situation appears worrying.

Key Findings of the Qualitative Case Study

12. Concluding from the results of case study, most respondents indicate they are influenced by the education policy so as to recognize core values of inclusive education. Some schools have implemented inclusive education to increase the enrolment of more SEN

students in order to avoid school closure. However, this policy has brought many difficulties and challenges to schools. They include: insufficient knowledge of inclusive education, shortage of resources, inadequate manpower, great workload and a lack of collaboration.

13. Based on the degree that SEN students impact on others and the capacity that schools can take care of them, school stakeholders hold different views on different types of SEN students and their severity. Respondents are not willing to accept students with ID, ASD or ADHD, and those with moderate or severe disabilities. It is easier for most schools to accept students with HI, VI and PD.

14. Class placement in schools is mostly based on students' abilities or random allocation. However, for some schools with small numbers of classes, SEN students with low academic performance, behavioral problems and special needs of caring might be allocated to the same class. For most interviewed schools which receive support from NGOs and special schools, students on average appear to have fair academic performance. However, some schools are concerned about the potential drop of overall teaching quality.

15. Although home-school cooperation is generally smooth, some teachers think that certain parents do not disclose the situation of their SEN children and are not willing to cooperate with schools. However, some parents of SEN students consider that schools do not provide sufficient information and they are worried about the labeling effects on their children. Parents of regular students complain that more resources are allocated for SEN students.

16. To facilitate the implementation of inclusive education, teacher training is a matter of concern. Most interviewed teaching staff (particularly teaching assistants and social workers) reveal that there is not sufficient training for them. The causes are: (1) Administrative arrangements of schools do not allow a considerable number of teachers to receive training each year; (2) As there is a small number of SEN students in school, caring of these students and related teacher training are not pivotal for school development; (3) The training contents cover broadly and lack practical information and follow-up guidance; (4) Even if teachers can afford to have further studies, their first choices are usually degree or post-graduate courses, rather than those professional development courses in special education; (5) There are already too many types of SEN students for inexperienced teachers who lack proper training to juggle with; and (6) The mobility of teaching assistants is so great that training is forever needed every year. In the long run, all teachers should receive pre-service training in special education so that their negative views about SEN students could be changed.

17. There are different reasons that parents of SEN students let their children study in the mainstream schools. For some parents, their children are transferred to the existing school as the original school has not met their children's special educational needs. Some parents are rejected by many schools and only the existing schools are willing to accept their SEN children. Furthermore, some parents expect their children to be treated fairly, and are worried that if their children attend special schools, they will be negatively labeled in the society and cannot have better development. Most parents of SEN students are satisfied with their children's learning in schools but some parents show disagreements and make complaints to

schools. Complaint cases are mainly about insufficient support for SEN students as their parents expect schools to provide more resources and support for their children. Moreover, some parents of SEN students have great expectation on their children and when there is a gap between their expectation and the reality, they express dissatisfaction to the schools.

18. The majority of interviewed SEN students have expressed that they like their schools and get along well with their teachers and classmates. However, some SEN students think that they are regarded as bad students in the eyes of their teachers. They are sometimes bullied (teased or beaten up) by classmates. Interviewed SEN students have mentioned that there are after-school counseling and assessment adaptation. However, a few students need private tutorials to solve their learning problems.

19. Most interviewed regular students reveal that they are willing to get along with SEN students or offer assistance to them. Regular students in secondary schools are more considerate and tolerant towards SEN students than those in primary schools. Nevertheless, some regular students find that sometimes it is difficult to get along with SEN students, mainly because of their impolite and unacceptable manners. Schools have made efforts to reduce bullying but cases of bullying among students still exist. There are more verbal abuses than physical bullying.

20. Parents of regular students do not have much understanding of inclusive education in schools. However, interviewed parents generally agree or accept SEN students to study along with their children in schools. They find that their children study happily. They indicate that there could be a win-win situation with inclusive education: SEN students will receive assistance while their children can study with classmates with different abilities. They also acquire attitudes of tolerance and acceptance, learn to care for others, build up senses of responsibility and empathy, and develop the characters of helpfulness. All these will be beneficial to their future life. However, a few parents of regular students have expressed worries that some deviant behaviours of SEN students will have negative influences on their children.

Conclusion and Recommendations

21. Concluding from the data of questionnaire survey and case study, there are problems in the system, policy and implementation of inclusive education in Hong Kong. They are summarized as follows:

- (a) The identification of SEN students is criticized to be too sloppy and simple. The assessment reports do not cover enough details. Although the complaints might be due to parents' concerns and high expectations, it should be understood that these assessment outcomes could have life-long impacts on SEN students such as school selection and placement. It would also affect allocation of public resources by the government.

- (b) If schools are going to implement inclusive education, they have to reform (e.g. changes in physical facilities and pedagogic adaptation) in order to cater for the needs of SEN students. However, survey data reveal that about 20% of the principals, teachers and professionals express disagreement about adopting some necessary modification measures. Even worse, there are around half of the respondents who disagree to accept and support students with severe disabilities. It is a great concern if schools are not determined to make necessary changes to meet the needs of SEN students, SEN students will face with the ever increasing learning difficulties.
- (c) Survey findings show that many principals (61%), teachers (43%) and professionals (49%) and parents of SEN students (37%) consider that schools do not receive enough government subsidies/ resources to implement inclusive education, particularly in funding amount, teacher training, manpower allocation and professional support. Many respondents indicate that teachers have heavy workload and do not have sufficient time to support different types of SEN students.
- (d) The findings of questionnaire survey show a worrying situation that around 20% of the principals, and 50% of the teachers and professionals are not familiar with the “Code of Practice on Education under the Disability Discrimination Ordinance” and “Indicators for Inclusion 2008: A Tool for School Self-evaluation and School Development”. They also express that they do not know much about the development of inclusive education and related support resources. It is disappointing to note that resources are allocated but outcomes are far from what stakeholders expect, and this will be an obstacle to the development of inclusive education.
- (e) In the case study, the majority of SEN students report that they have good relationship with teachers who encourage, help and care for them. However, survey data reveal that around 10% of the SEN students hold opposite views. 14% of the SEN students feel that they are not treated fairly in schools whereas 9% think that teaching staff, being unfriendly, do not actively take care of them.
- (f) There is a large discrepancy in the perception toward the sufficiency and appropriateness of support given by schools to SEN students. Teachers generally believe that their schools perform well in providing various measures and strategies to help SEN students. However, survey findings reveal that 20% or more of the parents of SEN students are dissatisfied with teaching, adaptation of curriculum and assessment, teachers’ professional knowledge, and support provided by teaching assistants. Parents of regular students also express disagreement with the extra support given to SEN students, considering it as unfairness. They worry that SEN students disturb classroom orders and slow down teaching progress. It demonstrates that the communication between schools and parents is insufficient so that it affects the effectiveness of inclusive education as well as assistance provided for SEN students.
- (g) In terms of relationship with peers, 16% of SEN students do not have good peer relationship and they are often teased (31%) and bullied (26%). From the case study,

interviewees generally think that bullying among students is not severe. In most occasions, students with emotional and behavioral problems (e.g. student with ADHD) may bully against regular students or regular students bully against SEN students verbally. It is rare to see physical bullying. However, even for the subtle hitting and scolding which have been neglected by teachers and parents, it may cause psychological stress to regular students or SEN students, causing them to feel unhappy and helpless.

- (h) In accordance with the development of the new senior secondary curriculum, applied learning courses are offered in some of the schools with special curricula, special schools and mainstream secondary schools. Some interviewed teachers are concerned about further education and career path of SEN students.
- (i) In general, schools receive funding through the New Funding Mode to support SEN students. Schools often contact NGOs to acquire support services which include purchased services, organizing activities or talks, providing consultation or collaborative projects. Most interviewed schools report that these support services have certain effectiveness. However, some respondents point out that the effects vary due to a lack of continuity in the support services, frequent changing supporting organizations, high mobility of supporting staff, insufficient communication between organizations and schools, and poor home-school cooperation.

22. In response to the afore-mentioned problems in the system, policy and implementation of inclusive education, the research team proposes the following recommendations with reference to overseas implementation experiences of inclusive education:

(1) Identification of SEN students

For early intervention, assessment should be taken in the stage of pre-school education. A comprehensive and detailed assessment report should be provided to parents, teachers and professionals. It not only helps parents understand the development needs of their children and right of their choices, but also provides useful information for the follow-ups in education and therapies.

(2) Initiatives of schools to implement inclusive education

Schools should be proactive in making changes or reform to cater for SEN students' needs. This can be achieved by formulating long-term plans and policy on the curricula and accommodation for SEN students. Furthermore, they should try to achieve consensus in the directions and goals among stakeholders in schools.

(3) Allocation of resources and manpower

In view of student cases with moderate or severe disabilities in mainstream schools, the shortage of manpower and limitation of resources are noted. Currently, mainstream schools take care of students with mild disabilities whereas special schools care for students with moderate or severe disabilities. This is a dual-track mode of the implementation of "mainstream integrated education and special education". For

effective implementation, the Education Bureau (EDB) should issue guidelines that include clear procedures of referral and ways of professional collaboration to mainstream schools and special schools so that the dual-track mode can be strengthened.

(4) Preparation and training of school staff

School staff's knowledge in integrated education, special education, and existing support services needs to be strengthened. All school staff, including principals, teachers, teaching assistants should be encouraged to take training in special education. Pre-service teacher training programs in tertiary institutions should include special education as a core module as well as exposure or attachment in inclusive settings. The government should provide incentives for teaching staff to have further studies in special education programs. For example, the completion of further studies in special education programs will be one of the prerequisites in the career promotion.

(5) Appointment of designated SEN coordinators

The government should consider setting up a functional post at management level in school, viz. a designated teacher, to deal with matters of SEN students, instead of the current practice of an added-on duty. In this respect, schools can constantly evaluate and prioritize the development of integrated education, identification of special education needs, organization of support measures, and management of resources. Schools may also connect with other schools which have rich experiences in integrated education for support and advice.

(6) Whole school approach

In some mainstream schools, SEN students may be confined to the same classes given that class placement is based on students' academic performance. It is recommended that schools should handle class placement of SEN students so as to reduce segregation and discrimination. The research team is also concerned about the ideas of selective acceptance of SEN students, as students with certain disabilities (e.g. ID, ADHD and ASD) are commonly not welcomed. There are guidelines in the Whole School Approach in School provided by the Education Bureau. Schools should refer to the guidelines in the processes of student admission and class placement.

(7) Specialized and long-term IEP for SEN students

Some teaching staff too much emphasize uniformity that the learning effectiveness of IEP has been neglected. Therefore, the EDB should consider allocating more resources, and delineating the function and implementation format of IEP. With reference to overseas experiences of the learning rights of SEN students and legislation of IEP, schools should be requested to provide specialized and long-term IEP for diagnosed SEN students in order to protect their rights of receiving appropriate educational arrangements. The enforcement of IEP to all SEN students will be a proactive measure to guarantee equal learning opportunities of all SEN students.

(8) Caring Campus

The cultivation of a caring campus is an essential foundation of integrated education. Teaching staff should develop the spirit of education for all, reduce the rejection of SEN students and let them feel respected, cared and concerned. Schools should help students understand the importance of mutual respect and elimination of discrimination through public education, small group activities and individual counseling. To promote peer relationship, schools should hold peer counseling/ learning partnership programs and other group activities to enhance SEN students' social skills. Stakeholders should have zero tolerance towards any form or degree of bullying, no matter it is direct or indirect, physical or verbal.

(9) Home-school communication and cooperation

Schools have the responsibilities to notify parents about their integrated education policy and support, so as to eliminate parents' mistrust and worries. Parents of SEN students should recognize their rights of participation and giving opinions. Apart from parent-teacher association, IEP meeting is a good platform for communication between parents and schools. The EDB may allocate more resources on publicity through different media (e.g. TV and internet), in order to raise the public's and the parents' knowledge of integrated education and their respect for human rights.

(10) Community support

Schools may build up long-term collaborative relationship with organizations (e.g. NGOs, professional organizations, special schools with resource centres, and integrated education resource schools) which provide support services for SEN students' learning and staff training. The EDB should publicize more extensively about the availability of resources and support.

(11) Way forward for SEN students

For further education and career development of SEN students, the government and related organizations should offer a wide range of appropriate study courses, related manpower and resources for SEN students who will truly experience equal learning opportunities of post-secondary education. Moreover, universities and tertiary educational institutions should set up well-defined practices in providing adjusted admission criteria, flexible duration of study and adaptation of support measures, in meeting the needs of SEN students.