

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

**Meeting of Legislative Council
Panel on Education
Subcommittee on Integrated Education
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~~ Submission from the Equal Opportunities Commission ~~

Purpose

This paper aims to provide views of the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) on the equal learning opportunity for students with disabilities under the Integrated Education (IE) System.

Background

2. All students, with or without disabilities, can enjoy twelve years' free education in Hong Kong. Parents of students with special education needs (SEN) have the choice to arrange their children to study in special schools or mainstream schools which practise IE.

3. The concept of IE was first introduced to Hong Kong in the 70s. Initially, it took the form of special class and special programmes in ordinary schools to cater for students with SEN. In 1997, the IE Pilot Project emphasizing "whole-school approach" was launched in response to the 1994 Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education that called upon governments to accord inclusive education the highest policy and budgetary priority so as to include all children in mainstream schools regardless of individual differences or difficulties. From 1999 onwards, the IE programme was officially implemented in a number of primary and secondary schools. In 2001, EOC issued the *Code of Practice on Education under the Disability*

Discrimination Ordinance (DDO) to provide guidance on the legal requirements under the DDO to ensure that students with disabilities can have equal learning opportunities.

4. However, acceptance of the IE policy or principle is not enough to enable its effective implementation. The implementation of IE over the past decade has led to the involvement of a wider group of teachers and increased public awareness, bringing about heightened parental expectations and increased pressure on schools and teachers.

5. Given that IE Policy has been implemented for many years, key stakeholders like parents of students with SEN, academia as well as teaching professional generally considered that the IE Policy is not effective enough to meet the particular educational needs of students with SEN. To work towards the effective implementation of IE, it entails adopting a mindset that respects equal opportunities for all and strong commitment from all stakeholders.

6. To study the policies and practices in the pursuit of equal learning opportunities for students with SEN, the EOC commissioned a ***Study on Equal Opportunities for Students with Disabilities under the Integrated Education System*** (the IE Study) to the Centre for Special Educational Needs and Inclusive Education of Hong Kong Institute of Education in 2009. The Study aimed at understanding the general attitudes of the stakeholders such as educators, students with SEN, regular students and parents towards the IE Policy and discerning the difficulties they encountered with respect to students with different categories/degree of disabilities. Moreover, it also aimed at soliciting the stakeholders' opinions on how to implement the IE Policy more effectively in the areas of resources allocation, professional training and gaining community support. The Study consisted of a quantitative questionnaire survey with 5,136 respondents from 230 schools and qualitative case studies which feature interviews with 475 stakeholders from 20 schools. The Report on IE Study was released in November 2012.

Key Findings of the Study

7. Key findings of the study include:

- (i) The assessment of students with SEN, which could have life-long impacts on the students in school selection and placement, was criticized to be too sloppy and simple.
- (ii) The number of principals and teachers with special education training in schools implementing IE Policy was rather low. Only 26% of the principals had attended special education training courses. 49% of the teachers had not received any training in inclusive education. Only 1-2% of the principals and teachers possessed a professional diploma or degree in special education.
- (iii) About 20% of the principals, teachers and professionals disagreed to adopt necessary changes in physical facilities and pedagogic adaptation to cater for the needs of students with SEN. About 20% to 43% of the teachers were not willing to accept students with Intellectual Disability (ID), Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorders (ADHD), Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD) in regular classes.
- (iv) 61% of the principals, 43% of the teachers, 49% of the professionals and 37% of the parents of students with SEN considered that the schools did not receive enough government subsidies/ resources in terms of funding, teachers' training, manpower allocation and professional support to implement IE.
- (v) 57% of the principals, 62% of the teachers and 55% of the professionals disagreed that excluding students with SEN from regular classes was a discriminatory practice. Around 20% of the principals and more than 50% of the teachers were 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*. Most of them were not aware of the development of inclusive education and related support measures.

- (vi) Nearly half of the students with SEN (48%) revealed that their examination results were not satisfactory. Approximately 30% of the students with SEN could not grasp learning skills such as note-taking, problem-solving and learning independently. About 20% of them indicated that they could not understand what the teachers were teaching in the classroom.
- (vii) In terms of peer relationship, over 80% of the students with SEN considered that their classmates were friendly to them. However, around one-third of them indicated that they had been teased (31%) and bullied (26%) by their classmates whereas the percentage of regular students with experience of being teased and bullied were 24% and 18% respectively.

Key Recommendations

8. To address the issues identified in the local IE system, the EOC has proposed the following recommendations:

Early identification of students with SEN

9. Comprehensive and detailed assessment should be given to pre-school students for early intervention and therapies. The shortage of counselling professionals/educational psychologists posed great challenges to teachers in taking care of the students with SEN in mainstream schools.

Increasing resources and manpower

10. The Education Bureau (EDB) should address the problems of manpower shortage, limited resources and inadequate special education

training for school principals and teaching staff in mainstream schools. Pre-service and in-service teacher training programmes in tertiary institutions should include special education and inclusive education as core components.

Teachers and principals should learn more about the equal opportunities principles

11. School authorities and personnel should be reminded of their legal obligations under the DDO to provide equal learning opportunities to students with SEN, including students with ID, ADHD as well as ASD. Schools should adopt policies that pursue the elimination and prevention of unlawful disability discrimination.

Adopting the anti-bullying policy

12. The cultivation of a caring campus is essential for the implementation of IE. Teaching staff should share the value of education for all. Schools should promote mutual respect and zero tolerance towards any form of bullying in the campus.

Promoting public awareness on the IE policy

13. Schools should notify parents about their IE policy and support. Apart from the parent-teacher association, Individual Education Plan (IEP) meetings are a good platform for communication between parents and schools. The Government should raise public awareness on the IE policy through social media and publicity programmes.

Way Forward

14. Education is a major social investment and is crucial to the future of our children. For many students with SEN, their access to quality and higher education remains their only effective hope to integrate into the mainstream society and move up the social ladder.

15. After the release of the Report of the IE Study, EOC's Members met with senior officials of the EDB on 18 December 2012 to exchange views on the challenges and difficulties in relation to the implementation of IE policy, and the ways to promote IE. EDB agreed in principle to enhance special education trainings for principals and teachers as well as to organize public education programmes to increase public understanding of equal opportunities in education.

16. The EOC is prepared to strengthen its collaboration with the Government and key stakeholders in promoting equal opportunities for students with SEN, and facilitating public understanding on the principles of equal opportunities in education and requirements of the DDO.

Equal Opportunities Commission
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