

EO Files (January 2014)

"THINGS WE DO, PEOPLE WE MEET - Reflections in Brief"

Inclusive classroom must embrace children with special education needs

York Chow lays out the steps we can take to provide the best education for all Hong Kong children, not least those with special needs. That begins with a pledge to embrace diversity

Hong Kong is lagging behind on inclusive education, while most advanced economies are moving ahead. Many students with special educational needs are not getting the support they require and deserve.

Last year, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child issued its concluding observations following China's combined reports under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Not surprisingly, the committee expressed its deep concern over children with disabilities in Hong Kong. It urged the government to "promptly identify and remove all the barriers, including physical, that prevent students with disabilities from entering and staying in the mainstream system ... and reallocate resources from the special education system to promote the inclusive education in mainstream schools".

The benefits of inclusive education are well documented, not least because it imparts to all children the importance of empathy and acceptance, while enabling those with disabilities to form a positive sense of self. An inclusive classroom exposes children to communication with different groups, which trains them in multiple modes of expression and understanding. These are important skills in this age of globalisation, where cross-cultural competence is vital.

In short, with the right support, children learn better together. In adulthood, they will be more likely to embrace diversity, respect differences and fight for equality, not only for themselves but also for others. This is the foundation we need to foster a truly inclusive society.

Yet, despite these obvious gains, support measures to promote inclusive education remain woefully inadequate in this city. Indeed, the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) has long voiced our concern that students with disabilities should have access to equal learning opportunities through inclusive education.

Our study on this issue in 2012 found that the system is far from satisfactory. Nearly half the teachers had not received any training in this area, and over 60 per cent of principals felt that schools do not receive enough government resources to implement inclusive education. Given the current situation, this will be one of our priority areas over the next few years.

More must be done. Access to quality education for all is fundamental to Hong Kong's competitiveness. Our children who are not able to adapt to the mainstream system should be given support according to their individual needs. Otherwise, the barriers they face will affect their ability to participate in society later in life, including in higher education and employment.

For students with learning disabilities, this must begin with early assessment, which specialists and professionals agree is crucial to provide timely intervention.

We recommend that assessments should be taken at the pre-school level, to enable early identification of a child's specific requirements, which is why access to early childhood education is so vital, particularly for children with special learning needs.

A detailed assessment report should be made available to the parents, school and relevant experts. Parents and carers can use the information to better understand the child's developmental needs and equip themselves to address such needs at home, as well as share their experiences and work closely with professionals on holistic support measures and strategies.

The report can also help to ensure a seamless transition between pre-school, kindergarten and primary school, whereby children with

special educational needs can continue to receive appropriate services and assistance. Above all, any education policy should take the diverse needs of students into consideration.

Another critical component of inclusive education is the availability of educational psychologists, occupational and speech therapists, and counselling professionals to support the progress of students with special learning needs in mainstream schools.

In Hong Kong, there remains a manpower shortage in this area, which must be promptly addressed by the Education Bureau, higher learning institutions and other relevant professional bodies.

The success of integrated education also depends on teachers' attitude and training. Unfortunately, misconceptions and a lack of understanding on this front remain common. The EOC's study found that more than half of the surveyed principals, teachers and professionals believe that excluding students with special learning needs from regular classes was not discriminatory. Such views only serve as additional obstacles to ensuring that all children can access quality education.

To encourage teachers to embrace inclusive education, they must be provided with appropriate training. Pre-service and in-service teacher training programmes in tertiary institutions should include special education and inclusive education as core components. A monitoring process and appropriate audit are also necessary to ensure such training is relevant for real-life application.

Teachers and principals should also be educated on equal opportunity principles. In particular, the benefits of inclusive education should be emphasised and clearly communicated to parents, in order to break down stereotypes and clarify misunderstandings.

Teachers and principals must take the lead to implement a caring and safe campus for all students regardless of their disability.

Our recent meetings with the leaders of the city's tertiary educational institutes showed there is both acceptance and support to embrace an inclusive policy for tertiary education.

All institutes are ready to admit students with special needs, and are willing to share expertise and experiences in making university life accessible to students who need further assistance.

As a community, we must come together to build a truly inclusive education system, with the recognition that every child, given the appropriate support and care based on their individual needs, can reach their full potential and achieve their dreams.

We must acknowledge that many of the barriers standing in our way are not merely physical, but also social and attitudinal. Undoubtedly, they are within our power to change. What we need is commitment. Our children deserve the chance to learn together and from each other. As role models, we must enable them to access these opportunities.

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