

## The Teaching of Students with Special Educational Needs, SEN, in Hong Kong

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### Abstract:

*The paper basically provides a general view of SEN education in Hong Kong. The author will first discuss the Hong Kong SEN educational policy, nonetheless the critically essence of inclusive education. More specifically, views of SEN education in Hong Kong will be shared, including exploring into the issues of special treatments to SEN students with disabilities, introduction to topics related to students with ADHD, Autism and Asperger Syndrome and investigating the strategies in helping children with emotional or behavioural difficulties. Last but not least, the author attempts to emphasize the importance of understanding of learning difficulties based on his teaching experience in SEN education. On top of that, comments on gifted education in Hong Kong will be included.*

**Key words:** Gifted, SEN, ADHD, Austim, Asperger Syndrome

### SECTION A

#### A General view of SEN education in Hong Kong

##### 1. Introduction

Nowadays, teachers are often anxious about how to assess students' learning outcomes in knowledge building. As assessment drives learning, a well aligned assessment practice should be expected to effectively motivate quality student learning (Biggs 1999). However, is it a perfect strategy for modern schools to assess students "equally" without concerning

the Special Educational Needs (SEN) of certain students? In fact, it leads to SEN students cannot learn well due to the lack of an inclusive environment; eventually they will rather get a negative summative assessment report from their teachers, but not positive formative learning outcomes.

## **2. Background - Hong Kong SEN educational policy**

In dealing of the teaching of students with SEN, schools should think and plan on how to provide a quality inclusive education for every kind of students. In order to build the inclusive education, collaboration is the chief consideration.

On the principle of "one curriculum framework for all", Hong Kong SEN students follow the mainstream school curriculum of their able counterparts and are offered essential life-long learning experiences. (EDB 2011)

Under the Curriculum Development Council (CDC), the Committee on Special Educational Needs (CSEN) is responsible for formulating policy and overseeing curriculum development for SEN students. Various ad hoc committees were set up to cooperate to develop programme of study, learning objectives, and learning and assessment exemplars for students with SEN. The following, introducing the duties about SEN education of various ad hoc committees, is cited in an Education Bureau webpage. (EDB 2011)

- To conduct surveys in exploring the way ahead of curriculum reforms in special schools; to work in collaboration with schools on the development of school-based curriculum so as to enhance students' learning;
- To design and produce reference materials;
- To conduct seminars, workshops and experience sharing sessions for enhancing teachers' professionalism;
- To encourage schools to participate in the "Seed Project" on issues which are in line with the aims of curriculum

reform.

### **3. Essence of inclusive education**

In inclusive education, the basic problem needed to concern is how to achieve the collaboration of schools, teachers and students. The solutions can be simply divided into two sides. Physically, we can make use of extra time, auxiliary facilities and physical care to give assistance to the students with learning difficulties, such as dyslexia, disability or injury. For examples, schools can provide: an amanuensis to type or handwrite as the student, who cannot write due to an injury or disability, dictates; a word processor (without any spell checking tools) for students who have trouble writing legibly; the Ease of Access for student using a wheelchair; and magnifiers for children with visual impairment.

From the perspective of psychology, it is not only to provide help offered in physical form any more.

Prejudice is agreed by psychologists to be the barrier to achieve collaborative teaching and learning for educational improvement. Psychologically, prejudice often serves to ward off feelings of doubt and fear (Wade & Tavis 2002). In many times, SEN students feel great shame at having their physical, psychological or mental differences compared with their able counterparts. As a result, these differences will form their psychological barriers leading to the conservation of their abilities, hence a decline in their academic results.

#### ***Issues of teaching in inclusive settings***

The metaphor of *teacher as a facilitator*

Teachers should encourage SEN students more in saying that they are possibly able to do what their “normal” classmates (without SEN) can do, and make them believe in their unique talents and powers of efforts.

## **Dealing with the arrangement of examinations with SEN candidates**

There are definitely appropriate and fair helps can be offered for students with learning difficulties, an injury/repetitive strain injury (RSI) or a disability in an examination.

For instances, different format exam papers, e.g. coloured papers with large print and Braille, or a teacher responsible for reading out the words written on the exam should always be well-prepared and stand-by for candidates with visual impairment in an exam. If the student is unable to write quickly enough to complete the exam, a word processor should be provided.

Hence surely, assessment as a form of teaching can therefore be improved and be more appropriate to inclusive settings.

## **SECTION B**

### **More Specific views of SEN teaching in Hong Kong**

Apart from the two issues above, the following points will help teachers in improving the teaching of different kinds of SEN students, more importantly motivate the current Hong Kong schools deliberately achieving the inclusive education.

#### **4. Special treatments to SEN students with disabilities**

According to a report issued by the Hong Kong Association for School Discipline and Counseling Teachers (HKDCA) in 2008, the kinds of SEN students in Hong Kong include Hearing Impairment, Visual Impairment and Physical Disability (HKDCA 2008).

In modern schools of the inclusive society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, management should be done well in constructing facilities for SEN students with disabilities. The various facilities should include adequate information boards in school areas *for Hearing Impaired students*; tactile guide paths in

school corridors, modification of obstructions, and even in some large-scale schools, an escalator with audible warning signals *for Visually Impaired students; finally*, wheelchair aids, stair lift(s) and more ramps instead of stairs need to be provided *for Mobility Impaired students*.

## **5. An introduction to students with ADHD, Autism and Asperger Syndrome**

In Hong Kong, the students with mental or psychological needs include students with Mental Handicap, Depression, and Anxiety Disorder. But indeed, the above mentioned students may still not be the major easy to be neglected students. Instead, I will introduce the ADHD, Autism and Asperger Syndrome.

*Students who are diagnosed as ADHD are necessary to be treated as SEN students.* ADHD is an abbreviation of the Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. According to 'Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders' (DSM-IV-TR) published by the American Psychiatric Association, children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, ADHD, are mostly difficult to concentrate on a single thing; they always look around and stop their processing work, and finally cannot successfully finish one thing. It is explained that they are easily distracted by the environment around themselves.

Furthermore, they frequently lose things or forget matters. Besides, they always have more "energies" than normal children do. They cannot keep quiet in participating in activities. They sometimes cannot control their body gestures, cannot sit quietly and usually run and jump around; when other people are speaking, the students with ADHD like to disturb the conversation. In addition, their self-control is comparatively weak, and so they are usually in disorder, doing anything without deliberate thinking and not following the rules. (APA 2001) As a result, they are likely to be difficult to socialize from the perspectives of sociology.

## **Asperger Syndrome and Autism**

Learners with Asperger Syndrome or Asperger's Disorder, as a kind of Autism, have communicative barriers and social difficulties. Compared with normal people, they find difficult in noticing the facial language of people or understanding the body language or gesture of speakers; they always think communicating or making friends with others is an exhausting matter.

Asperger Syndrome is common with other kinds of Autism, sharing characteristics of communication disorder, social difficulties and lack of imaginary or creative playing styles. But compared with patients of other kinds of Autism, sufferers of Asperger Syndrome often have less language proficiency problems. They normally speak fluently, although their speaking style is overcautious and awkward. In solving this problem, teachers should provide them varieties of opportunities to communicate with more kinds of people.

Moreover, sufferers of Asperger Syndrome are not like the patients of other kinds of Autism who have learning difficulties. Sufferers of Asperger Syndrome normally have the intelligence of their able counterparts, or even higher intelligence.

## **6. Strategies in helping children with Emotional or Behavioural Difficulties**

If children have emotional or behavioural difficulties at different levels, their gaining of social and teaching and learning experiences at home or in school will be affected. This kind of children always finds difficulties in adapting to circumstances in daily lives. In many times, teachers use the same pedagogy to the normal students to apply to children with emotional or behavioural difficulties. It is inappropriate. In some situations, if the children cannot get appropriate assistance immediately, they will possibly be nurtured as children with over-nervous, invasive or destructive behaviours. So, the strategies of helping children with emotional or

behavioural difficulties should be designed well in order to establish better inclusive classrooms.

First of all, teachers should use more time to observe the personal problems and daily behaviours of the children. Moreover, if teachers can focus on listening to their problems more, it should help building the trust between teachers and students. The teacher-student relationship can hence be improved and be kind. In case children have the difficulties, the implementation of solutions of their emotional and behavioural problems can be more effective.

Secondly, teachers should encourage those children to express their feelings more in a possible manner, and discuss the reasons or intentions behind their daily behaviours or performances with teachers afterward. Nevertheless, teachers should explain to children with emotional or behavioural difficulties the possible negative effects to their counterparts of their misbehaviours. It will then better, precisely and sustainably help to stop the misbehaviours happened again, after those children have thoroughly understood their seriousness.

Thirdly, teachers should help those children in building their positive self-image. The children with emotional and behavioural difficulties usually lack confidence and sometimes feel ignored. They may not feel love or care by others. In terms of their studies or social network, the failures are more than success. So, teachers should provide them more chances to get the acceptance from others and the happiness of experiencing a success in order to encourage them to do anything by making more efforts.

Besides, when the emotions of learners are unstable, teachers are advised to let them stay alone in a safe and peace environment. Teachers should always keep stable, and let the learners have a moment to calm down and stabilize their emotions, and hence try to understand their needs and problems.

Moreover, teachers should avoid having a direct conflict with those children as it will increase the misunderstanding of a specific problem by the children hence making the problem more serious.

Furthermore, never attempt to immediately correct their misbehaviours. The best way is always to plan deliberately on how to make a change in the current behavior of the learner by listing its concrete possible solutions first, then try to let the learner changes his/her behavior within several lessons.

In addition, in order to help a child in changing behaviours in a certain aspect, teachers may lead his concentration to the learning of appropriate behaviours, but not lead to the ban of inappropriate behaviours. For instance, if a child shows his honesty after he did a wrong thing, teachers should forgive and praise the child; but should not condemn him, because he lies. Even if he lies, we should educate him to say the truth, which can be achieved by praising publicly the students who say the truth after doing wrong things.

Nevertheless, teachers can give those children more warmth and care. However, teachers should have a constant teaching principle, never think that the children will hate us if we punish them, and so to accept their misbehavior(s). The role of teacher should be helping students in developing the behaviour(s) allowed within a society; and so, teachers need to clearly express their discontents if the students misbehave unreasonably.

Finally, teachers need to help the children with emotional and/or behavioural difficulties in understanding the possible harm to themselves and/or others of the inappropriate behaviour(s). It can help the children in developing the right attitudes of living. (EDB, 2001)

## **7. Understanding of Learning Difficulties**

Communication disorder, as a kind of learning difficulties, is commonly appeared among the primary students in Hong



Kong. Besides, students with Dyslexia, Dysphasia and Dysgraphia are also common in Hong Kong.

The 2002 LD Roundtable produced the following definition of Learning Difficulties (LD):

Concept of LD: Strong converging evidence supports the validity of the concept of specific learning disabilities (SLD). This evidence is particularly impressive because it converges across different indicators and methodologies. The central concept of SLD involves disorders of learning and cognition that are intrinsic to the individual. SLD are specific in the sense that these disorders each significantly affect a relatively narrow range of academic and performance outcomes. SLD may occur in combination with other disabling conditions, but they are not due primarily to other conditions, such as mental retardation, behavioral disturbance, lack of opportunities to learn, or primary sensory deficits.

(Renée Bradley; Louis C. Danielson; Daniel P. Hallahan, 2002) & (NRCLD, 2010)

More specifically, there is a term called the Specific Learning Difficulties or Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD). In above quoted definition, it is shown that the SLD have become the collocation of LD.

### ***What is Specific Learning Difficulties?***

American Psychiatric Association proposed the most update definition of specific learning difficulties in 1994:

Specific learning difficulties can generally be diagnosed during infancy, childhood or adolescence. There are 3 main categories if classified by the nature of the difficulties: learning disorder, motor skill disorder and communication disorder. The more common types of specific learning difficulties are: specific learning difficulties in reading and writing, or dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysphasia, etc., and among them, dyslexia is most common. (APA, 1994)

Specific learning difficulties is a kind of learning difficulties, generally referring to a whole spectrum of problematic

behaviours in learning.

As the above cited definition mentioned, Specific Learning Difficulties can be diagnosed during the periods of infancy, childhood or adolescence with professional psychological or psychiatric treatment.

The main categories and sub-divisions of specific learning difficulties, according to the division of their nature, are shown in the table below:

<b>Categories of Specific Learning Difficulties</b>	
<b>1. Learning Disorder:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Reading disorder</li><li>• Mathematics disorder</li><li>• Disorder of written expression</li></ul>
<b>2. Motor Skill disorder</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Developmental coordination disorder</li></ul>
<b>3. Communication disorder</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Expressive language disorder</li><li>• Mixed receptive-expressive language disorder</li><li>• Phonological disorder</li><li>• Stuttering</li></ul>

Like other places around the world, the most common specific learning difficulties in Hong Kong are also specific learning difficulties in reading and writing or dyslexia, dyscalculia and dysphasia etc., where dyslexia is the most common one. As a teacher, special psychological care alone is not enough in the teaching of students with specific learning difficulties. They should be able to recognize the learners with specific learning difficulties. Teachers should have professional knowledge to differentiate between learners with specific learning difficulties or just simply laziness. We should understand learners with the specific learning difficulties always try to minimize the differences between their able counterparts and them, and never want their specific learning difficulties to be the barriers

in their studies. So teachers should have both care and professional knowledge of SEN in the teaching of students with specific learning difficulties.

## **8. Gifted Education in Hong Kong**

Special care of children with SEN is needed by school teachers or facilities, as in definitions of educational psychology, SEN children are *different from* their able counterparts physically, psychologically or mentally. In many times, the words 'special education' or the term SEN make us to think of special treatments to students with Mental retardation (MR), which has historically been defined as an Intelligence Quotient score under 70 (2h, 2010); whereas seldom think of gifted children and its education. Owing to this reason, here I would mention the rationale of Gifted Education.

The Gifted Education Policy and its Principles in Hong Kong

The mission of gifted education is to fully explore and develop the potentials of gifted students systematically and strategically *by providing them with opportunities* to receive education at appropriate levels in a flexible teaching and learning environment. (EDB, 2011)

### *How to achieve the gifted education?*

In order to improve the teaching of gifted students, teachers should first understand the importance of the specific educational needs of them. Exploring students' thinking and creativity abilities and social skills should be the foci of gifted education. Teachers should nurture their multiple intelligences after their intelligences are recognized. However, do not let them think that there exists a difference between their less able counterparts and them, or make the whole class differentiate between the gifted students and the non-gifted ones. It is because the discrimination may exist, leading to social barriers of students in the class level. The social life of both gifted and

non-gifted students will be limited. Nevertheless, the self-fulfilling prophecy will happen. So the **basic inclusive** attitudes to gifted students should be met in their classroom.

## 9. Conclusion

The education system in the 21<sup>st</sup> century should be inclusive which schools provide an environment to nurture students regardless of their own disabilities or difficulties. The basic aim and philosophy of teaching should be **leading to learn**, so the SEN teaching and learning should also focus on how to increase participation of students. In the new trend of inclusive education, better strategies should be designed for motivating students of both with and without SEN, such as thinking how feedbacks from teacher can be realized well before giving to students.

In the future, schools should be more responsible for providing sequential and multiple educational activities to students with different kinds of SEN, and most importantly teachers should compile useful resources from different media, like resources from educational parties/bodies e.g. the Education Bureau (EDB), as support to the teaching of students with Special Educational Needs in Hong Kong. And this essay should help teachers in raising awareness that special care is needed to be aligned with the teaching of students with special needs.

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