

SPECIAL EDUCATION PERSPECTIVES

Integration to Inclusion in Hong Kong: Not an Easy Progression[†]

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Abstract

This article describes the evolution of inclusive education in Hong Kong, moving from segregation via integration to inclusion. The outside influence of education policies and trends from Britain, Australia, and the United States are identified, and the current situation is described. In particular, obstacles that are encountered on the route to inclusion are compared with those found in other countries. These obstacles include large class size, teachers' often negative attitudes, parents' expectations, teachers' lack of expertise for adapting the curriculum and for providing differentiated teaching, and ongoing conflicts between the notion of 'inclusive schooling for all' and the 'academic standards agenda'.

Keywords: inclusion; Hong Kong; special education

It is now more than 25 years since education authorities in Europe, Australia, Britain, and the United States (US) espoused the intention to follow the recommendations of the Salamanca Statement (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 1994) and move beyond 'integration' of children with special needs to embrace the much broader notion of inclusion. It is fair to ask how successful this has been, and how other countries and regions that came to the inclusive education movement somewhat later are progressing — for example, Hong Kong.

Progress Overseas

Several studies of inclusive education in Australia in recent years have tended to reveal a less than satisfactory implementation of inclusive practices in some schools (e.g., Anderson & Boyle, 2015; Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, 2013; Children and Young People with Disability Australia [CYDA], 2019a; de Bruin, 2019; Poed, Cologon, & Jackson, 2017). A general finding is that most teachers still feel ill-prepared for teaching students with special needs within the context of the mainstream core curriculum. Too many students with special needs and disabilities are still being refused full-time admission to their local school (up to 40% in some regions), or if admitted are not really included in several curriculum areas and in some classroom activities. Students who are on the autism spectrum and students with emotional and behavioural difficulties are most likely to be excluded. When interviewed, some parents report that their child with a disability was bullied in

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the mainstream classroom, did not feel happy at school, and did not receive adequate support for learning. As Anderson and Boyle (2015) concluded, there is still a long way to go before Australia achieves truly effective inclusive schooling for all students.

These findings are very similar indeed to those obtained in Britain, where inadequate funding for inclusion and a poor response from some schools are still causing much unrest for parents of children with disabilities (e.g., Ainscow, 2019; Bartley, 2017; Keer, 2019). Less than satisfactory implementation has also been found in 12 other European countries surveyed by Inclusion Europe (2018). In these countries, provision was reported to be most inadequate for students with severe and complex disabilities.

Hong Kong initiated inclusive education much later than Australia and Britain, as will be explained later, so it is pertinent to ask if schools in Hong Kong have managed to avoid some of the problems identified above.

Hong Kong

First it is important to describe the demographic and cultural context into which the earlier movement of integration of students with special needs and disabilities was introduced. The nature of the school system in Hong Kong and many of the traditions associated with education tend to differ somewhat from Australia, Britain, and the US.

Hong Kong is now a Special Administrative Region of China with a population of approximately 7,400,000. The official languages are Chinese (mainly Cantonese) and English. There are currently 518 primary schools, 527 secondary schools, and 61 special schools (down from 70 in 1982; Education Bureau Hong Kong, 2019). In 2018, approximately 376,000 children attended primary school and 345,000 students attended secondary schools. Special schools cater for approximately 8,000 students each year (about 1.12% of all students), and this number has remained fairly stable for the past 5 years (Education Bureau Hong Kong, 2019). In Hong Kong, an additional 7.8% of students in public sector mainstream primary schools are identified as having special needs, with another 8.6% in secondary schools (Hong Kong Legislative Council, 2019a). Since 2017, public sector mainstream schools can apply for an extra teaching post so that a designated teacher can be assigned as a special educational needs coordinator (SENCo) to promote and support integrated and inclusive education in the school. The term SENCo has been adopted from the similar title and role in the education system in Britain. Almost all schools also have access to school-based and central guidance and counselling services and may have their own guidance teachers.

Education in Hong Kong is provided in a combination of government or government-aided schools, private schools, and international schools (Becher & Rao, 2012). Education in Hong Kong government schools is free. Students spend 6 years in primary school and a minimum of 3 years in junior secondary schools. They may then opt to spend another 3 years in senior secondary education. Many children have also spent up to 3 years before the age of 6 in kindergartens prior to commencing primary education.

Integration or Inclusion?

In the context of Hong Kong, the terms *integration* and *inclusion* always need to be defined clearly to avoid confusion. The older term *integration* was often misinterpreted to mean placing students with mild disabilities and learning difficulties into mainstream schools, but without necessarily modifying the mainstream curriculum, teaching methods, or learning environment. In other words, under *integration*, the student with special needs must adapt to the school. These students, if given a little extra support, are expected to cope with the normal classroom program. *Inclusion*, on the other hand, is understood to require school curricula, teaching methods, classroom management, and sometimes the physical environment of the school to be modified to accommodate a much more diverse range

of students in terms of ability, disability, behaviour, gender, ethnicity, culture, and religion (CYDA, 2019a).

In some countries, it is argued that *all* students regardless of their degree of disability have the right to attend their local mainstream school. This is often referred to as ‘full inclusion’ — but few countries around the world have managed to achieve that goal (Muskens, 2009; Rieser, 2014). At the moment, the Hong Kong education system is still based on the belief that special schools are necessary to provide the most appropriate education for students with severe and complex disabilities.

Previous Provisions

It is important at this point to acknowledge the contribution of Yung (1997) who compiled a valuable history of education for students with special needs in Hong Kong up to 1995. According to Yung’s account, the first special school was set up in Hong Kong in the 1930s (much later than in Australia and Britain). By 1954, the number of segregated special schools had increased significantly, but catered mainly for children with sensory or physical impairments. It was not until 1964 that the first special school for students with an intellectual disability (at that time referred to as ‘mentally handicapped children’) was established.

Throughout the 1960s, the number of segregated and part-time special classes for children with learning difficulties in mainstream schools also increased, in line with what had occurred earlier in Britain and the US. During that period, Hong Kong also operated a system of ‘banding’ for secondary schools. Band 1 schools catered for students with high academic ability and motivation, and Band 5 (now reclassified as Band 3) served less academically inclined and lower ability students. By 1982, more remedial support was also being provided for students with learning difficulties in secondary schools. Since 2000, an Intensive Remedial Teaching Programme has operated, mainly but not exclusively in Band 3 schools for students identified as being 2 or more years behind three key subjects of Chinese, English, and mathematics (Woo, 2009). The band system and the use of special classes or remedial groups were well intentioned, but have been criticised now for being forms of segregation based on students’ ability, and that this segregation can limit the opportunities and long-term outcomes for students who do not attend Band 1 schools (Crawford, Heung, Yip, & Yuen, 1999; Lee, 2018; Woo, 2009).

Moving Towards Inclusion

The evolution of inclusive education in Hong Kong mirrors that of most Western countries, albeit at a slower rate of development. The stages of evolution can be recognised as moving gradually from strictly segregated provision for students with special needs, towards greater integration — and most recently to the first attempts to implement fully the concept of inclusive schooling.

Initially, the influence to move toward integration came mainly from Britain, because during the time that Hong Kong was a British colony up to 1997 (with a hiatus between 1941 and 1945 during Japanese occupation in World War II), the education system was modelled largely on that operating in England. It was natural that trends and ideologies in Britain would eventually spread to Hong Kong. In Britain, policies and reports produced between 1970 and 1994 reflected an increasing intention to integrate, with appropriate support, as many students with special needs and disabilities as possible into regular schools rather than placing them in special schools and special classes (e.g., British Government, 1981; Committee of Enquiry into the Education of Handicapped Children and Young People, 1978; Department for Education and Employment, 1997; Department of Education and Science, 1975). The spirit underpinning these United Kingdom (UK) policies did not begin to permeate education in Hong Kong until later. Even the ‘mainstreaming’ movement in the US, sparked by the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (U.S. Congress, 1975) and later the Individuals with

Disabilities Education Act (U.S. Congress, 1990), did not really influence practices in Hong Kong until after 2000.

According to Luk-Fong (2005), the idea of having more children with disabilities receiving their education in ordinary schools in Hong Kong was first suggested much earlier, within a White Paper titled *Integrating the Disabled Into the Community: A United Effort* (Hong Kong Government, 1977). However, at the time, there was no really active response from schools, and segregated education was still the norm (Crawford et al., 1999). Often, students with disabilities who were placed in mainstream schools were educated full-time in separate special classes, and remained segregated from their peers (Dowson, Bodycott, Walker, & Coniam, 2000).

Throughout the 1980s and most of the 1990s, special schools and mainstream education coexisted in Hong Kong, and no one doubted that this system best served the needs of children with disabilities and learning difficulties. It is important to recognise that in Hong Kong (as in Australia and Britain) segregated education was *not* designed to deliberately isolate and discriminate against students with special educational needs, but rather reflected the sincere intention to provide them with the most appropriate educational programs to meet their needs and matched their capacity to learn. The Education Commission in Hong Kong had stated,

For these students, special schools can still provide the most suitable learning environment to help them learn effectively. What matters is that every student should be able to learn in an environment that is most appropriate to him/her. (Education Commission, 2000, para. 15, v4)

Similarly, the Department for Education in the UK has taken the position that ‘no one type of school placement (such as full inclusion in mainstream provision, special schools, or specialist units in a mainstream setting) is the most effective at meeting children’s SEN [special educational needs]’ (Department for Education, 2011, p. 20).

It was not until worldwide issues of human rights and social justice emerged that it was deemed unjust to deny any child with special needs and disability access to an education in ordinary schools and to experience the mainstream curriculum. It was after publication of the UNESCO Salamanca Statement in 1994 that much greater attention was given to placing students with special needs and disabilities in ordinary schools.

Pilot Project on Integration

In 1996, the Sub-committee on Special Education in Hong Kong attempted to revive the 1977 concept of integration, and in 1997 a small-scale pilot project was launched to evaluate the feasibility of more integration (Mittler, 1998). The aim was to evaluate the success of placing a few students with mild intellectual disability, vision or hearing impairments, physical disability, or mild forms of autism into seven primary schools and two secondary schools in Hong Kong (Crawford et al., 1999). The schools involved were able to employ an extra teacher (often used as a ‘resource teacher’) to offer support, and class teachers were given short training workshops to prepare them. Evaluation procedures for the project involved questionnaires and interviews with teachers, students, principals, and parents, conducted over a period from 1998 to 1999. Results revealed that the overall academic progress and behaviour of the integrated students was satisfactory, with some students making what was described as ‘good progress’ in terms of achievement within the curriculum and in behaviour (Crawford et al., 1999; Mittler, 1998). The integration policy was then extended to all primary and secondary schools, but it was not mandatory for a school to apply the policy. In 1996, a resource centre had been established in Kowloon Tong to support special education teachers, and its role was now expanded to support all teachers.

In Hong Kong, movement towards greater integration of more students was marked by publication of the Disability Discrimination Ordinance of 1998, the *Education Commission Report 8* (Education

Commission, 1999), and the policy statement *Learning For Life, Learning Through Life* (Education Commission, 2000). The latter publication proposed wide-ranging general reforms to the educational system that would affect kindergarten, primary, secondary, and university levels (Dowson et al., 2000). These reforms, inter alia, assumed that in the coming years more students with special educational needs (which includes gifted students) would be placed in mainstream schools to receive an appropriate education. The commission suggested that ‘this will be achieved through collaboration and mutual support among teachers, parents and students, curriculum tailoring and diversified teaching and assessment methods’ (Education Commission, 2000, para. 9. v).

Moving Forward

As the 1990s became the early years of the 2000s, the Code of Practice on Education (Equal Opportunities Commission, 2001) was issued by the commission under the Disability Discrimination Ordinance. The purpose was to ensure that children with disabilities have equal opportunity to access and participate in local education (Centre for Special Needs and Studies in Inclusive Education [CSNSIE], 2012). Schools were given some small amount of guidance to help them move towards inclusive practices — for example, in-service training options increased for practising teachers, enabling them to undertake special courses. In 2008, the Hong Kong Government issued a document titled *Catering for Student Differences: Indicators for Inclusion* (Education Bureau Hong Kong, 2008). This material was based on similar guidelines used in Britain (Greenberg & Greenberg, 2014) and amounted to a comprehensive checklist of indicators that school staff could work through to determine how far their school has progressed in moving towards inclusive policies and practices, and to set targets for what needs to be done next. A similar set of guidelines has been published by UNESCO (2017) as part of its ambitious Education 2030 Agenda.

In 2014, the Education Bureau produced a comprehensive publication titled *Basic Education Curriculum Guide* (Education Bureau Hong Kong, 2014a). A section in Chapter 4 in that guide addresses students with special educational needs and provides at least some suggestions for how the curriculum can be adapted to suit a wider ability range. However, most of the chapter deals with the broader issues of creating an inclusive climate and culture in schools and how this requires a ‘whole-school approach’ with collaboration among teachers. In the same year, a third edition of *Operation Guide on the Whole School Approach to Integrated Education* was issued (Education Bureau Hong Kong, 2014b). Chapter 6 therein also contains advice on curriculum adaptation and differentiated teaching. Most recently, the UNESCO (2017) *Guide for Ensuring Inclusion and Equity in Education* has also influenced policies and practices in Hong Kong and elsewhere.

Pressure had been increasing to commit more firmly to making education in Hong Kong inclusive, influenced by the United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of Persons With Disabilities (United Nations, 2006). Particularly influential was a later interpretation of Article 24 that explicitly affirms the right of persons with disabilities of all ages and at all stages to participate fully in an inclusive education system, without discrimination, and on the basis of equality of opportunity (United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons With Disabilities, 2016). The People’s Republic of China — including Hong Kong Special Administrative Region — had signed up to the Convention on the Rights of Persons With Disabilities in 2008.

Principles Underpinning Current Practices

According to the current policy governing provision for students with special needs, five principles are used by the Education Bureau to implement integration and move towards inclusion, namely early identification, early intervention, cooperation between home and school, whole-school participation, and cooperation among schools and services (Hong Kong Legislative Council, 2019b). Hong Kong is endeavouring to support students with learning difficulties or disabilities in the mainstream by

adopting a three-tier system of intervention, as implemented, for example, in Australia and the US (Audit Commission Hong Kong, 2018; Woo, 2009). Primary schools can apply for a Learning Support Grant to assist them in implementing the system. Under the three-tier model, students are provided with three levels of support ranging from Tier 1 for students with mild or temporary learning difficulties (mainly provided in the regular classroom) through to Tier 3 for students with more severe and persistent learning difficulties (usually provided in small groups or individually — or in special schools). The need for support at Tier 1 and Tier 2 is determined by the school's student support team, with appropriate input from an educational psychologist or medical expert. Students receiving Tier 3 support are supposed to have an individual education plan (IEP), but some do not — due mainly to insufficient resources and educational psychologists required for assessment, or to parent non-cooperation (Hong Kong Legislative Council, 2019b).

Evaluating Progress

Between 2010 and 2011, the Equal Opportunities Commission contracted the CSNSIE at the Hong Kong Institute of Education to investigate and report on the extent to which integrated education is providing appropriate opportunities to students with special needs (CSNSIE, 2012). The research team collected information from school principals, teachers, professionals (social workers, counsellors, and therapists), students with special educational needs, regular students, parents of SEN students, and parents of regular students. The report indicates that among the 230 schools participating in the survey only 192 schools (83%) had actually admitted SEN students. It was also found that of the 192 schools, only 48% have adopted the recommended 'whole-school approach'. Survey findings show that many principals (61%), teachers (43%), professionals (49%), and parents of SEN students (37%) consider that schools do not receive enough government funding, resources, and support to implement inclusive education, and teacher training is currently insufficient. It is interesting to note that teachers reported the most difficult students to integrate are those with emotional and behavioural disorders, intellectual disability, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, and autism spectrum disorder, because it is hard for these students to learn independently. This finding is similar to evidence from surveys in other countries, including the UK, US, and Australia (e.g., Inclusion Europe, 2018; Kemp, 2016; Silveira-Zaldivar & Curtis, 2019; Whitlow, Cooper, & Couvillon, 2019). Perhaps the most concerning finding from the CSNSIE study was that

... about 20% of the principals, teachers and professionals express disagreement about adopting some necessary modification measures [to curriculum and teaching]. Even worse, there are around half of the respondents who disagree to accept and support students with severe disabilities. It is a great concern if schools are not determined to make necessary changes to meet the needs of SEN students, SEN students will face with the ever increasing learning difficulties. (CSNSIE, 2012, p. vi)

Current Situation

In her 2018 Policy Address, the Chief Executive in Hong Kong stated that, starting from the 2019/20 school year, an additional funding of \$800 million would be provided each year to cover the three-tier support system for students with special needs, and to restructure the Learning Support Grant, the Intensive Remedial Teaching Programme, and the Integrated Education Programme. In public schools with large numbers of special needs students, the SENCo post would be raised to a promotion rank; and the School-based Educational Psychology Service would also be expanded (Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government, 2018).

Obstacles to Inclusion

Moving towards inclusion is always a complex and incremental task, given that it requires the acquisition of new insights and skills by classroom teachers and a major shift in the way that regular classes are

usually taught (Crawford et al., 1999; Greenberg & Greenberg, 2014; Westwood, 1999; Westwood, 2005). The difficulties in implementing inclusive practices in schools are reflected in reports from Australia (CYDA, 2019b) and Britain (Bartley, 2017; Keer, 2019). The move towards inclusion has been far from easy in Hong Kong because most schools, particularly secondary schools, still have large classes where traditionally teachers have focused on formal instruction in academic subjects, with much attention given to memorisation of material and preparing for good examination results (Dowson et al., 2000; McClatchey, 2013; Tang, 2000). Teachers in Hong Kong have a heavy workload and are held responsible for ensuring that all students achieve a high standard within the subject-based curriculum. There is even competition among the schools to market their own reputation based on high academic results (Chun Sing Ho & Lu, 2019). In the past, there has been very little thought given to how to differentiate instruction or curriculum content to address the individual needs of students. The traditional Chinese view of learning is that if a student has difficulty mastering a subject, you don't make the work easier — he or she must simply work harder, because effort is more important than innate ability. The school's response was often simply to set more homework; or the family response was to obtain private tutoring for their child — if they could afford the fees. It is only recently that policy improvements recommended by the Hong Kong Legislative Council (2019b) include the need to produce teaching materials and curriculum content of varying levels of complexity to suit different levels of ability and students' special needs. At the moment, this is not a reality.

Inclusion is also difficult to implement in Hong Kong because the attitude of mainstream teachers and principals is often far from confident or positive (Crawford et al., 1999; Forlin, 2010; Pearson, Lo, Chui, & Wong, 2003; Poon-McBrayer, 1999; Sharma & Chow, 2008). This reluctance of teachers to engage enthusiastically with the notion of integration and inclusion is similar to the response of teachers in most other countries when integration was first proposed to them in the 1970s (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Janney, Snell, Beers, & Raynes, 1995; Vaughn, Schumm, Jallad, Slusher, & Saumell, 1996). Teachers generally believe that they do not have the knowledge and expertise to teach and manage the behaviour of children with disabilities and learning problems, and that having to attend to the needs of these students may undermine the effectiveness of education for all the other students in a class (Wong, Pearson, & Lo, 2004). Some of these doubts are probably valid, because teacher education courses in the past have not equipped trainee teachers with insights and skills needed to adapt their teaching according to students' differences in ability, motivation, and rate of learning (Forlin, 2010; Greenberg & Greenberg, 2014). Nor has there been a tradition of close collaboration and teamwork among teachers in schools — a factor that is now considered important for implementing inclusive practices (CSNSIE, 2012; Kirkpatrick, Searle, Smyth, & Specht, 2020; Pearce, 2009; Tang, 2000). Specialist subject teachers in secondary schools tend to experience the most difficulty, but without adequate preparation and training, *all* teachers find it very difficult indeed to implement inclusive practices (Becher & Rao, 2012; Zhu, Li, & Hsieh, 2019).

In summary, Schuelka (2018) reviewed several studies of inclusion in action and cited the following obstacles as typical in all countries: inadequate funding, insufficient resources and facilities, lack of specialised school staff, inadequate teacher training, a rigid curriculum, and often an unsupportive school and district leadership. To these problems one must also add that a tension exists in several countries where an inclusion agenda tends to be up against an agenda that has a focus on maintaining high academic standards (Shaw, 2017).

Teacher Training

In 1960, a Special Schools Section had been established within the Education Department in Hong Kong; and in 1967 the first in-service special education training was provided for teachers working with students with a disability. However, it was not until 1991 that a degree program in special education was introduced for teachers by the University of Hong Kong, and courses were also provided later

by the Hong Kong Institute of Education (established in 1994 and now renamed as The Education University of Hong Kong).

The need for additional training for serving teachers was stressed in an Audit Commission Hong Kong *Report 33* of 1999 and reiterated in 2000 in the Education Commission proposals for education reform. According to that report, most ordinary schools that were not part of the Integration Project were claiming that they lacked the necessary knowledge, skills, and resources to meet the needs of students with disabilities and learning difficulties. The University of Hong Kong and the Hong Kong Institute of Education both responded by strengthening their courses at both preservice and graduate levels. At the University of Hong Kong, a postgraduate course in special education was introduced for serving teachers, in addition to an existing BEd degree that covered the education of children with learning difficulties. The masters program continued to cater for those who wished to take further qualifications and to engage in research. The new postgraduate program in 2000 addressed (and continues to address) important strategies for implementing and encouraging inclusion. The course contains practical advice on adapting the curriculum, individualised programming, assistive technology, formative assessment, differentiated teaching, and establishing schoolwide support services. Although these longer courses tend to yield the best results in increasing teachers' confidence and expertise, it is also true that even short courses with a practical focus on inclusive teaching practices can have a very positive effect on Hong Kong teachers' self-efficacy beliefs regarding their ability to teach students with special needs (e.g., Chao, Forlin, & Ho, 2016; Forlin, Sharma, & Loreman, 2014).

By 2007–2008, the Education Bureau had launched a professional development framework for serving teachers covering the characteristics and needs of students with various disabilities, and the principles and practices for inclusive education (Audit Commission Hong Kong, 2018). According to Goda (2013, p. 1), the 2007 guidelines required that

... at least 10% of teachers at each of government primary and secondary schools must receive no less than 30 hours of basic training in special education and at least three teachers at each school must complete a 90-hour advanced training course.

The fact that by 2019 almost 90% of schools had participated in this training is a very positive sign. However, approximately 10% of schools had not met the required target for the number of teachers participating in the training. It is not clear whether this reflects that teachers have too little time available for training, or whether the schools concerned have very few students with special needs.

One of the main problems that all countries have encountered is that it usually falls upon universities to provide much of the preservice and in-service training for teachers in inclusive methods — yet few, if any, of the lecturers in universities have actually taught in inclusive classrooms that contain students with special educational needs and disabilities. The advice they give therefore tends to lack credibility and may not be easily assimilated into teachers' own practices. On the other hand, teachers' expertise tends to grow best when they can learn new strategies from other teachers who are engaging in the same work each day (Foltos, 2018; Juliani, 2015). Valuable skills and insights are also learned when teachers can observe typical lessons in inclusive classrooms that are already operating effectively (Israel, 2019). On the topic of teacher training for inclusion, it has been noted elsewhere that 'there is a move away from formal "courses", often delivered in a top-down model, towards greater collaboration and use of terms such as "joint practice development" and "professional learning"' (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2015, p. 40).

The Centre for Advancement in Inclusive and Special Education (CAISE) was established in 2004 at the University of Hong Kong. This centre provides workshops and seminars for teachers dealing with the inclusion of a wide range of students, including those with gifts and talents. Many of these sessions help teachers and school counsellors understand better the purposes of inclusion and how it may be achieved in Hong Kong schools. A strong feature of the CAISE in-service sessions is that they often use practising teachers who can share their experiences of inclusive classroom strategies that work well in their own schools.

Effects of Inclusion on Curriculum in Special Schools

As indicated already, at the moment Hong Kong is continuing to maintain a system that provides special education in separate schools for students with more severe disabilities. In response to the notion that these students have the right to access the same curriculum as that provided for all other students has led to some special schools trying to adapt mainstream subject-based programs for students with major learning problems (Li, Tse, & Lian, 2009). Whether this attempt to 'make the mainstream curriculum inclusive' is an inspirational move or is actually misguided is open to debate. Traditionally, special schools for students with intellectual disability have always maintained a clear focus on teaching everyday living skills and helping their students develop self-determination and self-management. Indeed, that focus has been their main strength and contribution. Some educators have suggested that switching to a *subject-based* curriculum for learners with severe intellectual disability may be a disadvantage, because it limits the amount of time that can be devoted to helping students develop everyday skills, communication, and independence (Ayers, Lowrey, Douglas, & Sievers, 2011; Westwood, 2001). Most recently, Hong Kong's neighbour, Macau, is attempting also to make special schools more like ordinary schools by following an adapted mainstream curriculum.

Continuing Contribution of Special Schools

When the pilot study on integration first began, it was suggested that mainstream schools could call upon the expertise of special school teachers for ideas and support (Crawford et al., 1999). This proposed new role for special schools was also identified in the Education Commission (2000) document *Learning For Life, Learning Through Life* as an aspect of education reform in Hong Kong. The recommendation was later echoed by Forlin and Lian (2008) and Woo (2009) who advocated for more collaborative work between special education and mainstream teachers. One justification for maintaining special schools for specific disabilities, such as vision impairment, hearing impairment, autism, and intellectual disability, is to expand their roles as centres of expertise available to mainstream schools (Becher & Rao, 2012; Pearce, 2009; Shaw, 2017; UNESCO, 2017). The extent to which this is really occurring at the moment in Hong Kong is not known, but should be a focus for further investigation. It is now 20 years since the Education Commission (2000) stated, 'We recommend the ED [Education Department] to, in consultation with the Board of Education, continue its study on issues relating to the mode and mechanism of collaboration between special schools and ordinary schools'.

Conclusion

In a review paper, Goda (2013) reached the conclusion that Hong Kong has shown considerable progress towards integrated and inclusive education, but still has a long way to go. The obstacles already identified above, particularly large classes and the emphasis that mainstream schools (and parents) continue to place on high achievement in academic subjects, ensure that the path to inclusion will be slow. As Chan and Lo (2017) have pointed out, teachers are still grappling with how best to go beyond the rhetoric of inclusion to enact inclusive classroom practices.

In reality, even in 2021 it is uncertain whether Hong Kong has yet managed to progress much beyond a situation described by Ainscow and Miles (2004, p. 2), namely that '... ordinary school placement has not been accompanied by changes in the organization of the ordinary school, its curriculum, and teaching and learning strategies'. Yet these are the variables, together with creating an accepting school climate and strong school leadership, that characterise inclusive education. It cannot be ignored that some students with special needs who have been integrated into mainstream schools do not feel that they have been accepted, are worried about their schoolwork, and have developed a negative self-image (Lam & Yeung, 2005; Wong-Ratcliff & Ho, 2011).

Two fairly recent articles in Hong Kong's main English language newspaper, the *South China Morning Post*, indicate public awareness that inclusive education is far from an accomplished goal. For example, the two writers state, 'Hong Kong students with special needs not properly supported by government education system' (Cheung, 2017) and 'Hong Kong education needs to be more inclusive for students enrolled in special needs schools' (Ma, 2019). There is no doubt that Hong Kong has put in place the policies and guidelines necessary for the move from integration to inclusion, but the fact will always be that achieving inclusion in ordinary schools has to be an incremental process. It is no easy task for school staff to develop the insights and skills needed for adapting a common curriculum and using a teaching approach that addresses the various abilities of students in an inclusive classroom. There is also a need to create a more accepting culture in many schools, to help students with disabilities feel valued and successful. UNESCO (2017, p. iii) has observed that

including all learners and ensuring that each individual has an equal and personalized opportunity for educational progress is still a challenge in almost every country. Despite commendable progress made over the past two decades to expand access to basic education, further efforts are needed to minimize barriers to learning and to ensure that all learners in schools and other learning settings experience a genuine inclusive environment.

These remain the main goals for Hong Kong in the immediate future. But, as Lo (2007) has written, all this necessitates a means of managing schools that is easier to comprehend than to carry out.

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