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# Transition for a Student With Special Educational Needs From Primary to Secondary School in Hong Kong\*

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In this paper the authors employ a case study approach to investigate the transition process for a student with special educational needs from a Hong Kong subsidised primary school into a secondary school. An analysis of transcripts from individual and focus group interviews with the student, his parents, his 4 primary teachers and his 10 secondary teachers, as well as government documents and notes of school observations, indicated that a lack of formal procedures for supporting a student's transition can result in a range of significant difficulties. The discussion focuses on the urgent need to develop strategic guidelines at a systemic level within Hong Kong, with a much greater focus on a collaborative school approach rather than the current overreliance on the parents to lead this process.

**Keywords:** transition, Hong Kong, parents, students, special educational needs, secondary schooling, support, collaboration

## Introduction

While the inclusion of students with special educational needs (SEN) has increased considerably in many regions in primary schools, inclusion in secondary schools has been enacted more slowly (Humphrey & Ainscow, 2006). Nevertheless, a majority of students with SEN who have been included in primary schools are now transitioning to mainstream secondary schools (McCauley, 2009), either included in regular classes or within a self-contained special class. There are, however, many concerns and difficulties faced with inclusion in high schools (Duncan, 2012; Rice, Frederickson, & Seymour, 2011). The quality and efficacy of support provided varies between schools (Li, Bassett, & Hutchinson, 2009; Maras & Aveling, 2006) and frequently declines at the critical transition period from primary into secondary schools (Martinez, Aricak, Graves, Peters-Myszak, & Nellis, 2011).

## *Collaboration Between Primary and Secondary Schools*

The generic transition issues for moving between primary and secondary schools that have been identified include, for example, a lack of communication between or across agencies, student involvement, individualisation and appropriateness of the transition plan, and district obligations (Etscheidt, 2006). Yet a systematic review of all published

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research in the area by Jones, Rodger, Ziviani, and Boyd (2009) was unable to identify sufficient evidence to guide understanding of the pertinent transition factors explicitly relevant for students with SEN. Further, although some approaches and models of transition practice (such as ensuring consistency in policies across local districts and agencies through collaborative planning) seem to help foster positive progress, others (such as a lack of time for participation or a lack of reimbursement for attending transition meetings) have been seen to hinder the process (Rous, Myers, & Stricklin, 2007).

In a *National Longitudinal Transition Study (2)* in the United States (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Levine, & Marder, 2007) the key importance of schools in providing information about services for students with SEN during transitions was noted. Continuity of support, collaboration between primary and secondary schools, flexibility in response by staff, as well as providing a safe haven for vulnerable students, have been deemed central for successful transition (Maras & Aveling, 2006). A confluence of normative biological, psychological, and social changes such as puberty, and social and emotional development is, in addition, especially heightened for students who rely on using specialised assistive technologies (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006).

The strength of the links between the secondary school and their feeder primary schools, and the degree of collaboration, has been considered indispensable in ensuring effective transition processes (McCauley, 2010). According to McCauley (2010), some schools dedicate persons to take on this role; in contrast, others rely on the efforts of proactive teachers to establish their own processes based on need. The sustainability, difficulty, and inequity of such a tenuous approach are apparent, with some students with SEN undoubtedly receiving excellent support while others are left to their own devices (Yadav, O'Reilly, & Karim, 2010).

### *Academic, Social and Emotional Needs*

Bridging the academic gap between primary and secondary schools, modifying curricula, and providing an atmosphere in which all students can succeed is challenging for secondary teachers (Humphrey & Ainscow, 2006). In particular, students with SEN continue to need explicit instruction in self-management strategies throughout high school, as well as in the primary school setting, to enable them to cope when seeking additional support from teachers and obtaining appropriate accommodations to curricula and pedagogy (Carter, Swedeen, Moss, & Pesko, 2010). In addition, the bureaucratic nature of high schools is often not supportive of incoming students with weak social and academic preparation (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006), especially in schools that place a strong emphasis on academic outcomes, such as those found in Hong Kong (Forlin, 2010).

For many students with SEN, the social aspect of inclusion is more problematic than academic issues (Groom & Rose, 2005). Parents report that their children with SEN may have a negative attitude toward school and exhibit a low self-esteem manifesting in pseudo illness, which is used as an excuse for truancy (Groom & Rose, 2005). Yet the inclusion of students in a school community is strongly linked to the emergence of positive self-esteem and is fundamental to the development of inclusion (Ainscow, 2005; Pearce, 2009). Specifically, the first year of high school is suggested to be a critical period of self-esteem reorganisation for low achievers (Humphrey, Charlton, & Newton, 2004).

McCauley (2010) investigated Irish teachers' perceptions of the impact that transition-ing from primary to secondary school would have on students with SEN. Although the number of respondents was fairly small ( $N = 38$ ), the vast majority indicated that they felt that students with SEN would experience greater academic difficulty than their peers in

coping with the transition. They indicated that the main difficulties faced would be with the curriculum, the number of subjects taught, the amount and number of information being imparted, the complexity and abstract nature of many academic concepts, and the increased demands of interacting with this information. Regarding the effects on social and emotional adjustment, the teachers considered the issues to be the same as their typically developing peers, but believed that those with SEN would be affected to a greater degree.

There are numerous differences in the academic and discipline focus of schooling in secondary schools compared to primary schools, as well as in the structure of classes, timetables, and social expectations (Sin, 2001). For learners with SEN, the change of academic pace and social contacts may pose additional problems during transition (Dockrell & Lindsay, 2007). Students who struggle academically are at particular risk of developing a negative perspective to learning (Humphrey et al., 2004) and for dropping out of secondary school (Bear, Kortering, & Braziel, 2006). This is noticeably evident in Hong Kong where the number of mainstream students who fail to show up at school for a prolonged period, without a legitimate excuse, during the first 3 years of secondary school, has risen 45%, from 1035 in 2005–2006 to about 1500 in 2007–2008. This means almost 6 in 1000 students have stopped attending class (Nip, 2009).

Academic inclusion is one of the major goals of inclusion, nevertheless high school students with SEN have been found to exhibit poor academic achievement and more behavioural problems as compared with their peers without disabilities (Donlevy, 2004). These are also two of the strongest predictors for not completing high school (Bear et al., 2006). Transitioning into a secondary school in Hong Kong for students with SEN is occurring alongside increased competition for a falling number of students due to a reduction in the number of births. Secondary schools, therefore, may be reluctant to encourage the inclusion of students at risk who may drop out of school or lower a school's reputation, which in turn might discourage other students from enrolling (Nip, 2009).

Inclusive educational approaches within the Asia-Pacific region have challenged the traditional segregationist approaches that have been considered the norm for many decades (Forlin, 2010) and increased the number of students with SEN transitioning from primary into secondary schooling. The implementation of such an ideological rights-based approach within a conservative system such as Hong Kong has, nonetheless, gained impetus. As a signature to the international declarations that promote non-discrimination through inclusion (Forlin, 2010), Hong Kong has adopted a whole-school approach (WSA) to inclusion (Sin, 2010) that encourages mainstream schools to accept children with SEN (Forlin, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c; Forlin & Sin, 2010; Sin, Tsang, Poon, & Lai, 2010).

Although relatively slow to gain momentum, there has recently been a large increase in the number of schools adopting this philosophy of including students with SEN (Forlin, 2010). The policy was first initiated in 1997 as an *integrated education program*, yet by the end of that decade only 16 primary and five secondary schools were voluntarily involved. An additional approach, with a new funding mode, focusing on a *WSA to cater for diversity*, was also initiated in 2003–2004 (Forlin & Lian, 2008; Sin, 2010). By the 2007–2008 school year, a total of 77 schools, consisting of 39 primary and 38 secondary, were participating in the integrated education program, with further schools involved in the WSA to cater for diversity. In total, 60% of all government primary schools (312 of 518) and 7% of secondary schools (32 of 541) in 2007–2008 had become involved with including students with SEN (Education Bureau [EDB], 2008).

By the 2009–2010 school year, this had increased rapidly to a total of 633 mainstream schools applying for additional funding or resources for including students with SEN. In

total, 5810 primary students (out of a total of 344,748 students; i.e., 1.68%) and 2950 secondary students (out of a total of 481,188 students; i.e. 0.61%) with intellectual or physical disabilities, visual or hearing impairment, ASD, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, or speech and language impairment, were included in public sector mainstream schools. As students reach the end of their primary years, it is apparent that due to the larger number of students included in primary schools there will be a rapid increase in the number of these students transitioning into secondary schools.

In 2007, specific measures were proposed for enhancing the education services for students with SEN, including better facilitating the smooth interface between primary and secondary education (Rehabilitation Advisory Committee, 2007). Being unable to locate any research evidence on the outcome of the implementation or success of these transition measures for students with SEN, from primary to secondary schools in Hong Kong, this research, therefore, forms an initial investigation as the first stage to considering policy and practices that need to be instigated to ensure that all learners receive appropriate and effective support during this transition period. The research question guiding this study was, 'From the perspectives of the student, his mother, his primary school teachers, and his receiving secondary school teachers, what were the major challenges encountered by the student and the schools in making the transition from primary to secondary school?'

## **Method**

### *Research Design*

An exploratory single case study design was employed as the procedure of inquiry to investigate the critical instance of transition issues for one representative case of a student with SEN in Hong Kong (Creswell, 2008). The case was an individual student who had transitioned from a government public sector mainstream primary to a similar secondary school within the previous 6 months. Audit techniques included structured and open-ended questions through interviews with individuals and focus groups; and a review of government documents. Focus questions for the case study were derived from the literature that addressed issues related to six key areas of transition: (a) procedure and timeline, (b) school transition support, (c) curriculum and pedagogy, (d) expectations, (e) adjustment, and (f) labelling. Examples of questions for each of these areas are given in the Appendix.

All interviews were undertaken in the separate schools, with times and rooms being organised by the schools. The parent (mother) attended the secondary school to be interviewed. Three interviewers participated in each focus group interview, with one leading the questioning and two recording the information using a rubric for the six key areas. Two interviewers undertook the individual interviews, with one questioning and the other recording. A research assistant recorded all interviews.

### *Procedure*

Six potential first year secondary school students were identified through a purposeful approach to a secondary school in Hong Kong that branded itself as an inclusive school. Each of the primary schools that these students came from were contacted by telephone, with a follow-up letter provided that outlined the research and invited them to participate. Final selection was based on the availability and willingness to be interviewed of the primary school staff who had taught the student during the transition period. Ethics clearance was granted by The Hong Kong Institute of Education's Human Research Ethics Committee, and written consent was acquired from all participants.

## Participants

One student, Lenny (pseudonym), was selected. Lenny was a 14-year-old boy attending the first year of a local government-funded secondary school in Hong Kong. He was considered to be physically big compared with his peers. Lenny's family consisted of his mother plus both his biological father and his new stepfather, all living together in the same flat. His stepfather was seen as very nurturing and caring. Lenny did not seem to have much engagement with his biological father. He had one younger brother attending primary school. According to his mother, the family was financially secure with a stable, reasonable level of income, allowing them to employ a part-time tutor after school to help Lenny with his schoolwork. Lenny was very keen about playing football and also spent considerable time playing computer games. Lenny experienced a number of behavioural challenges.

Lenny had been attending the secondary school for 9 months. He attended all regular classes for curricula areas and was taught by a range of male and female teachers. In addition, he participated in a year-level home room and was able to access additional support through a learning support room with a dedicated support teacher. All of Lenny's teachers were invited to participate in the interviews, with 10 teachers agreeing, including his home room and support teacher plus the school principal.

In the primary school Lenny participated in regular classes, undertaking lessons with a range of different teachers. Participants in the primary school interviews included the school principal, who had known Lenny throughout his primary schooling, Lenny's Year 4 and Year 6 home room and class teachers, the school support teacher, and the school social worker.

## Data Analysis

Data were collected through four individual interviews with the two male principals, the student's mother, and the student. In addition, four focus group interviews with the student's teachers from the primary school (one group,  $n = 4$ ) and secondary school (four groups,  $n = 10$ ) were undertaken. All government documents related to transition were reviewed, and in-school observation was undertaken within the secondary school on three separate occasions.

All interviews were audiotaped with the permission of participants. Individual interviews ranged from 30 to 60 minutes, and focus group interviews ranged from 25 to 50 minutes. The data were transcribed, described, analysed, and interpreted by all three researchers to confirm the key issues associated with the transition process. Data analysis was concurrent with the data collection phase, allowing the researchers to observe, think, test, and revise the data. An iterative procedure was employed whereby initial data shaped subsequent data collection. From this procedure the transition process was reviewed from the perspective of the six identified key areas.

## Results

The results to the research question guiding this study are presented in two sections related to the six key areas of transition identified a priori. In the first section, procedural and timeline information is provided. This includes descriptive information about Lenny's schooling experiences: primary schooling, the transition from primary school, transition to secondary school, and secondary schooling are described. In the second section, findings in relation to the remaining five key areas of transition, namely, school transition support, curriculum and pedagogy, expectations, adjustment, and labelling, are presented.

### *Transition Procedure and Timeline*

**Primary Schooling.** According to his mother, Lenny attended two primary schools. One during Grade 1, the second for Grades 2 to 7. No information was available from his first primary school. The second primary school reported that no records were forwarded from the first school. His mother showed the new school his first school report that indicated that Lenny had satisfactory achievement and no behavioural issues. On entering his second school the teachers reported that, although his homework was always good, his class work was weak and his examination results were poor, requiring him to attend the Intensive Remedial Teaching Program in the school. It was not until his third year of primary schooling that a medical report identified Lenny as having Asperger syndrome. In this second primary school setting, Lenny was considered to be ill-mannered toward his teachers and he had difficulty with social interactions with his peers. He was prone to losing his temper, and was not socially accepted by his classmates. Cases of him bullying others and also of himself being bullied were noted, although he would always apologise after he had cooled down from losing his temper.

**Transition From Primary School.** According to the primary school principal, there was no government policy or guidelines on transition issues in Hong Kong, but there were established practices regarding the role of primary schools in enabling the allocation of secondary school placements. The expected procedure was for all Primary 5 students (i.e., during their second last year in primary school) to take school-based secondary place allocation examinations. These were marked by the school and the grades were submitted to the EDB. The EDB then used this information to confirm secondary school allocations. The teachers advised parents about their child's ability and made suggestions for the level of secondary school that they might apply for. In Hong Kong there are three bands of schools, with Band 1 catering for the higher academic learners, Band 2 for those in the middle range, and Band 3 offering places to students with the lowest academic performance. Parents make up to 30 choices of secondary schools and submit these through their primary school to the EDB. Final decisions regarding school placement are made by the EDB, depending on a matching mechanism with regard to student rank, school achievement, parental choice and availability of places.

For children identified with SEN, parents may either follow the aforementioned transition procedures or they may look for a school that better meets their child's needs. This allows parents to select from a range of special schools or secondary schools that promote themselves as catering for diversity. Some secondary schools organise their own promotion seminars to attract students with SEN, and the primary school teachers indicated that they would disseminate this information to the parents.

In Lenny's case, his mother said that she chose to look for the school herself, beginning the search when Lenny was still in Primary 4. She attended a number of school seminars and took part in many school visits, talking with the teachers to understand more about their curriculum and philosophy to see if her son would fit in. She was particularly keen to find out whether the school would be prepared to meet Lenny's needs and whether the teachers seemed sensitive and willing to accommodate his special challenges. Lenny's primary school teachers said they were not involved in organising any of these visits, although they did offer advice and recommendations for appropriate segregated special schools. The primary school teachers strongly recommended a special school placement for Lenny, but his mother insisted on Lenny attending a regular secondary school. Thus, the selection of a suitable secondary school for Lenny was the sole domain of the mother.



**Transition Into Secondary School.** Likewise, according to the secondary school principal, there were no formal structures in place for collaboration or contact between primary and secondary schools during transitions. Once Lenny had enrolled in the secondary school, the primary school could forward a case report about him, although they must first gain the written permission of the parents to do this. Usually dissemination of these reports is coordinated by the EDB, with the primary schools submitting the report and the EDB passing it on to the relevant secondary school. The principal, however, reported that no report had been forwarded for Lenny. During the summer break, prior to the start of secondary school, the EDB informed all schools of the number of students with SEN who had accepted places in their schools, and extra funding was allocated accordingly. This was when the school was officially advised that Lenny would be joining them.

In Lenny's case, though, once the school received his enrolment, one of the secondary school teachers explained that she knew his primary school teacher and through this connection was able to organise a telephone discussion between Lenny's primary learning support teacher and the secondary learning support teacher. Even though the secondary school had not received any formal information at this stage, this discussion enabled the school to start preparing for Lenny.

The secondary school teachers indicated that they organised an orientation day for all Secondary 1 students and their parents. During this day they arranged interviews with the families of any students who had been identified as having SEN. As the teachers said that they knew that Lenny had SEN they organised an interview with his parents. The secondary school had a learning support team, and this team met to discuss Lenny's needs and to prepare a summary of these for all other colleagues. A 3-day camp for student orientation was offered, in which Lenny participated. A bridging course was also offered as a summer school, which Lenny attended.

**Secondary Schooling.** Initially on entering the secondary school, Lenny's teachers reported that his behaviour concerning bullying, being ill-mannered toward his teachers, and having difficulty with social interactions continued. He was considered socially immature for his age. Lenny frequently lost control and was self-centred. His personal hygiene was of a low standard. There were cases of verbal bullying but no physical violence. Some students were not overly accepting of his behavioural problems, and his achievement was below average. Although his teachers reported that he was friendly and outgoing at times, some behaviours were considered inappropriate, especially his overt tactile approach with others. He presented himself as a class clown and enjoyed the attention he received because of this. In class he was talkative, continually raising his hand to ask questions and demanding the teacher's attention.

The teachers said that Lenny had great difficulty with organisational and self-management skills. He frequently overpacked his school bag, was disorganised, and generally did not complete his homework. He had poor self-control with a short attention span and had difficulty remaining on task. His language was often considered to be inappropriate, and he frightened other students with his size and boisterous behaviour. He exhibited emotional conflicts over the use of computers, speaking bad language in both Chinese and English. Lenny had difficulty following school and classroom rules and would easily become angry in response to minor incidents, such as when a peer borrowed his pencil without asking.

According to the principal, and the learning support teacher, the parents of other children frequently complained about Lenny's behaviour, saying that he would scream in the classroom, disturb its structure, and prevent the other children from learning. He had

a strong temper and would throw things if angry, such as throwing his chair or desk on the floor. When he calmed down, though, he would apologise and attempt restitution (e.g., picking up the things he had thrown away).

A range of support structures were offered to Lenny once he started secondary school. These included the involvement of the learning support teacher and the development of an individualised education program with input from an educational psychologist, an EDB special educational needs officer, and his class teacher. Lenny was enrolled in a student–teacher mentorship program and a secondary buddy peer program. In addition, he received homework support, after-school tutorial classes, curriculum differentiation, a multisensory approach, access to a resource class, counselling, and extra time for examinations, which were undertaken in a separate room.

### *School Transition Support*

The transition for Lenny from primary into secondary school appears to have happened in an ad hoc way, which, according to his mother, left her with the major role in organising this process. There was no planned procedure for dialogue between the primary and secondary schools, and if there had not been a personal connection between teachers from Lenny's primary and the secondary school, then no interchange would have occurred. Both schools were independent in planning their exit and entry procedures, which occurred outside any direction from the government system. Selection of a secondary school for Lenny was family-based, with the mother identifying possible options and then pursuing them. There was no support process in place at the primary school regarding providing assistance in Lenny's transition to a regular secondary school.

### *Curriculum and Pedagogy*

The primary school reported that they endeavoured to modify the curriculum for Lenny as much as possible, although, as all students needed to complete examinations that would determine their secondary schooling, they were constrained in how much they could do. In Lenny's case, the chosen secondary school was geared to take students with SEN because it was a nominated WSA catering for diversity. It also acted as a Resource Centre WSA (see Forlin & Rose, 2010, for a review of the role of these schools in Hong Kong), which meant that it provided support in curriculum and pedagogy and shared its resources with other schools that included learners with SEN. Thus, this secondary school was well prepared and experienced in being able to provide appropriate curriculum support for Lenny. Modifications to the curriculum for Lenny were made by the class teachers under the guidance of the learning support teacher. The teachers reported that they had trialed a variety of pedagogies, including co-teaching and peer observations and mentoring, in order to better meet Lenny's needs. They considered that Lenny's language skills were well developed and he was bilingual, being fluent in both Cantonese (the local dialect) and English. Consequently, he was able to do well in the English class with no modifications required.

### *Expectations*

At a personal level, there were many issues for Lenny and his family regarding different expectations for his schooling. In primary school, the staff felt that Lenny's mother had great difficulty accepting that Lenny had a low IQ and also learning difficulties that required a special education solution. This led to a poor home–school relationship that was further compounded by Lenny's mother saying she was rejected by the other parents, leaving



her isolated and alone. The parent–teacher association in the primary school complained fervently about Lenny’s poor behaviour in the classroom. Lenny’s mother also complained extensively to the EDB about Lenny’s treatment at the school. Government officials visited the school in an attempt to better understand the situation, resulting in Lenny being offered a place one day per week in a special school.

While the primary school teachers proposed a special school placement for Lenny, his mother expected him to attend a regular mainstream school. Thus Lenny’s mother took on the sole responsibility for identifying a suitable secondary school for Lenny to transition into. She said that she found this very time consuming and extremely stressful as she had to visit many schools and have many interviews with the principals before locating the current one. The whole process was protracted, spanning the last few years of Lenny’s primary school. While the secondary school reported that his behaviour was challenging, the teachers were proactive in dealing with the difficulties he faced and did not complain to, or blame, Lenny’s mother about it. In the secondary school, his teachers and his mother had similar expectations for Lenny, which helped a good parent–teacher relationship develop. His mother also reported that in the secondary school she was able to take part in activities with other parents from the school and that for the first time she herself felt included.

### *Adjustment*

From the mother’s perspective, the transition to secondary school made a big difference to Lenny’s life. The new school was very accepting of Lenny’s poor social skills, and the teachers were patient and listened to Lenny, taking proactive steps to support him. From the teachers’ perspective, they expressed positive attitudes toward accommodating Lenny’s needs and demonstrated a caring and concerned approach. Lenny’s mother was pleased that she received frequent telephone calls from his mentor teacher, and she considered that the home–school partnership was good. Lenny’s mother believed that he was much better accepted, the learning support team was helpful, and the whole-school support was very positive. Adjusting to secondary schooling had not been as challenging as she was anticipating due to the positive support she received from the school and the collaborative approach employed by the teachers. Lenny was also able to receive speech therapy. The teachers addressed Lenny’s individual needs through early identification and with intensive intervention including organisational support.

The teachers reported that when Lenny joined the school he still exhibited some quite challenging behaviours and adjustment problems due to his learning difficulties. By the end of his first year of secondary schooling, however, while still exhibiting some behavioural difficulties, Lenny had adjusted well to the new environment. He was active in all school games and had many friends from the senior classes. He was willing to learn in many subjects and was enthusiastic and energetic. He had very good English as a second language and was the top student in his class for this subject.

### *Labelling*

In the primary school, Lenny had been labelled as having Asperger syndrome, and severe challenging behaviours. According to his mother, all the staff, students, and parents knew about Lenny’s problems, and the labels preceded him in every class. At the secondary school, though, no one knew that Lenny had Asperger syndrome as the teachers said that they treated all students as individuals and did not label them. The school took in approximately one third of their intake of students with SEN, and the school philosophy

was to accept everyone as being different. Gradually, during the first year, Lenny began to change. The learning support team communicated closely with his parents, initially on a daily basis. The school and his parents collaborated on structuring a program to help him overcome his challenging behaviours. Lenny was provided with a self-study corner for reflection, and he learned to reflect and understand his difficulties and the consequences of his actions. He became enthusiastic, sociable and enjoyed his buddy relationship.

Lenny knew he had special needs, but this did not stop him from having lots of friends in his secondary school and enjoying learning and playing football. He particularly liked the lessons, saying that the teachers were good to him. During his first year he became independent in getting to school, travelling on several trains and buses. Lenny said that secondary school was best as he did a lot of subjects, including cooking and music, and he had been very successful in English.

## Discussion

With the increased number of primary schools adopting a WSA in Hong Kong, the number of students with SEN involved in transition to secondary schools is likely to follow the international trend and amplify rapidly in the next few years (McCauley, 2009). Support for transition is decisive if students with SEN are to achieve quality learning outcomes in regular secondary schools (Maras & Aveling, 2006). According to the review of government documentation, however, and in discussion with the principals, there seems to be no policy or consistent government process available in Hong Kong as yet for ensuring the support that is needed to assist students to make a successful transition between schools. Although many schools in other regions have been engaged in transition planning for a considerable time and have established their own detailed procedures for providing support (Etscheidt, 2006), this is a new experience for Hong Kong. Converse to the general trend that support declines with the transition from primary to secondary schooling (Martinez et al., 2011), the support that Lenny received in his secondary school was comprehensive and much greater than what was available in his primary school.

In Lenny's case, it seems that the procedure and timeline for the transition process relied almost totally on the good will of the individuals involved and in particular the leading role taken by Lenny's mother in preparing for this move. Although long-term planning, the involvement of all stakeholders, and particularly working closely with parents have been found to be essential elements for establishing appropriate transitions for students with SEN (Hartman, 2009), this did not occur for Lenny; yet his transition into the secondary school was considered successful by all involved. Even though the final transition was positive, Lenny's mother indicated that she found the process stressful and she felt very much alone throughout. In particular, the conflicting expectations between the primary teachers suggesting that Lenny should attend a special school and his mother's insistence that he would attend a regular secondary school meant that no support was provided in identifying a suitable secondary school.

School support for Lenny during the transition process was minimal, with the secondary school reporting that they had little school information upon which to prepare for Lenny's arrival. When Lenny first joined the secondary school, the teachers reported that his behaviours were very challenging and that he had great difficulty with social interactions with peers and teachers alike, frequently losing control and being very self-centred. Primary–secondary transition has been highlighted by parents (Ankeny, Wilkins, & Spain, 2009; Detwiler, 2008) and teachers (McCauley, 2010) as an especially traumatic time for students with SEN. Even though these behaviours seemed to have been apparent

in Lenny's primary school, the lack of support during the transition period may have heightened these difficulties for him starting in his new school. Once the secondary school had included Lenny, however, considerable support was made available to assist him in settling in to the new environment. Although the school's expectations for Lenny in the primary school had conflicted with his mother, as his teachers wanted him to access a special school, in the secondary school the expectations aligned with those of the family, in that Lenny would be accommodated within the regular class structure.

Lenny clearly required modification to the curricula in order to access the regular classroom. As found previously, though, by Li et al. (2009) and Maras and Aveling (2006), the amount and degree of support varied enormously between the schools he attended. The primary school indicated that they felt constrained with modifying the curricula due to the pressures placed on teachers for all children to sit examinations to attend higher levels of secondary schools. Although modifying the curricula in secondary schools has been found to be challenging (e.g., Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Humphrey & Ainscow, 2006), Lenny's secondary school, conversely, was firmly established with whole-school principles and was able to modify the curriculum to meet his needs. Further, as they already accepted a number of learners with SEN, the secondary school teachers were familiar with adopting inclusive pedagogies within the regular classrooms.

Even though the Hong Kong Government has adopted a WSA to inclusion, with all regular schools being encouraged to accept children with SEN (Forlin & Sin, 2010), inclusion can still be a challenge (Forlin, 2007a, 2007b, 2010). In this instance, adjustment to the secondary school was reported to be less traumatic than expected. The school's positive attitude toward including learners with SEN, the regular contact made by the school with the parents, the acceptance of Lenny by his teachers and peers, and the general willingness by all staff to look for ways to accommodate his needs were all considered to be effective strategies for including Lenny. Labelling was not an issue for Lenny in the secondary school given that, with the large numbers of students with SEN and the positive attitude promoted throughout the school, all learners were accepted regardless of the diversity of their needs. Gradually, with considerable support from his teachers, Lenny became more settled and independent and better able to access the curriculum.

It appears from Lenny's experience that the current process for transition in Hong Kong occurs in an ad hoc way and places too much emphasis on the responsibility of the parent. There is also no collaboration between the feeder and receiving schools. The involvement of a range of peripatetic paraprofessionals, such as psychologists, social workers, occupational therapists, speech therapists, among others, and interdisciplinary school staff, such as the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCo) and subject leaders, in collaboration with the parents in a multi-agency approach to dealing with transition, has been found to be essential (Barnes, 2008). For Lenny, even though there was contact with the parents, the secondary school staff indicated that they would have welcomed greater collaboration with the primary school. A range of support staff were engaged in planning once he joined the secondary school, but they had not been involved during the transition process.

## Conclusion

It is apparent that there is currently no policy or explicit guidelines, and a deficiency of data, available on transitions for students with SEN from primary into secondary schools in Hong Kong. It seems critical that this transition period needs to be managed carefully in order to ensure an effective outcome and appropriate support for learners with SEN.

A greater focus on family involvement and between-school collaboration is unmistakably needed in Hong Kong as this appears to be absent at present. According to Jindal-Snape, Douglas, Topping, Kerr, and Smith (2006), transition planning for students needs to be timely and planned and involve long-term strategic decision-making. Leaving schools to determine their own policy and practices without any guidelines, training, or support for teachers does not seem to auger well for effective transitions for the anticipated growing number of students expected to move from primary into secondary schools in the coming years in Hong Kong.

Yet for systems wanting to provide support and direction for this transition, there is already a wealth of available resources that could relatively easily be adapted to meet the unique cultural contexts and localised requirements in this region. There are many websites where materials can be accessed that range from a framework for student transition support (e.g., Special Education Support Service, 2011) to transition planning (Western Australian Department of Education, 2011), to transition guidelines (Devon County Council, 2002), to strategies and activities for students (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2000), among many other useful sites. Gradually, stakeholders are also beginning to develop booklets to provide guidance to parents focused specifically on transition for students with SEN (e.g., Winn, Hay, Parmenter, & Riches, 2010), although such information can provide only general advice due to the diversity of student needs.

This exploratory single case study provides an initial investigation into the critical issue of transition for a student with SEN from primary to secondary schooling in Hong Kong. The results are obviously limited by this purposeful selection of only one student and will not be statistically viable or valid. Further, the data may not be generalisable and should be interpreted with caution as many individual variables may have contributed to the specific findings for this case. More in-depth research is now warranted to explore issues for a wider range of students with SEN transitioning into different levels of schooling in various socioeconomic areas throughout Hong Kong and with different levels of family and school support. To benefit all students it is essential that those with SEN have equitable chances for effective transition into secondary schools, which will in turn help to facilitate their long-term engagement in school. Based on this case study, it appears that, at a minimum, this requires immediate and efficient development of strategic guidelines at a systemic level with a much greater focus on a transdisciplinary approach with collaboration between schools and with the parents, rather than the current overreliance on the parents to lead this process.

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## APPENDIX

### Examples of Questions Related to the Identified Six Key Areas of Transition for Focus Group Interviews

- (1) Procedure and timeline (e.g., When were you aware that Lenny was joining your school?);



- (2) School support (e.g., What type of support were you able to offer Lenny? Did this change over time?);
- (3) Curriculum and pedagogy (e.g., What modifications or adaptations were needed for Lenny to access the curriculum?);
- (4) Expectations (e.g., Did your expectations coincide with those of the parent?);
- (5) Adjustment (e.g., How well did Lenny adjust on entry to your school? Across the duration of his time with you?); and
- (6) Labelling (e.g., Once Lenny was identified as having Asperger syndrome did this label impact on his acceptance or on your expectations?).