

**The government should strengthen integrated education practices to support students with special educational needs**

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#### **Preamble**

Nowadays, over 30,000 students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) study in mainstream schools in Hong Kong. These students need greater assistance to keep up with others. We have thus put forward this motion with an aim to address the shortcomings of the current Integrated Education system, with the aim of SEN students' better learning experience and outcomes in mainstream schools.

#### **Background**

##### *The definition and aims of Integrated Education*

According to the definition provided by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 2009, Inclusive Education (i.e., Integrated Education in Hong Kong) means addressing the needs of all learners by strengthening the functions of the education system. The Hong Kong Legislative Council defines Integrated Education as “educating SEN students in mainstream schools”. According to the *Operation Guide on The Whole School Approach to Integrated Education* issued by the Education Bureau, “Integrated Education aims to empower all ordinary schools to provide high quality educational services through catering for student diversity and SEN. The objective is to develop the potentials of every student, to promote mutual respect of individual differences among teachers and students and to cultivate an inclusive school culture.”

##### *The definition of Special Educational Needs (SEN)*

There are nine types of Special Educational Needs (SEN): Attention Deficit/ Hyperactivity Disorders (ADHD), Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD), Communication Difficulties (CD), Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (EBD), Hearing Impairment (HI), Visual Impairment (VI), Intellectual Disability (ID), Physical Disability (PD), and Specific Learning Difficulties (SLD). According to the report of the Subcommittee on Integrated Education of the Legislative Council in September 2014, there are currently 33,830 SEN students studying in mainstream schools.

#### **Current Situation**

##### *Problems facing SEN students*

SEN students face many obstacles. For example, students with SLD encounter deficiencies when reading, writing, listening and speaking, including unclear pronunciation, unidentifiable handwriting, and unsatisfactory organizational skills, which would seriously hamper their performance in coursework and exams. Compared with other students, SLD students have to spend extra time on coursework at a cost of insufficient rest, inadequate entertainment and other activities. However, their grades remain unsatisfactory. These academic setbacks harm their self-confidence.

Some SEN students, such as those with autism or Hyperactivity Disorder (HD), find it difficult to keep their temper in check. They often disrupt classes by making noise or behaving in what is deemed a “naughty” manner, resulting in poor interpersonal relationships. They are susceptible to isolation and bullying, both of which carry significantly impact for physical and mental health.

### *Insufficient training for pre-service and in-service teachers*

The current policy stipulates that pre-service teachers must take a core course on Integrated Education. Students from the Hong Kong Institute of Education can further their understanding of the subject by taking Integrated Education as a minor. However, only around 30 students opt to take the course every year. Professor Sin Kuen-fung from the Executive Committee of the scholar-formed Support Group of Integrated Education explained that students enrolled in teacher training programmes often preferred other electives to Integrated Education, which, in their opinion, had limited career prospects and lacked professional recognition.

Currently, the Education Bureau does not require in-service teachers in Integrated Education programmes to acquire professional qualifications. Schools only need to send 10-15% of teachers to attend a 30-hour introductory course on Integrated Education, to which the schools fail to actively respond. In addition, teachers taking the course are only required to provide a written account of their experiences, methods and reflections in dealing with students with SEN. There is little guarantee about the quality of service or support to SEN students.

In 2010, the Equal Opportunities Commission commissioned the Centre for Special Educational Needs and Integrated Education of the Hong Kong Institute of Education to conduct a research project named “Study on Equal Learning Opportunity for Students with Disabilities under the Integrated Education System”. About 5,000 teachers and students participated in the questionnaire survey and 475 stakeholders took part in the interview study. The findings show that only 26% of principals had taken professional development courses on Integrated Education, while 49% of teachers had never received any training in this regard. In addition, less than 2% of principals and teachers held a profession certificate or a Bachelor’s Degree in special needs education.

Many respondents stated that overburdened teachers had little time to offer support to students with different SEN. Teachers were also worried about after taking on relevant courses, they would be allocated SEN students to care for, which would increase their workload. This would easily translate into a sense of helplessness, even a dislike for SEN students. All these point to the lack of knowledge of and support for Integrated Education among teachers.

### *School’s cooperation*

#### Hurdles in admission

According to the Disability Discrimination Ordinance, schools are not allowed to reject the applications of SEN students admitted through regular application procedures. However, many parents still find it difficult to have their SEN children enrolled in normal schools. Schools are reportedly reluctant to admit SEN students, in particular those with EBD, ASD and ADHD. Those schools turning down the applications of SEN students, offer various excuses. Most schools fail to provide information related to their implementation of the Integrated Education policy, such as the transfer rate of SEN students and the ratio of SEN students to normal students. In most cases,

schools provide special facilities to physically impaired students but neglect due assistance for other SEN students.

### Palliative adjustments

Some special arrangements for SEN students are made in many schools during exams, such as enlarging the fonts and exam papers, allowing them to use computers (i.e. word processors) or Braille or even hiring amanuenses for them. However, the learning difficulties for SEN students lie not in the exams but in classes and daily school life.

### Lack of professional assistance

Parents we have interviewed, non-governmental organisations, legislators, the Equal Opportunities Commission and the Hong Kong Institute of Education all agree that early identification and intervention services are crucial to the improvement of the conditions of SEN students, as well as to their adaptation to the learning environment and inclusion in mainstream schools. However, based on the current School-based Educational Psychology Service (SBEPS), each educational psychologist (EP) is responsible for SEN students in about 7.5 schools. They are unable to provide suitable care and services. As a result, schools cannot identify SEN students at early stages and provide timely intervention.

## **Recommendations**

### A. Legislation and monitoring mechanism

To thoroughly strengthen its practices, legislation is needed to ensure the implementation of Integrated Education in Hong Kong. The government should follow the examples of UK, US and Taiwan to establish an Integrated Education Law through referencing their laws, enactment processes, practices of handling lawsuits and executive problems. In implementing Integrated Education, individual learning and teaching plans should be formulated and reviewed regularly based on the capability and needs of SEN students. The government should help strengthen teachers' training and qualification accreditations and set up monitoring mechanisms and appeal systems on Integrated Education. In addition, a Supervisory Committee for Integrated Education should be set up and empowered to examine the account books and reports, etc., monitor schools' support to SEN students, and to direct criticism toward unqualified schools so as to further improve Integrated Education practices in Hong Kong.

### B. Early identification and strengthened support

We notice that many SEN students remain unidentified until their primary or secondary years. The government should offer more resources, enhance mechanisms in pre-school evaluation and strengthen school-based educational psychology services to identify the needs of SEN students as early as possible. Suitable treatments and early learning assistance can therefore be provided to prevent further deterioration.

We suggest that the government should allocate more resources to Integrated Education and simplify its approval procedures. In this way, the identified SEN students can receive immediate assistance to avoid being affected academically by inefficient administrative arrangements

including insufficient facilities and support in schools, complicated approval processes, and prolonged procurement procedures for relevant facilities, etc.

#### C. Improving the training and qualification accreditation for pre- and in-service teachers

We recommend that Integrated Education should be made compulsory in the pre-service training courses. A practical session should be included in the course so that pre-service teachers can master the skills needed to teach SEN students effectively.

For in-service teachers, we propose that the Education Bureau should see to the concrete implementation of the regulation that each school must send 10-15% teachers to attend a 30-hour introductory course on Integrated Education so that SEN students in those schools can be ensured of proper care. Moreover, exams should be held at the end of the course to enhance the effectiveness of the course and ensure that teachers are capable and qualified to support SEN students.

Furthermore, we recommend that teachers qualified for Integrated Education should be given recognition. A post of “Integrated Education Coordinator” (IEC) can be set up. This measure allows the teacher-in-charge to follow up issues related to SEN students. The IECs should be given salaries commensurate with their added workload as an incentive for teachers to take the Integrated Education course.

#### D. Strengthening parental and public education

The general public remains largely ill-informed about Integrated Education and SEN students. In fact, many parents fail to realize the fact that their children may have special education needs and attribute their learning difficulties to laziness, unintelligence or disobedience. These children are thus deprived of the assistance and treatment they need. One can only imagine the pressure they suffer. We suggest that the government should offer information about SEN to parents, including the types, symptoms and caring techniques of SEN. Parents should also be provided channels to obtain relevant community services and ways to understand Integrated Education so as to choose appropriate schools for their children. This way, parents can identify as early as possible the issues in their children and be positive in dealing with these issues. Parents should also be encouraged to keep closely in touch with schools to help their children adapt to life in mainstream schools. Meanwhile, parents of ordinary children can also have a deeper understanding of children with SEN and teach their children to be tolerant towards their classmates.

The government should strengthen publicity efforts to inform the general public about the actual situation of the students with SEN through various channels such as announcement of public interest videos and posters to boost public awareness and dispel misunderstanding of SEN.

### **Conclusion**

Given the considerable number of SEN students receiving education in mainstream schools, Integrated Education policy has to involve many parties including schools, teachers and children. We propose to improve the current Integrated Education through different avenues: legislation, early identification, teacher training, education and publicity. We hope that this motion can be passed in the Children’s Council and will serve to give SEN students a bright future.

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