

Implementation Challenges of Inclusive Education: A Review of Hong Kong's Local and International Education Sectors

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Abstract

This paper reviews Hong Kong's local and international education sectors with a view to special education practices against an inclusive education philosophy adopted by the Hong Kong government. First, a summary of the Hong Kong education system is presented, followed by a brief introduction of inclusive education. Second, key characteristics of special education provision in Hong Kong's local and international school sectors are reviewed. Each sector is appraised in its own right and respective challenges which diminish successful implementation are identified. The local sector appears to require more expertise leadership but provides across all education levels. The international sector offers an insufficient number of places and incomplete information dissemination but remains the preferred choice, especially for non-Cantonese speakers. Suggestions to improve the current situation to benefit not only individual children with special educational needs from preschool level up but also the Hong Kong economy at large are discussed.

Keywords : special education, international schools, minority group, Hong Kong

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The Education System in Hong Kong – An overview

The education system of Hong Kong was considerably influenced by the British in the past, as Hong Kong remained a British colony until 1997. Although it is now a Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China (PRC), its educational policies are still separate from those of the PRC. English and Cantonese, a Chinese dialect, are Hong Kong's official languages. According to Hong Kong's Basic Law and Official Languages Ordinance, the two languages are of equal status despite Hong Kong's population consisting 95% of Chinese ethnicity, resulting in Hong Kong being a predominantly Cantonese-speaking community.

The Hong Kong government can be roughly divided into two education sectors, a local and an international one. The local sector primary and secondary schools absorb approximately 93% of Hong Kong's school population. The international school sector offers the remaining 7% of school places, which is equivalent to approximately 34,600 students (*Hong Kong 2008, 2009*).

There are four types of schools in the local sector. A small number of schools are fully funded by the government (government schools); many schools are managed by charitable institutions (aided schools); some are private schools, known for high academic standards; and finally private schools with good performance results receive government funding through the Direct Subsidy Scheme (DSS schools) (*Hong Kong Higher Education, 2007*). With the exception of a few DSS schools following the International Baccalaureate curriculum, the majority of schools in the local sector follow a Hong Kong-based curriculum which is guided by the Education Bureau (EDB) and predominantly delivered in Cantonese.

There are also 51 international schools in Hong Kong which enjoy operational autonomy in terms of medium of instruction and curriculum design. The respective curricula vary between the schools and are often, but not always, guided by the country's education system the school affiliates with or increasingly by the International Baccalaureate Organization. Similar to their local counterparts, admission into international schools is regulated by each school, typically through the means of written and/or oral examination, even at primary school entry level. Some international primary schools admit into reception classes at the age of 4, while others have kindergartens feeding into them. Even entry at these early childhood education

levels is subject to every student passing the respective entry exam. These schools, charging a school fee, "... have traditionally been meeting the demand from non-Chinese speaking students and foreign nationals most of whom would eventually return to their home countries for education" (Education Bureau, 2007). In addition to meeting the demands from Hong Kong's international community, a plea for school places in this sector increasingly comes from many affluent or overseas-born Chinese families as they favour Western-style education, or prefer education conducted in English in view of assumed better preparation for overseas universities. This has put the international schools in Hong Kong under considerable strain to offer a sufficient number of school places.

As for the early childhood education years, it is estimated that at least 95% of children over the age of 3 years attend some kind of preschool programme in Hong Kong. In the 2008/09 school year, this was equivalent to 964 preschools, composed of 889 local and 75 non-local (mostly non-Cantonese) schools, with a total of 137,630 children ranging in age from 3 to 6 years enrolled. The divide between local and international preschools is 92% and 8%, respectively, and thereby almost identical to the divide of local versus international schools at higher levels.

Inclusive Education – An overview

Until the early 1990s, the prevailing practice in special education worldwide remained for educational facilities to be largely designed for typical students. Students with special needs had to fit in (Barnes & Smukler, 2009). This gradually began to change to what is currently known in special education as *inclusive education*. It has been greatly influenced by the bio-ecological perspective of development and learning as well as the capability approach to disability.

The bio-ecological approach, refined from the ecological theory by Bronfenbrenner (1979; 2005) in the mid- to late 20th century, takes into account the influences of the various environments a child exists in, such as the wider family, neighbourhood, community, social and cultural groups of which the individual is said to be an integral part. At the same time it acknowledges innate abilities. Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model does not specifically

refer to inclusion as it is a conceptual model and thereby too general. However, its framework is the only one to date which comprehensively offers a link between the various concepts which take the variety of influences in which child development occurs into account. Applied to the education sector it links education, inclusive or otherwise, to the other influences in a child's life.

The "capability approach" presents a philosophical shift in the past decade from the so-called affirmative to the rights-based models of disability, exerting influence on society as a whole as well as education. These models focus on societal, individual and eventually political attitudes, which Reindal (2009) refers to as "non-negotiable social entitlements". "The capability approach is crucially different because it considers disability as a specific variable of human diversity" (Reindal, 2009, p.157). Applied to education, this perspective speaks clearly for fully inclusive practices with no tolerance for any segregated system to be the norm. But widely held beliefs in society about the legitimacy of segregated education have traditionally put a barrier to this idea with breakthroughs evident only as recent as a decade or so ago (Hodkinson & Vickerman, 2009), indicating how education can be influenced by society-held concepts and principles.

Special Education Philosophy in Hong Kong

Rao (2002) noted that recent educational reform proposals and implementations in Hong Kong were in fact much under the influence of international developments. It therefore comes as no surprise that Hong Kong has officially adopted the inclusive approach in special education. The practice of inclusion is referred to in Hong Kong as "whole school approach" and indicators have been developed to help schools assess if they are meeting the criteria for being an inclusive school. These indicators are developed along three inter-connected dimensions of school life, namely culture, policies and practices (Education Bureau, 2008).

These dimensions are supported by Kaplan (2009, p.13) stating that helping marginalized children to learn needs to be reflected in "...an educational and policy agenda to enable schools to become supportive environments". She further makes the point that any intervention needs to be integrated across the systems of family, school, and community. Interconnected and

interdependent agents assisting a child's development is further emphasized by Scott-Little (2009), which in turn leads back to Bronfenbrenner's framework.

Education Provision for Children with Special Needs in Hong Kong

Local School Sector

Forlin, Au, and Chong (2008, p.93) point out that "preparing teachers to cater for diversity in schools in Hong Kong has undergone a number of meaningful changes in the recent years". For example, more training courses have become available to special needs as well as mainstream teachers. However, many of these courses are only isolated talks or at best 30-hours long, which is said to barely cover the basics and does not much towards fundamental attitude changes. Some studies in Hong Kong have established that teachers themselves strongly feel the need for further training in order to implement inclusive education (Forlin & Lian, 2008).

Since 2003, the Education Bureau (2008) has published a regularly revised paper regarding tools for school self-evaluation purposes and school development adopting indicators for inclusion. In addition, regular workshops as noted above are made available and a resource centre base as well as publications and reports intended for the use of teachers are accessible via the Bureau's website in both of its official languages, Cantonese and English. Under "Special Education Services" on the EDB website, names of schools are provided, presumably of those using the inclusive approach, but these lists regularly omit to mention the language used for teaching.

In view of future growth, Forlin and Lian (2008) suggest for Hong Kong's education system to orientate itself along international guidelines and practices but to find its own culturally sensitive and appropriate way toward inclusive education. In accordance with the general literature on this topic, the same authors strongly advocate key features such as collaborative work between special education and mainstream teachers, strong leaders in schools, and parent-school cooperation to be incorporated. The Education Bureau (2009b) promotes that "...its main policy objective of special education is to enable children with

special educational needs to fully develop their individual potential. We encourage students with special educational needs to receive education in ordinary schools as far as possible, or in special schools when necessary.” This is certainly consistent with the UK and other countries’ approach to special education needs provision where modified learning and assessment approaches are encouraged.

However, Hong Kong currently still runs special child care centres for preschoolers and 60 special schools for older children who require intensive support due to severe or multiple disabilities. The existence of special (pre-) schools so separate from the mainstream schools seems contradictory to the Education Bureau’s inclusive policy. The Education Bureau is addressing this controversy by envisaging a continuation of special schools as part of its education system, albeit with significant changes in their future roles, especially in terms of their partnerships with mainstream schools (Education Bureau, 2005). This is consistent with the latest international developments of inclusive education and in line with Forlin and Lian’s (2008) suggestion. Other identified challenges which have to be addressed in this sector with regards to special education provision include better resource management (Education Bureau, 2005). Unlike in many other countries where resources are insufficient, Hong Kong needs to make more effective uses of its available and relatively affluent resources. Furthermore, a need for more skilful and adaptive leadership in special education has been identified, in particular to address curriculum development and implementation of learning outcomes through the more consistent use of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs).

International School Sector

It should be noted that the review so far only applies to the local education sector in Hong Kong. Special education facilities for non-Cantonese speakers (NCS) with special needs are said to be not as well developed. Factors contributing to this and to the challenges toward bridging these differences in special education practices will be discussed next.

Lack of Compulsory Special Education Provision

One could assume that the local sector practices apply to the international sector, namely to

place every student with special needs in a mainstream environment wherever feasible. However, international schools in Hong Kong are separate entities with regard to policies, enjoying more freedom in making their policy decisions regarding student admission and education provision than local schools. This is not unique to Hong Kong but appears to be commonly the case around the world, according to Shaklee (2007). Hong Kong's international schools are therefore under no obligation to adhere to any of the (special) education practices or philosophies which Hong Kong's Education Bureau promotes. Reasons to neglect or avoid special needs provision in international schools, very much mirrored worldwide, include economics, lack of expertise, or negative attitudes.

Some international schools in Hong Kong openly acknowledge that they do not admit any child with special needs, although they would provide some support should any difficulties emerge after admission. Other schools admit children with special needs but only according to the school's own terms, arguing that the school can only provide for a certain level of educational need and to a certain number of children with such needs per classroom. Yet other schools, especially at kindergarten or preschool level, admit children regardless of their level of educational needs. They often claim inclusive practices but show little if any effort to provide for or adapt to the individuals' needs. This has been an increasingly emerging practice, apparently to boost admission numbers amongst a declining birth rate.

As a result, only a small number of international schools from early childhood education level onward provide adequate support for NCS children with special needs. These schools are high in demand and have long waitlists. Being admitted to the school of choice is already highly competitive amongst typically developing NCS children in Hong Kong, but even more so for NCS children with special needs.

The limited provision of education for NCS children with special needs is viewed as potentially hurting Hong Kong's economy as Hong Kong is actively trying to attract "quality migrants". With a worldwide increase in special educational needs, the chances of quality migrants bringing families who need special educational support also rises. The migrating families are often young ones, including children aged 0 to 8 years. This range is defined as the early childhood period and a critical time in any child's development but especially for children with special needs where early intervention can make significant differences. Hence (special) education facilities for this age group would demand particular consideration in this

shortage debate. It should be noted that the Education Bureau (2009b) states that “some kindergarten-cum-child care centres have joined the “Integrated Programme” to provide intensive training and care to mildly disabled children aged three to six.” That these integrated programmes as well as the earlier mentioned special child care centres are offered in Cantonese only is not indicated.

Despite an increase in demand, a change in the situation across Hong Kong’s international education sector does not seem imminent. Neither forthcoming is a mandate from the Hong Kong government demanding compulsory inclusion of children with special needs amongst Hong Kong’s international education sector. Only such a mandate is believed to instigate ALL international schools to admit a certain proportion of children with special needs and thereby make Hong Kong’s entire education system practice what its government has adopted in theory.

Lack of Comprehensive Information

Not only schools as such are in limited supply for NCS children with SEN. Information about available options across the entire education system on the EDB website is far from complete and adequate. A prospectus published by the Education Bureau (2007) lists all international, subsidized, government and private schools across both education sectors but makes no reference regarding which of these schools accommodates special educational needs and in which language. Specific to the international school sector at preschool level, no mention is made of the only two international preschool centres specifically catering for NCS children with special needs up to the age of six years.

At school level only those schools run by the English School Foundation (ESF) system are mentioned although a few other international schools also offer some SEN places. The special school under the ESF umbrella, the only one for NCS children, is overlooked. The actual number of SEN places available per school is also not provided. Only through a newspaper report by Heron (2008), it is known that 126 places were provided by the ESF schools in May 2008 plus an additional 60 places in the ESF special school, with an extra 100 more places being needed.

Limited by the incomplete information about local and international school options, it is

suspected that many international families of non-Chinese background are not fully aware of the range of services available to them. Due to this lack of insight, many shy away from the local health and education systems with regard to their child with special needs, focusing only on the international sector despite the much higher cost involved.

The somewhat confusing situation surrounding special education provision is not unique to Hong Kong. Aron and Loprest (2007) commented that due to the complexity and fragmentation of the child disability service system in the US, many families have difficulty to understand what benefits they are entitled to, how they can access them, and how to identify the supports that best meet their child's needs. As a result many children miss out on needed services and support, especially at preschool age, and do not reach their full potential.

One of Hong Kong's attempts to make access to appropriate supports easier from an early age is a comprehensive child development service (CCDS) through its Department of Health. One of the components of the CCDS is a referral and feedback system to enable nurses, medical practitioners, social workers and pre-primary educators to identify and refer any child between 0 and 5 years with physical, developmental or behavioural problems to the Maternal and Child Health Centres (MCHCs) for assessment and timely assistance (Education Bureau, 2009a). However, possibly out of ignorance of the staff at international educational preschools or kindergartens about the existence of such a referral system, many children from the international education sector are typically referred to private practitioners. This means an opportunity to be introduced and admitted to the local sector of health and eventually educational support is missed.

Grace, Wedgwood, Fenech, and McConnell (2008) also reported access difficulties to early childhood education services in Australia. Accordingly, unless staff is familiar with the family through another sibling, it takes much time, energy, and resilience to enroll a child with disabilities and to have a centre agree to accommodate that child. The most stress provoking elements in this process are said to be the uncertainty and length of time involved, as some families overseas as well as in Hong Kong experience waiting periods of one year or more (Becher, 2011; Grace et al., 2008) with a need to persistently apply to schools in order to secure a place. Furthermore, many families accept any conditions of enrollment even if the times and days offered do not fit in with their needs. Similarly, there is the risk to create a situation whereby placement needs become so acute for some families that any placement is

better than none. At the extreme, some families are known to have left Hong Kong for reason of seeking better special education facilities elsewhere (Becher, 2011). But even for those who gain access, positive experiences on a daily basis are not guaranteed, as Grace et al. (2008) caution.

In addition to lacking full understanding of all education options available, other factors might be contributing to the fact that international families almost exclusively consider international options for special education in Hong Kong. These are explored next.

Biased Views

It cannot be overlooked that the international schools, rightly or wrongly, enjoy a prestigious reputation amongst the international community and some affluent local Chinese in Hong Kong. This makes them a desirable, possibly biased, choice for general and special education alike. Second, siblings may already attend an international school and families wish to have all children at the same school. Third, families based in Hong Kong for only a few years often desire the same curriculum as their home country in order to provide a more seamless transition between countries. Fourth, a difference in culture, curriculum, and learning approach in local (pre-) schools would ask international families to adapt significantly. This may be a particularly great and additional challenge for children with special educational needs.

Even for long-term residents, a school choice is biased by relating to a system that a parent knows best from his/her own childhood versus something that appears quite foreign in fundamental believes.

Another factor includes that local Cantonese speakers often prefer international schools to give their children an advantage to attain good English skills and to experience a “Western” approach to education.

Last but not least, local Chinese families who have a child with special needs have reported to feel fewer stigmas about having a child with special needs in more internationally-based surroundings than within their own Chinese community, culture, and circle of family and friends.

Summary and Conclusion

In its commitment to inclusive education, Hong Kong's Education Bureau has adopted a whole-school approach. Within this approach, local schools aim to integrate children with special needs, while at the same time some special schools for specific disabilities are maintained with a future view to change their roles to a more collaborative one with mainstream schools. According to the Hong Kong government, all students residing in Hong Kong, regardless of level of ability or mother tongue, have access to this free education system. In reality however, NCS families, which are in the minority, face significant challenges in the attempt to gain a comprehensive overview of special education options in addition to securing a place in the school of their choice, which typically is in the international education sector.

The international education sector faces some challenges. On one hand, SEN places in the international sector from early childhood levels onward are limited, since not all international schools make such places available. On the other hand, some schools admit irrespective of special education provision being available, especially at the early childhood education level. Furthermore, information from the government about where and what type of SEN places throughout the education system might be available, especially for non-Cantonese speakers, is incomplete. Consequently, the NCS families' understanding about the scope of special education provision as well as in terms of curriculum expectations and teaching approaches throughout Hong Kong is limited. As a result, these families continue to narrow their school selection to the international sector, i.e. international schools. A further disadvantage, especially when in search for a SEN place, is that the international school options are costly since regular plus therapy fees are to be paid. Yet several biases in favour of international school attendance maintain the drive to seek SEN support in such schools.

The dilemma of high-demand and low-availability of quality special education in Hong Kong's international sector needs to be addressed in the near future. To this effect, a mandate from the government should be considered, asking all international schools to provide a certain number of SEN places. This would have a number of consequences in terms of changing physical facilities, staffing and curriculum delivery for those schools which currently do not provide SEN places. Furthermore, some kind of monitoring and quality

assurance mechanism would have to be put in place, but this should be feasible as a revision process seems to be already actively applied in the local education sector. Second, more comprehensive information about special education options for non-Cantonese speaking or non-Chinese-reading families needs to be forthcoming. This would require clearer publications of the types and number of SEN places available per school regardless of education sector. The medium of teaching used by each school would also have to be clearly stated. This would apply to all education levels, starting from the early childhood education years. Improvements in making more comprehensive information available would further assist to broaden the horizons among non-Cantonese speakers about local school options in special education. The proposed changes may not only provide significant improvements for individual students and their families but also for Hong Kong's economy as better understanding about and provision of (special) education in Hong Kong would more likely attract quality migrants. This is an important consideration in this highly competitive region. Hong Kong has the advantage of not having to consider vast regional disparities and of providing an education system which is comparatively small from a global perspective. Hence the above proposals are considered realistic and achievable.

This article has brought to light some practical challenges other cities, regions or countries might share in trying to implement inclusive education. The role of any government in this has been shown to be crucial. Government philosophy and implementation should apply to the entire, not only a part, of an education system. Foci toward improving Hong Kong's special education provision include more expertise leadership in special education, a mandates to ensure implementation in all education sectors, clear dissemination of details to benefit all end-users, and structured provision for staff and facility improvements. It is suggested that Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological theory may continue to serve as the theory framework to guide the vision for future improvements in Hong Kong's inclusive education regardless of education sector and level.

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