

A Collaborative, Collegial and More Cohesive Approach to Supporting Educational Reform for Inclusion in Hong Kong

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Together with the many advantages incurred by educational reform there are concomitantly a number of challenges that have to be addressed. In the field of special education there have probably been more changes in the past decade than in any other area of education. In 2006, Hong Kong is undoubtedly at the cusp of major changes which continue to reflect the paradigm shifts occurring internationally. One area of concern for all is the issue of support for learners with special needs. It is clear that as more learners with disabilities are included in regular classes support services are moving relatively quickly from a withdrawal one-on-one intervention model that is no longer viable, to increasingly providing support in class by co-teaching, or even redesigning support so that it is aimed at the teacher rather than the child. Additionally, support services are becoming more sophisticated as parents demand greater attention to the specific needs of their child and as they expect educational systems to provide the most up to date practices. For every child with a special need there are many stakeholders who seek to provide some form of support. This can become quite overwhelming, staccato in its implementation, and demanding in the extreme, thus resulting in a disjointed unworkable approach. This paper will consider how support can be redesigned to provide a more collaborative, collegial and cohesive approach that is manageable within the current transformations that are occurring in Hong Kong.

Key words: special education, educational reform, support, inclusion, disability, stakeholder

Introduction

The movement towards a more inclusive educational system has its roots in the normalization principle (Loreman, Deppeler, & Harvey, 2005). This was furthered by the strength of international delegations that resulted in important declarations such as the key Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), that promoted inclusion as being the most effective means of educating the majority of children while combating discriminatory practices. The guiding principle that underpins

inclusion is that regular schools should accommodate all pupils regardless of their physical, intellectual, sensory, emotional or other special needs. Inclusion in an educational context, then, means that every child should be a valued member of the school community and none should be marginalized, alienated, humiliated, teased, rejected or excluded (Forlin, 2006). While the initial focus was on including children with disabilities, inclusion has become much broader in its interpretation and there is also now a stronger emphasis on the need for the restructuring of schools and for greater social change to accommodate all forms of diversity. In many instances, such as in Hong Kong, school systems are interpreting this by taking a *Whole Schooling* approach.

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Education Reform for Inclusion

While inclusion tends to be internationally promoted as the panacea of education for all children, it is not necessarily supported by all professionals or parents and it is important to ensure that due consideration is given to all viewpoints (Forlin, 2006). Increasingly, systems are being forced to use standards-based curricula and tests with their performance goals being measured against expected outcomes. Schools that find difficulty in maintaining these standards are progressively more reluctant to include students with disabilities who may affect their scores (Peters, Johnstone, & Ferguson, 2005). This is certainly likely to be an issue in Hong Kong where the schooling system is seen as “rigid, highly competitive and strongly weighted towards academic subjects” (Pearson, Lo, Chui & Wong, 2003, p. 490). The elitist approach that is embraced in regular schools in Hong Kong means that those children with special needs who are studying in mainstream schools face very tough challenges in coping with the academic demands both in the classroom and in doing homework (Wong, 2002). It has been argued for quite some time that success needs to be measured using much broader indicators, such as presence, participation, choice, respect, knowledge and skills (Stubbs, 1995), rather than a narrow examination oriented focus. Providing an inclusive environment that meets the needs of all students requires reconceptualising what constitutes appropriate outcomes and this necessitates commitment, dedication and perseverance to ensure that relevant accommodations and appropriate support are made available to enact them. Educators should also be more open to considering that inclusion should be *one option* and not the *only option* for education. This is particularly pertinent in the Asian countries where cultural differences from the West may not support a fully inclusive educational system.

There is, though, little doubt that the inclusion movement will continue to impact enormously on the role of the regular class teacher, which is already becoming increasingly more complex, demanding and stressful (Forlin, 2001). As teaching has become progressively more multifaceted, and workloads have increased enormously (Forlin, 2005; 2005a), research has clearly shown that many regular class teachers are not overly eager to participate in full inclusion (Yeun, Westwood & Wong, 2004). While they appear to support integration from an ethical and philosophical standpoint in general they are ambivalent about their own involvement (Pearson, et al., 2003). Although in general inclusion is not perceived as overly stressful by

regular class teachers, there are certain aspects that do cause teachers considerable concerns (Forlin, 2001). Teachers who are including children with an intellectual disability full-time in their classes are most concerned about classroom issues related to a child’s challenging behaviors and a lack of support, and they also feel a perceived threat towards their own personal competency (Forlin, 2001; Forlin, Keen, & Barrett, in press). In Hong Kong, it has been argued that “policy makers have continually underestimated the role of teachers in the process of change” and that school reform requires them to be active and not passive partners (Crawford, 2002, p. 42). The issue of disruptive classroom behavior has been previously cited as a major task for teachers, even before the push towards including more children with specific behavioral issues had really gained momentum (Leung & Ho, 2001). According to a review of research evidence in Hong Kong regarding the progress made towards inclusive education, Crawford (2002) posits that the top-down reforms have failed and that a more school-based collaborative culture is needed.

Hong Kong is also not considered “a society that is friendly to people with a disability” as it is seen as where systems “collude in creating an exclusion zone” (Pearson, et al., 2003, p. 490). How then can inclusion be realized in schools where it is not reflected in society? Some would argue that “Educational reform begets societal reform” (Zuna, Turnbull, & Brown, 2004, p. 212). Surely as educators it is our duty to be proactive in developing a more inclusive society by ensuring that educational reform establishes a more inclusive agenda. Yet it is difficult to make a decision about how to proceed when there is such a dearth of research to date in Hong Kong regarding the practicalities of how to implement and support a more inclusive educational system. This needs to be addressed, particularly if decisions are to be founded upon strong and validated empirical evidence. Based on the recent findings of Yeun et al. (2004), there would seem to be a long way to go before appropriate inclusive settings can be expected as they hypothesize that:

... it is unwise at this time to expect mainstream primary teachers in Hong Kong to be able to meet these special needs fully, particularly when class sizes are large (35+ students) and teachers appear to lack the necessary expertise or motivation for implementing appropriate in-class remedial interventions (p. 74).

This should, however, not be a deterrent from considering the way forward and looking to establish a more positive and inclusive educational environment for all children. One of the most pressing decisions that needs to be

made in order to do this, nevertheless, is how support can be redesigned using a more collaborative and cohesive approach to enable educational reform for inclusion to take the next step forward.

Supporting learners with special educational needs

The issue of support in the context of the current reform agenda in Hong Kong has been recently considered by a major study on the effectiveness of special schools (Education & Manpower Bureau (EMB), 2005). The review found that:

Special schools are experiencing considerable uncertainty and change, particularly in terms of curriculum reform and a more varied and challenging student intake. They lack a sense of direction and their role within the educational community needs to be redefined (p. vi).

While this review was focused on determining how appropriately special schools were resourced and how they utilized their resources in order to foster student learning and development, the implications are likely to be far reaching as consideration continues to be given as to how they can also support regular schools in becoming more inclusive. Within the main findings of the report it is suggested that special schools should “develop wider roles in relation to developments for responding to student diversity within mainstream schools” (p. iii), and it is also posited that: “... there will be significant changes in their roles, particularly in their partnership with mainstream schools as the process of inclusion develops” (p. iii). More specifically it was envisaged that:

... strong and sustainable special schools, interacting openly and productively with mainstream schools in a way that breaks down existing barriers, and opens up dialogue and professional interchange at a leadership and staff level, as well as providing greater fluidity in student placements (p. 24).

While the report identifies the need “for managers who are skillful and confident in providing effective leadership” it also suggests that there is a great need for quality leadership and improved management at all levels. The central issue is seen as the need to establish a ‘sense of direction’ for special schools and within this it would seem critical to develop a strategic plan for maximizing the use of both human and material resources.

It is important to add a word of caution here. Just because special schools are considered to be ‘well resourced’ this should not be seen as an opportunity to expect them to take on the major responsibility for inclusion support in mainstream schools as well as their existing role. While they

are in the unique position of being able to assist mainstream schools in developing appropriate support mechanisms, the way in which this is done must be strategically planned and with appropriate guidelines and due consideration before embarking on this approach, to ensure its sustainability.

This issue of special schools supporting mainstream schools in Hong Kong is not new, as it has already been trialed by the EMB. Since 2003, special schools have been encouraged to establish mechanisms for supporting their local schools. In the 2004/5 academic year a total of 19 special schools were acting as resource schools. Initially, some funding was made available to assist this, however, in the since 2006 special schools have been asked to continue without any additional financial support.

A number of alternative models of support were initiated by the special schools. The support offered by these trial resource schools was negotiated directly with the individual mainstream schools and, therefore, varied considerably. In a review of three different models employed it was found that in each instance staff from the special schools were putting in considerable effort and time to develop a model that was seen as appropriate to the mainstream school (Forlin, 2006). Unfortunately, these were met with limited success due mainly to a lack of commitment by the regular schools.

The purpose of this research paper is to consider how support can be redesigned to provide a more collaborative, collegial and cohesive approach that is manageable within the current transformations that are occurring in Hong Kong. This will be done by a detailed review of models of support and best practices that have been utilized locally and internationally to support learners with special needs. These will be used to inform the development of a proposed brokerage model of support that is contextually and cultural appropriate for Hong Kong.

Models of Support

Various models of support have been utilized elsewhere that range from segregated and multidisciplinary services to those at the other end of the continuum that are integrated and transdisciplinary (Sandall, McLean, & Smith, 2000). Service delivery in many cases can involve multiple services carried out by a range of providers covering speech-language pathology, audiology, occupational therapy, physical therapists, psychology, medical and assistive technology, among others. In addition, there are (*delete the word ‘other’*) many other stakeholders involved in providing different types

of support such as para-educators or paraprofessionals (e.g. Education Assistants), peripatetic staff, caregivers, parents, social workers, general practitioners, pediatricians, nurses to the child.

Such stakeholders are seen as “Individuals who have a stake or interest in services” (Sandall, et al., 2000, p. 168). Thus it includes all of those responsible for either assessing or providing services to a child, specifically including the parent(s) and the child when appropriate. Generally most educational support services are either provided in the community or in the school, making the school a critical element in coordinating support; but the degree of access to such support varies enormously depending on a jurisdiction’s general legislation or policy and the local situation.

The most restrictive model of support involves a multidisciplinary approach that sees professionals working directly with the family or child but without any cross communication with other service providers. While this is improved by the use of an interdisciplinary approach which involves numerous professionals communicating with each other; in this approach each provider still aims to work directly with the family or school. The least restrictive model and one that is increasingly being promoted, is that of the trans-disciplinary approach. Although this involves professionals working together there is only one person serving as the primary contact with either the parent or the school. This reduces the number of personnel required to make contact with the parents or the school and allows for the development of an optimum climate for establishing trust and engaging in more focused planning without the need for repetition or an overload of information. This is of course not a new approach as the importance of this for service delivery for children with disabilities was initially discussed by Bruder (1997).

A trans-disciplinary approach also provides a much more cohesive support service that is able to focus on the child’s changing developmental needs rather than being locked into a range of services that tend to continue regardless of how useful or appropriate they actually are as the child’s requirements alter. This model is seen as particularly important during early intervention when parents and early childhood advisors are often beleaguered by the number of different support agencies all trying to ‘help’ the child.

Determining Support Required

Determining the amount and type of support required

has always been a controversial issue. Many systems have endeavored to develop and map out comprehensive structures that will enable stakeholders to determine how limited resources can be equitably distributed to cater for children with a diverse range of needs. In many instances these approaches are fraught with disagreement, heavily argued, highly competitive in nature and complex to administer. In addition, they invariably end up forcing stakeholders to inflate the degree of a child’s disability in an attempt to gain more adequate support.

In addition, funding models range from jurisdictions that provide financial support on a per head basis to those that provide generic support to schools encouraging them to utilize the additional monies to cater for all children in their local community (Meijer, Pijl, & Waslander, 1999). Both options have advantages and disadvantages and should be considered carefully before selecting one over the other.

For some children, final decisions about support do not occur in the school system at all, but end up being determined by the legal system under challenges to the enactment of Education or Disability Discrimination Acts (e.g. see case studies in the UK, Konur, 2006). Such decisions are far from satisfactory as they are costly, involve considerable time delays and are often subject to appeal.

Increasingly, researchers are trying to find ways of providing more accurate and empirical methods to determine resource issues directly related to disability evaluation (Barnett, Daly, Jones, & Lentz, 2004). A number of alternative proposals for operationalising how children respond to interventions have been posited (e.g. Fuchs & Fuchs, 1998), which use a response to intervention (RTI) approach for determining the success of support programs. According to Barnett, Daly, Jones, and Lentz (2004), “There are no formulas that are both simple and technically defensible for identifying educational disabilities, especially when service-delivery questions are raised” (p. 77). They do, however, posit that by using a single-case design and direct assessment data, decisions can be made by a team of professionals and parents that are justifiable and authentic as they are based on a child’s response to intervention within a natural environment. Their model employs the concept of intervention intensity, using both increasing and decreasing intensity approaches as the guiding factor in determining resource and support decisions.

Models such as the one proposed by Barnett et al. (2004), are based on the underlying concept and legislation in the USA that each child should be able to access regular classes until it becomes clear that after undergoing effective

instruction, which is supported by detailed progress monitoring, that in order to further develop, they need to access special education. Such a concept is the epitome of inclusion. This is not yet the case in Hong Kong. Indeed, although the fact that there are 'inclusive' schools and that the new philosophy on 'whole schooling' is actively promoted, in reality across all jurisdictions including both government and private, it is generally an integration concept that is fostered, whereby, the child must meet the requirements of the system if they wish to be included in a regular class (Forlin, 2007).

A truly whole school approach includes and involves all community members in every aspect of school life, by empowering students, their families and staff. A school following this philosophy does not segregate or discriminate against students of differing ability, ethnicity, gender or socio-economic status (Consortium of Whole Schooling, 2004). Such a move toward whole schooling is underpinned by the determination, enthusiasm and the positive attitude of all stakeholders involved (Peterson, 2004).

To be able to take inclusion further in Hong Kong there is, therefore, an immediate need to develop valid and appropriate decision-making frameworks that will assist schools in both determining a child's needs and in providing access to appropriate advice and support. Without a justifiable and well conceived support program, it is going to be extremely difficult for regular schools to become fully inclusive or enact an authentic whole schooling approach. Such a support program would also need to consider the cultural context within the Asian educational system to ensure that it is manageable and appropriate within the fairly structured schooling systems that still exist.

Best Practice

So what then is 'best practice' for providing support for students with disabilities or special needs when included in regular schools? More importantly, how can these practices help inform the development of suitable support systems for learners with disabilities in Hong Kong? An extensive review of literature has found that best practice ideas are frequently found in the form of guidelines, standards, policies or position papers. Others are embedded as recommendations within major reports. In addition, some guides are designed specifically by separate professional groups such as physical therapists or speech therapists, where they develop and publish guidelines for their own professional organizations. Such practices are also usually developed for different age

groups of children with a different focus on early childhood, primary and secondary groups.

Most professionals would argue that best practice should be determined by input from stakeholders and research; yet in many instances the rate of published research lags well behind the rate at which practices need to be implemented (Rapport, McWilliam, & Smith, 2004). What is clear, though, is that once implemented there needs to be a strong empirical base for continuing to support an intervention. As has been stated:

Without the ability to demonstrate successful outcomes that have been measured and recorded through such research, a sense of skepticism looms over the ability of the field to demonstrate that it is knowledgeable and progressive (Rapport et al., 2004, p. 40).

This does not mean that observation, experience and shared interactions are no longer relevant when reviewing an intervention, but that these must be supported by data that will provide a stronger foundation for supporting such practice. The collection of such information should also sustain the wish for greater accountability through evidence-based practice and increased openness that is essential if practices are to be better accepted and more willingly supported. This is particularly relevant when seeking financial support within tight fiscal constraints. To be able to request additional funding to support best practice ideas, it is incumbent upon those seeking the backing to provide appropriate and indisputable evidence; thus strengthening their argument for the additional support. In the same way, many would argue that specialist support services should be re-framed to be in place before barriers are created rather than focusing on providing an array of services after students are failing (Deppeler, Loreman, & Sharma, 1995).

Traditional models of support in regular schools have included pull-out programs, self contained classrooms, remedial classes, resource rooms and in class support with an educational assistant (EA). More recently programs such as co-teaching have also been introduced. Increasingly, support is moving away from a withdrawal mode to in-class support, or in many jurisdictions to actually working collaboratively with the regular class teacher to support the teacher, rather than working in the class with the child (Loreman et al., 2005). In Hong Kong the role of the special school is also being seriously considered in respect of how it can best assist in this process. When considering how support can be redesigned to enable a more collaborative, collegial and cohesive approach to educational reform for inclusion, it is vital to consider the availability of support and the category

of school, as the type of program offered may need to vary considerably depending upon these.

Redesigning Support for Early Childhood Education

It is commonly argued that including children with special needs is easier to do in early childhood settings and that teachers are more accepting and less concerned by the inclusion of younger children. Interestingly, in research just completed in Western Australia (WA) with teachers engaged with the inclusion of a child with an intellectual disability in their mainstream classroom, the opposite was found (Forlin et al., 2006). In general, teachers reported that the areas of most concern for them during inclusion were those associated with their perceived professional competence and classroom issues such as the child having a short attention span, poor communication and inappropriate social skills; they were also concerned about their own difficulty in monitoring others and their perceived reduced ability to teach all students as effectively as they would like when attending to the specific child. Of the sample of 244 teachers from 111 schools within 16 districts across WA, 50% were teaching in the K-3 years. For these teachers their concerns regarding such classroom issues, and threats to their professional or personal competency were significantly higher ($p < .05$) than those teaching in upper primary Years 4 – 7 ($N=97$), in lower secondary Years 8-10 ($N=18$), or in upper secondary Years 11-12 ($N=7$). Clearly, when redesigning support such differences must be carefully considered.

Best practices for early intervention, as recommended by the Division for Early Childhood (DEC) within the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) in the USA are, for example, based on seven strands and include 240 specific recommendations (see Sandall, McLean, & Smith, 2000, for a more detailed report of these). Based on these the DEC promotes four theoretical creeds that summarize their early intervention support programs for children with special needs. These include the necessity for teamwork; the use of a trans-disciplinary model of service delivery; the delivery of a functional intervention program; and the use of services that are practical for regular caregivers e.g. parents. Such a process of service delivery is seen as critical as stated by Sandall, McLean, and Smith (2000):

Traditional medical-model or school-based model practices, in which different team members perform largely independently, is antithetical to recommended practices in early intervention/ early childhood special education. A critical value embedded in transdisciplinary

practices is the exchange of competencies between team members. This not only makes intervention more holistic and complete but enhances team members' abilities (p. 48).

The CEC places a lot of credence on the use of a functional approach and in particular one that is *do-able* by the family and teachers. Functional interventions pertain to those that are deemed to be necessary for a child to engage, act independently, and develop appropriate social relationships while in their natural context e.g. community or school, rather than being withdrawn and exposed to interventions in unnatural and contrived remedial rooms. By doing this, it is easier to consider any physical limitations or educational need in the environment within which the child intends to function. Expecting parents or schools to implement a demanding or unrealistic agenda is unlikely in the long term to be sustainable. Other interdisciplinary models for providing support for young children include the VT_RAP assessment coordinator approach (Prelock, Beatson, Bitner, Broder, & Ducker, 2003), which includes families as active participants and collaborators.

Redesigning Support for Primary Education

In an ever-increasing number of jurisdictions, the best practice promoted for accommodating students in regular classes is the differentiated teaching approach (Wragg, Haynes, Wragg, & Chamberlain, 2000), which should ideally be developed and led by the classroom teacher. This type of model promotes a change in focus from a support teacher withdrawing students to work directly with them (*delete the word "or"*) to providing support for the regular class teacher in their classroom. While some support teachers may work in a co-teaching model, others are progressively discovering that they need to work outside of the classroom to help the regular class teacher plan for their own interventions. In consequence, the ownership for implementing the modifications to the curriculum becomes the direct responsibility of the regular class teacher, making them accountable for all students in their class, with or without another teacher in the room.

Unfortunately, to date, differentiating the curriculum has not been well received by teachers in Hong Kong, where there is a reluctance to modify programs due to the pressures of an examination led curriculum (Tomlinson, 2001) and where teachers "struggle to manage the disparate academic standards among students" (Pearson et al., 2003, p. 489). Investigations of the strategies used by primary teachers to accommodate students with different abilities in Hong Kong

have generally reported that teachers make relatively few adaptations, relying mainly on class peers to provide assistance (Chan, Chang, Westwood, & Yeun, 2002; Yeun, Westwood & Wong, 2004). According to Poon-McBrayer (2004), the government's expectation that schools will adapt instruction, assessment and homework has been ineffectual, as other than providing limited additional time, no accommodations on public examinations has been allowed, thus schools are reluctant to provide these for their assessments.

In western countries, where a fairly structured and consistently implemented program of support is generally available, a method that is typically used or proactively sought by many teachers is the use of a paraprofessional such as an Educational Assistant (EA) in the classroom to support a child with special needs. There has, however, been much concern raised that such delivery models place the least qualified person in the position of providing for the most needy students. There is also virtually no empirical data that actually demonstrates that students do as well or better in school when provided with a paraprofessional (Giangreco & Broer, 2005). In addition, having an educational assistant as the primary 'teacher' for the child can have adverse effects by reducing the engagement of the actual teacher with the child. Models of support whereby the EA is allocated to support a program, rather than just one child, have been seen to result in more frequent exemplars of teacher engagement with students with disabilities than when the EA is supporting in a one-on-one approach (Forlin & Bamford, 2005; Giangreco, Broer, & Edelman, 2001). Yet it is the latter method that seems to dominate requests by many classroom teachers when being asked to include students with special needs in their classes. Employing an EA should be considered as part of a holistic movement that supports the collaborative teaming approach that many promote as essential for meeting a child's goals and objectives (e.g. see Shairo & Sayres, 2003). It should not be seen as the only approach.

Redesigning Support for Secondary Education

Even in the most developed countries, the impact of inclusion on secondary schools has been marginal (Forlin, 2005). As ever more primary school aged children experience inclusive placements, though, the demand for this to be continued into high schools will also increase. In many instances the challenges for developing more inclusive high schools is exacerbated by the very nature of the school system (Pearce & Forlin, 2005). This is particularly significant in Hong Kong, where the examination led system

is even more prevalent than in primary schools, and the banding system means that only Band 3 schools are ever likely to be available for students with academic difficulties (Forlin, 2006). There are, however, some excellent models of support that have been used very effectively in secondary schools to enhance the engagement of students with special needs. The best ones in high schools utilize models that focus on the child as the central point while using a teaming approach.

One good example of these seems to be the Wrap Around Kids™ (<http://www.wraparoundkids.com/index.htm>) program. This program was developed in Australia to address the needs of children who do not necessarily fit well into schools. Its main focus is to assist teachers by providing practical strategies for managing students with different learning styles and challenging behaviors. The model (*delete the words* "it employs") engages all stakeholders in regular sharing sessions held at the school, that consider all aspects of a student's educational and medical needs. In particular, the student's general practitioner is a key participant as are the parent(s) and the students themselves. The focus is on the student and his / her needs and resolving what has to be done to enable better participation in school and the community. It takes a very proactive role focusing on establishing positive outcomes for all.

Many schools have also initiated support programs that consider the local context and specific needs of their own student clientele (e.g. Forlin & Bamford, 2005). Such support models are invaluable as they aim to utilize existing facilities and staff and are able to be flexible in order to cater for the ever changing needs of a school community. In order to be able to justify sufficient time to implement them appropriately, support models that consider the needs of all students rather than just those with specific difficulties may be the more appropriate.

Important key Issues in Redesigning Support in Hong Kong

Undoubtedly there are a variety of different best practices promoted for supporting students with learning difficulties across the different age groups. There are, however, several continuous themes that permeate across all of these. The first would be the need for a trans-disciplinary approach to providing support, which ensures a more cohesive approach across a range of peripatetic staff. The second is the movement away from withdrawing students

towards providing support within mainstream classes, which can then cater for a much wider group of students in a more inclusive placement. The third is the need to initiate support procedures that are practical and able to be sustained. The fourth is to ensure that support programs are student focused and based on a strong research foundation.

When redesigning support for learners with disabilities in Hong Kong or other Asian countries, it is essential to consider a number of other issues. These include the need for a transparent system that can support all learners; consideration of what is manageable if special schools are to support inclusion; the need for open communication between families and support agencies; and how an increasing number of support services can be managed effectively. It is also imperative to consider the cultural implications as many adjustments may be needed when importing support programs utilized in the West.

The need for a transparent system that reflects the need of all stakeholders and has the potential to support all children.

It is clear that if schools in Hong Kong are to become more inclusive then they need to consider and plan to better meet the needs of all children. Allocating small amounts of money to schools based on an individual’s diagnosis of ‘disability’ (as defined by the EMB) may not be the most economical or desirable way forward. It will in reality

provide nothing more than what could be seen as a ‘token’ effect. It will deliver only a limited and interim solution that, without any process for accountability or links to pedagogical or curricula change, is not likely to make a difference to the inclusion movement. Indeed, while this may be able to provide some limited help to a focus child, it is unlikely to offer any benefits to other children or to help a teacher improve their teaching for the advantage of all. Concomitant with the lack of empirical data to identify or justify outcomes when using a dollar per person method of resourcing, this approach clearly needs to be reconsidered.

The role of the special school – what is possible?

If the current support model is to be changed to make it a more cohesive, sustainable and ‘do-able’ approach in Hong Kong, then it has to be redesigned to maximize the use of existing structures. It has already been posited that “The formidable task facing schools when they try to achieve improvement may become more manageable and effective it can become more focused” (Duchnowski, Kutash, & Oliveira, 2004, p. 128). It is in this regard that special schools may be able to make the most impact. It should be fairly clear that the current resource school model that suggests that special schools should support local mainstream schools with children with learning problems, when being implemented without any funding, is far from ideal. Yet there is little doubt (*delete the words “in my mind”*) that special schools should

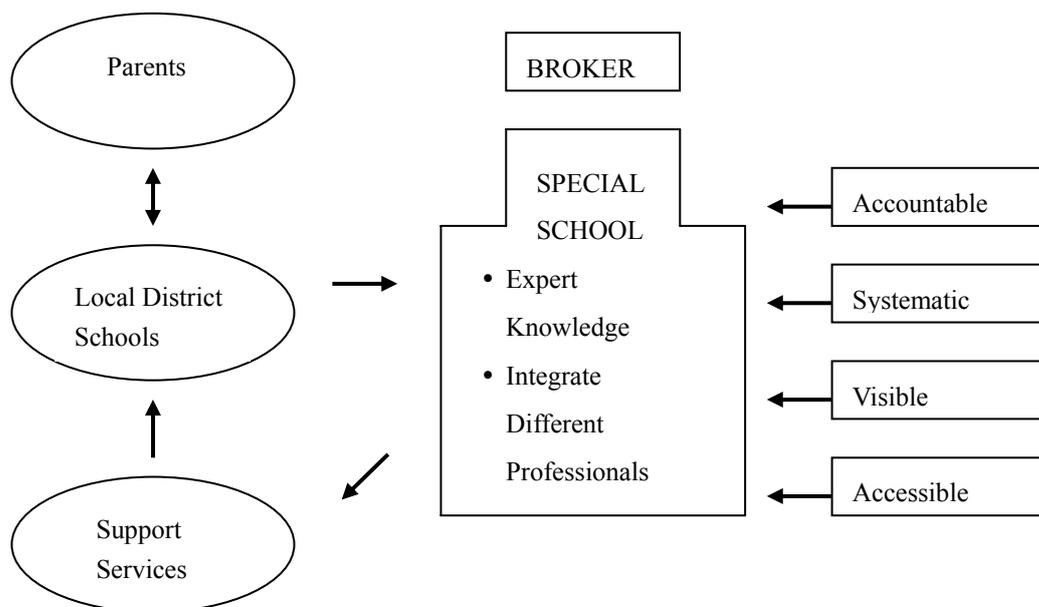


Figure 1. A brokerage model of support

be able to provide a leading role in furthering educational reform for inclusion.

Let me propose consideration then for an alternative brokerage model of support. If the role of the special school was to act as a broker for support services within their district, then their expert knowledge in the area of children's needs, together with an in-depth understanding of the availability of existing support and their ability to integrate different professionals, could enable them to assist regular schools in selecting and accessing what really is best for their children.

By utilizing a case-based approach this would also be more focused and result in a support program that was more manageable and sustainable than trying to implement a dual teaching role of working both within a special school and a regular school with little or no additional time or funding to organize this. Teachers trained to work in special schools should be well placed to effectively integrate the traditional functions of different professionals and to provide appropriate expertise to enable others to support children in regular classes. To enable this to happen, mainstream schools would need to allocate an Inclusion Support facilitator in each school, as has been done in many other systems (eg. Australia, UK, and the USA). These support facilitators could then work collaboratively with designated teachers from the special schools to guide mainstream schools in developing workable support models and could also provide the necessary help needed to initiate new programs.

Open communication between families and support agencies.

Parents need to be kept up to date on the type of support their child needs and how it is being provided in the school. Providing a brokerage approach that has a high level of accountability, is systematic, visible and accessible may be a more appropriate way to enable support to be redesigned to better meet the needs of all students; while accessing the most appropriate professionals in a more collegial way. It would also ensure that teachers could make a more informed decision about what is best for a child if they are fully cognizant of exactly what support the parent is providing for the child and what has been previously accessed; whether it is government or privately funded. To employ a brokerage model that works on a case based approach using a trans-disciplinary method, the case worker (designated special school teacher) would work with all other stakeholders to consider the services that are needed and coordinate and select the most relevant for the child's changing needs and for the school. They could also ensure that empirical data were

collected and used to inform the decision-making process.

Managing an increasing number of support services

As parents become more aware of the special needs of their child and of the increasingly sophisticated services that are available, they tend to become even more confused about where to go for help and are uncertain about what each service actually provides. While the proposed brokerage approach to support would undoubtedly assist in helping parents, para-professionals and schools to make decisions, it is not always easy to identify the range of options that are available. In this regard a recently launched *Federation in Community Support* (FICS) website in Hong Kong provides a central hub for parents and schools seeking information about the various support services and options available to children with all types of special needs (<http://www2.ied.edu.hk/fpece/fics>).

The Way Forward

In summary then, the way forward in Hong Kong and other Asian countries would seem to require responding to a number of challenges. While issues such as elitism, large class sizes, a lack of inclusive or collaborative school cultures, less than supportive teacher attitudes and insufficient training have all been recognized as major stumbling blocks for inclusive education in Hong Kong (e.g. Crawford, 2002; Forlin, 2006; Forlin, in press; Hogan, 2005; Pearson et al., Poon-McBrayer, 2004; Wong, 2002), it is the immediacy and critical issue of support that requires the most urgent attention. Initially, this will necessitate a reconceptualisation of what support should be provided and how this can be coordinated across a range of stakeholders.

To enable this to be cohesive, a process such as the proposed brokerage model should be considered to facilitate the development of a more collaborative and collegial approach between special and mainstream schools, parents and other paraprofessionals. Such a model will need to be supported by a strategic plan that is developed in consultation with all stakeholders and that considers the needs of both regular and special schools, teachers and the needs of all children, not just those with specific disabilities. A brokerage model could be suitably applied across all age levels as it allows for sufficient flexibility to address the changing support needs of learners at different ages. To initiate the proposed brokerage model, whereby special schools would take on the role of case managers and mainstream schools would nominate support facilitators; appropriate professional

development and training will be necessary to ensure a consistent and shared approach and the provision of quality support for all learners.

The model would also need to respond to cultural differences found between the East and the West. In particular, the idea of inclusive education is relatively new in most Asian countries compared to most western ones (Crawford, 2002; Forlin, 2006; Forlin & Lian, in press; Poon-McBrayer, 2004) and the Confucian philosophy promotes somewhat different values and beliefs which may also impact on inclusion (Forlin, 2007). Many challenges have also had to be faced by other educational systems (Forlin, 2006a), therefore Asian countries can gain a lot from their experiences. Furthermore, schools in Hong Kong are the products of a system where students are 'streamed' according to ability (Pearson, et al., 2003); thus contextual adjustments may be required to ensure that special school teachers are not only able but also willing to act as brokers.

Hong Kong is currently on the cusp of implementing major reforms in the area of special education. The recent comprehensive review of special schools; the range of educational reforms that will impact all children; the new 3-3-4 curriculum structure; the new senior secondary school curriculum for learners with intellectual disabilities; the increasing voice of parents; together with the opportunity to reflect in hindsight on the successes and failures of other systems; places Hong Kong in an ideal position to really make a difference for all of its new generations of children. Educational reform will unquestionably see an increase in integrated educational practices in Hong Kong. If these are to become truly 'inclusive in practice' and not just in name, then the whole issue of support must be addressed in a more visible, systematic, manageable and accountable manner; where decisions are supported by appropriate empirical evidence and made by teams of professionals in collaboration with parents.

There must be a clear educationally defensible vision which articulates and clarifies a culturally sensitive service delivery model that builds on best practice elsewhere but that is unique to the local context and is based on a strong foundation with the support of all stakeholders. This is not a case for putting a finger in a hole in the hope that it will stop the leak – it is a case for redesigning and rebuilding the wall.

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