

Cultivating a Climate of Change for Inclusion in Hong Kong

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Introduction

It is a privilege to present this paper at the inaugural conference of the Centre (CSNSIE) to professionals from over thirty regions and countries, including many of our neighbors. I feel that our friendship started almost a year ago when delegates first contacted us regarding the conference. Perhaps I should be grateful to the unexpected outbreak of SARS and the many problems encountered, including the changing of the date for the event to take place. This gave me more chance to communicate with many of the conference participants beforehand. Nevertheless, I waited for the exciting moment of actual meeting everybody face-to-face. As the Chinese saying goes, “Having friends coming from afar, brings immense joy and happiness”.

The intention is that the conference and, indeed, the subsequent publication of the papers, will stimulate further collaborative activity and I look forward to more opportunities in future to work with delegates in the development of inclusive education worldwide.

The context

I was not on the original list of keynotes speakers. However, I responded to the call of the Committee for a voice from the “East”, and preferably from a female to balance the predominately male speakers. Also, I was considered the most suitable speaker to explain the development of inclusion in Hong Kong in order to set a positive tone for discussion in the conference.

CSNSIE was established as a self funded centre in July 2000, at a time critical to the inclusive move and when schools require support most as they are preparing for the dynamic changes involved in integrating students. As head of the Centre, I have witnessed how Hong Kong schools move rapidly from segregation to integration and inclusion. I have also participated in local applied research. Of greatest value to me has been the involvement in school-based workshops on a “Whole School Approach to Integration” for over 50 secondary and primary schools. When I discussed with teachers of different schools regarding the impact and value of inclusive education, I often got a unique set of responses, telling me clearly that the journey towards inclusive education is a unique experience to the teacher, school or system. I hope to share with you, in this paper, the unique story of Hong Kong and the unique features which have brought about some successes recently.

Hong Kong is a place full of contrasts and is very interesting for foreigners to visit. Small but densely populated, with limited natural resources yet, developed into the world’s trade and commercial centre, full of vitality and full of problems as well. Hong Kong is also an interesting place for studying about inclusive education and educational reform. To me, Hong Kong possesses almost all the factors you can think of that are considered important barriers to inclusion, highly competitive education

system, academic, examination driven curriculum, large class size, unsupportive teacher attitude, level of professional training, etc. These factors may explain in part, why Hong Kong has made limited progress after two decades of a policy on integration. Against such a background, how and why inclusion thrives is worth studying. In a short period of 7 years, after Hong Kong was reverted back to China in 1997, rapid development in integration took place. The review may well serve as a reference for educators of different countries.

I believe that most countries would wish to seek, at different stages of development, to include diverse learners in education and reduce exclusions. Hegarty has rightly pointed out that no country can afford to have an underclass of citizens (Heung, 1999). I also believe that there is no absolute prerequisite for implementing inclusive education. Efforts to integrate, however, often have to battle with competing resources, policies, ideology, value and strategies. Unless there are changes in these competing demands or forces, it is difficult to sustain the development of inclusive education. In the Hong Kong contexts, there are specific strategies employed to cultivate changes for inclusion.

Definition issues

Before I discuss the strategies, there is a need to clarify the meaning of the terms “integration” and ‘inclusion’, which appear to have been used interchangeably. Vislie (2003) cautioned that, after Salamanca, the two terms have a different focus. While integration was the main issue on the agenda when the international community and national governments discussed how to promote the right of disabled persons to an appropriate education until the end of the 1980s, inclusion has captured the field during the 1990s. Inclusion involves a shift of policy focus, from special education to responding to the diversity within a common school for all students. It is not just about disability but concerns a school culture which welcomes and celebrates differences and recognizes individual needs (Booth et al., 2000). Inclusion is seen to involve the identification and minimizing of barriers to learning and participation in a school’s culture, policy and practices.

Background: Segregation vs. Integration

I shall start with a brief review of the policy and educational provisions for students with learning needs and the extent of segregation in Hong Kong for the past twenty years. Hong Kong has had an official integration policy in place since 1977. The White paper entitled “Integrating the disabled into the community: A united effort” strongly endorsed the idea that disabled children should be encouraged to receive education in ordinary schools (Hong Kong Government, 1977). Whilst there are integration policies over time, unfortunately, there are also policies which support segregation. In the two decades from 1977, segregated education provision has expanded rapidly. There is little evidence to suggest that integration has been a central element in the planning of special education (Board of Education, 1996).

From the publication of the 1977 White Paper onwards, the number of special schools established in Hong Kong has more than doubled, and the number of disabled students placed in these provisions has increased four times (Yung, 1996). The categories created for children with disabilities in special schools also increased. Besides children with sensory and physical impairments- blind, deaf, and other physical handicaps, as well as those who were mentally impaired in varying degrees, there were those labelled as maladjusted, mildly handicapped, and low-learning

ability children (Board of Education, 1996). At the recommendation of the Education Commission Report No. 4 (1990), practical schools and skills opportunity schools were established which created two more labels of children, 'unmotivated towards academic studies' and 'children with learning difficulties' respectively. The percentage of school children in segregated provision (i.e. special schools and special classes) for the past ten years, 1988-1998, is shown in Fig. 1 below. As can be seen, the percentage is increasing and by 1998, 1.01 percent of children of the total school age population were placed in segregated provision. That percentage would be higher if resource classes were counted as a form of segregated provision.

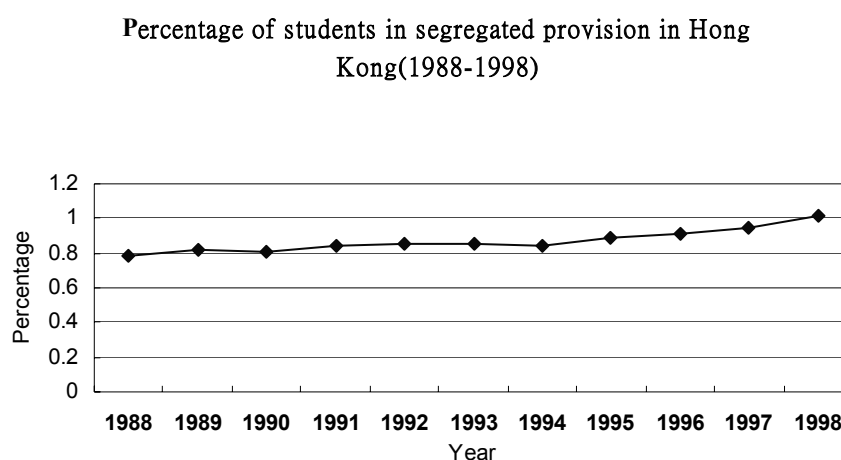


Fig. 1 Percentage of students in segregated provision in Hong Kong (1988-1998)
(Adapted from Yung, 1996)

In 1998, the actual number of students enrolled in the 74 special schools in Hong Kong was 9,513. Besides, there were 648 resource classes for children with learning difficulties, 8 ordinary schools operating 17 special classes (nine for the hearing impaired and eight for the visually impaired) where 154 students enrolled (Heung, 1999).

As for integrated provision, the Hong Kong Government has often considered special classes and resource classes in public-sector schools established in the 1980s a form of integrated education (Hong Kong Government, 1981). Students attending these classes were withdrawn, for part of the day or the whole day, and whether they could be considered integrated is subject to debate. An attempt was made by the Government in 1985, to introduce integration in ordinary kindergartens and by 1994, 18 kindergartens providing a total of 120 places participated with financial support from the government (Hong Kong Government, 1996). Clearly, it was in 1997 that more strenuous effort was made in integrating students when the pilot project was introduced. In 1998, 21 schools participated in the project with 125 students with disabilities included. In addition, 23,962 students with various kinds of disabilities were enrolled in ordinary schools (Crawford, Heung, Yip, & Yuen, 1999).

The Board of Education (BoE) Sub-committee on Special Education set up to review local special education in 1994 concluded in its report (Board of Education, 1996) that Hong Kong had only paid lip service to integration with little substantive action to advance the cause. The report made a further comment that integration of students with disabilities remained an aspiration rather than a reality in Hong Kong.

The Wind of Change: Pilot Project on Integration (1997-1999)

In 1997, the Chief Executive Officer of Hong Kong, Mr. Tung Chi-Hwa announced the launch of a two-year pilot project on integration which, as history can prove, has sparked off the wind of change. Although the pilot project has been criticized for its abrupt introduction and the lack of long-term planning, it has triggered off immense attention and debate among educators and the public at large. Never has Hong Kong been so concerned about implementing integration in practice. To a certain extent, these concerns and debate may become the driving force for reviewing long-standing educational practices and preparing Hong Kong for more substantial changes.

The pilot project aimed to try out in a number of selected schools a “Whole School Approach to Integration” for pupils with (a) mild grade mental handicap, or (b) sensory impairments (auditory or visual), or (c) physical handicap or (d) autistic disorder (normal IQ range). For schools taking more than five students with disabilities, an additional Resource Teacher would be provided. Each school would receive a non-recurrent grant of \$50,000 and an annual grant of \$1,000 for each disabled pupil. Besides, advisory support from educational psychologists and the Inspectorate was also provided. Even with this high level of support, only seven primary and two secondary schools out of a total of 1300 schools (Hong Kong Education Department, 2002) were willing to join and a total of 48 pupils were integrated.

The then Education Department clearly specified, in an operational guide for the pilot schools, details of the mode of operation and the range of teaching techniques suggested. In essence, the Education Department advocated for a system approach involving all school personnel so as to create an inclusive school culture. To take care of programme planning, an individualized Educational Plan Committee was to be formed to monitor the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) formulated for each pupil in the project. Classroom-based support services, for example co-teaching, co-operative learning and peer tutoring were encouraged and schools were expected to make accommodation in curriculum, instructional strategies, and modify evaluation.

The pilot project was evaluated by a team from the Hong Kong Institute of Education. The findings showed that students integrated made satisfactory progress in their academic work and social interaction (Crawford et al., 1999). Although some weaknesses in curriculum tailoring and instructional adaptation were identified, the pilot project sent out a strong message to the public at large that integration worked in Hong Kong. Teachers and principals participated in the project affirmed the success they had experienced. The pilot project also enabled local educators to learn from practice what strategies should be used to effectively prepare students for integration and not to rely solely on borrowed practices from the west.

After the pilot project, there was an unprecedented move in integrating pull-out services by the Government. In 2000, the Education Department announced the

mainstreaming of practical schools and skills opportunity schools in support of the worldwide trend of integration (Board of Education, 2000). In the same year, the Department also initiated an “Intensive Remedial Teaching Program” for students with learning difficulties in primary schools (Education Department, 2001). This program will enable almost 9,000 primary school children in formerly pull out resource classes to study with their peers in a co-teaching mode. At the same time, the number of schools joining the integration project has increased, first to 21 in 1999, 40 in 2000, 65 in 2001 and 116 in 2003.

The education reform movement

In 2000-2001, Hong Kong launches its education and curricular reform that has had by far the greatest impact on system changes. The reform attempts to draft the education blueprint for the 21st century which aims at all round development of students and life long learning. The focus of reform is to promote diversity to enable schools to develop according to their strengths and characteristics, to implement flexible and diversified curricula to meet student’s different learning needs, and to provide multiple learning channels for students to choose according to their abilities and aptitudes (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2001). Central to the spirit of the reform is the shift of the focus from learning for examination to learning for generic skills and whole-person development. These principles, if achieved successfully, would bring about fundamental changes in the long run that are in line with the development of inclusive schooling in Hong Kong.

At the same time, from the original focus on integrating students with disabilities in 1997, Hong Kong has shifted quickly to the focus of responding to diversity and individual difference in mainstream education. In 2004, a new funding mode will be launched and schools will be encouraged to operate Student Support Teams to meet the individual needs of students in the school through setting up a school policy on catering for diversity, systematic record-keeping, monitoring and evaluation of school-based programmes, peer support and co-operative learning.

Pedagogy for Inclusion

With the evidence and statistics presented above, can one jump to a conclusion that Hong Kong has achieved inclusive education? Here I am reminded by Vislie (2003) that the efforts of many countries in “Redesigning regular education support “ in the 1970s did not foster inclusive education, but rather the expansion of special education thoughts and practices into regular education. She cautioned that the real challenge for inclusive education is not the presence of special schools, but the reproduction of special education paradigms and rituals in regular education. The critical question is whether schools are willing to make changes to accommodate different learners and not viewing the child as “different’ or “having difficulties”.

It would appear to me that the heart of the issue is ‘inclusive learning’ (O’Brien, 2000) which demonstrates to individuals that they can learn and supports them in understanding how they learn. As pointed out by Corbett (2001), many children come to school with problems. Whether schools are willing to recognize the problem and respond sensitively to them is what constitutes inclusive education. Such a highly developed level of inclusiveness would require that schools and teachers work consistently on improving and adapting their pedagogy that relates to individual needs and school resources.

Effective pedagogy is hence central to inclusive education. Teachers need to be prepared to respond sensitively to the needs of learners through a combination of pedagogic responses which recognize individual needs and which offer more intensive and explicit teaching for pupils with different patterns and degrees of learning difficulties (Lewis & Norwich, 2000). However, research has shown that many teachers find differentiation difficult, intimidating, and over demanding. Preparing teachers for differentiation and accommodation in the inclusive classrooms with sundry abilities and disabilities, learning styles and needs could be a formidable task.

A new development

Worldwide, there is an escalating call to re-conceptualize teacher education in light of the widespread dissatisfaction among general and special education teachers to teach students of varying disabilities in the inclusive classroom (Sherry & Spooner, 2000; Sindelar, 1995; Villa, Thousand, & Chapple, 1996). In Hong Kong, the present system of preparing teachers for separate roles may no longer be functional or adequate. With inclusion, teachers have to be prepared comprehensively in content areas, diversification, accommodation and adaptation strategies for learners of varying background, learning styles, abilities and disabilities.

In concluding, I wish to share with you a recent effort of the Institute and the Centre in designing a Bachelor of Education (Special Needs) degree for serving teachers in inclusive classrooms. This B Ed (SN) aims to equip teachers with a parameter of critical knowledge and skills needed to educate the wide spectrum of students. I hope this degree will contribute to sustaining efforts for inclusion.

The experience of Hong Kong appears to show that integration involves years of struggle in removing blocks and barriers which have hindered the participation of some students in the education system. It also involves reorganizing learning, assessment and teaching to enable individual students to develop their potentials. These efforts are worth pursuing, as they will benefit students with and without disabilities. Educators in Hong Kong would not consider pursuing inclusion so as to join the bandwagon. It is not a swing of the pendulum towards equity or equality in education verses excellence. It is quality education which most educators in Hong Kong would strive for.

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