

Education Reform in Hong Kong:
Implications for Special Education

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Abstract

The main purpose of this paper is to examine and analyze implications for provisions of special education in the light of the current massive reform of the education system in Hong Kong. This paper first examines the background of the current reform of the entire education system in Hong Kong. It presents the context of Hong Kong's education reform, current provisions of special education in mainstream schools, provisions within the reform framework, and finally analyzes the implications for special needs children. This paper criticizes the policymakers' lack of commitment in (a) providing for special needs children, (b) providing support and resources for schools to transform into an inviting diversified learning environment, and (c) use of special educators from being part of this reform. Recommendations to ensure the realization of the goals of the reform include: (a) increasing collaboration between general and special education personnel, (b) more vigorous plans of personnel preparation, (c) reducing teacher workload, and (d) nurturing school personnel to be active learners.

Education Reform in Hong Kong: Implications for Special Education

Reform of any kind signifies an effort to improve, reorganize, restructure, modify, and/or transform. In the last few decades of the 20th century, education in many countries was involved in a number of reforms. Education reform is closely tied with a nation's economic and political developments. The globalization of economy and politics provides an impetus for even more education reforms (Currie & Newson, 1998; Davis & Guppy, 1997; Fretwell & Wheeler, 2001a; Fretwell & Wheeler, 2001b; Fretwell & Wheeler, 2001c; Fretwell & Wheeler, 2001d; Fretwell & Wheeler, 2001e; Liang, 2001; Linden, 2001; Mok, 2000a; Mok, 2000b; Nation, 2001; Ramos & Fletcher, 1999) and continues to reduce education to a subsector of the economy (McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2001; Selwyn & Brown, 2000). Education as a tool to produce citizens for what a nation needs becomes a standard practice.

Education reforms may target at increasing and improving free public education (e.g., Fretwell & Wheeler, 2001a; Liang, 2001), decentralizing power and supervision to local authorities or schools themselves (e.g., Fretwell & Wheeler, 2001b; Liang, 2001), improving the standards of the majority of students and learning of skills necessary for the information technology era (e.g., Currie & Newson, 1998; Davis & Guppy, 1997). The market- and economy-driven reforms focus on producing citizens who can further advance the economy and create more wealth for their nations. Therefore, the majority of recent education reforms are standards-based such as those in the United States (Finn & Rebarber, 1992), the United Kingdom (HMSO, 1994), Spain (Boyd-Barrett & O'Malley, 1995), Australia (Ginsburg, Cooper, Raghu, & Zegarra, 1990), New Zealand (Ginsburg, Cooper, Raghu, & Zegarra, 1990), Poland (Fretwell & Wheeler, 2001b), Hungary (Fretwell & Wheeler, 2001a), Thailand (Nation, 2001), Taiwan (Mok, 2000a), and China (Liang, 2001).

In the midst of raising standards, ensuring accountability, outcome-based evaluation, resource shortage, and inclusion movement, provisions for children with special needs are

naturally and easily neglected in these reforms. In late 1990s, Mexico did also make an effort to address needs of children with disabilities and children from diverse backgrounds when formulating education reforms (Ramos & Fletcher, 1999). Meanwhile, the United States government in the 1997 re-authorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act called for inclusion of children with special needs in general curriculum and standardized testing (Vohs, Landau, Romano, 1999) as part of the effort of moving toward the standards-based and outcome accountability education reform.

The globalization of capitalism has certainly exerted its influence on Hong Kong and its education provision (Mok, 2000b). In 1999, Hong Kong launched an education reform through a massive review of the current education system. This reform proposal has much in common with reforms implemented in other countries. How this proposed reform will affect the provision for children with special needs deserves attention but has hardly been discussed. The purpose of this article is to examine the reform proposal in light of how the provision of special education will be like when this reform is implemented.

The Context of Hong Kong's Education Reform

Hong Kong is no exception to the impetus provided by the globalization of capitalism to have education reforms (Mok, 2000). In Hong Kong, education initiatives remained rather stagnant until the provision of education became free and compulsory for 6 years in 1971. When the free and compulsory education was extended to 9 years in 1978, schools began to experience unprecedented need to meet diverse needs in the classrooms. The diversity and number of students with learning/ behavioral problems has since increased rapidly (Board of Education, 1997). In the last two decades, reforms of various focuses such as activity approach, whole language approach, target oriented curriculum, school-based management, integration of children with disabilities, and the establishment of parent-teacher associations

were initiated and implemented. In 1999, the Education Commission of Hong Kong initiated another reform through a massive review of the education system.

This initiative stemmed from the necessity to respond to and to function in a rapidly changing world in areas of economy and technology (Education Commission, 2000). The Hong Kong policy makers were dissatisfied with inadequacies within the existing education system in enabling people to achieve lifelong learning and all-round education, the low learning effectiveness of students, examination-driven teaching and learning, and little attention to 'learning to learn' (Education Commission, 2000). The new role and functions of education are 'to enhance knowledge, ability, quality, cultivation, and international outlook of the people of Hong Kong' (Education Commission, 2000, p. 29).

Principles that direct the reform include: (a) focusing on students, (b) no-loser, (c) quality, (d) life-wide learning, and (e) society-wide mobilization (Education Commission, 2000, p. 6). Therefore, the reform targets at: (a) building a lifelong learning society, (b) raising the overall quality of students, (c) constructing a diverse school system, (d) creating an inspiring learning environment, (e) acknowledging the significance of moral education, and (f) developing an education system that is rich in tradition but cosmopolitan and culturally diverse (Education Commission, 2000). More specifically, the review of the education system focused on and made recommendations on the academic structure, the curricula, the assessment mechanism of all levels of education, and the interface between various levels (Education Commission, 2000). These focuses will be examined and its impact or implications for the provision of special education will be discussed and analyzed.

Current Provisions of Special Education

In Hong Kong, provisions of special education are mainly achieved in separate settings in special schools for children with intellectual disabilities, physical disabilities, visual impairments, hearing impairments, medical conditions, and severe emotional

difficulties/social maladjustments. More children are now integrated into the mainstream schools to study alongside their non-disabled counterparts.

Because this reform targets at improving education in the mainstream schools, its impact is primarily on the children with special needs in those schools. Therefore, we will focus on examining the current provisions of special education in mainstream schools and then what the provisions will be under this reform plan. We will briefly describe the development of special education services in Hong Kong and then outline currently available services and its structure.

Before World War II, special education was mainly care-giving and the government's role in special education was minimal and negligible (Board of Education, 1996). Voluntary and charitable organizations played a major role in building special schools and residential facilities to provide care and education for children with special needs. The government became more active with the establishment of the Special Education Section within the Education Department of Hong Kong. The number of special schools continued to rise and more resources were allocated for special education provisions.

In 1977, policy statements on the need to integrate children with disabilities were first found in the education policy paper "Integrating the Disabled into the Community" (Board of Education, 1977). Following this policy paper, a system of diagnosis, classification, and referrals was developed and special education became more education oriented. The policy-making responsibility was later transferred to the Education and Manpower Bureau (EMB). The policy of integration was repeated in the Report of the Sub-Committee on Special Education (Board of Education, 1996). Educational provisions for children with special needs are closely tied to and affected by the current policies and system. We will examine the provisions in both segregated and integrated settings.

Despite the policy of integration since 1977, education for children with special needs is primarily accomplished in segregated settings in Hong Kong. Currently, there are seven types of special schools in Hong Kong and seven types of disabilities/impairments are categorized: visual impairments, hearing impairments, physical disabilities, mild mental retardation, mild and moderate mental retardation, severe mental retardation, and maladjustment. Two other types of schools are funded as but not considered as special schools: skills opportunity schools (for students with severe learning difficulties) and practical schools (for academically unmotivated students). Both types of schools have a practical component that takes up about half of the learning time to reduce the academic demand and to prepare students with practical job skills. These two types of schools only admit students from grades 7 to 9. Students may apply to continue their education in mainstream schools but must compete with those students who are already in mainstream schools. If they fail in being admitted to mainstream schools, they may have to join the work force or try evening schools for adults.

In the mainstream schools, students who may receive services are mainly students with mild-to-moderate learning and behavioral difficulties. Provisions are different at elementary and secondary levels.

Provision at the Elementary School Level

A screening/referral procedure is established for early identification at the end of Primary One. Primary One teachers are given a Teacher Observation Checklist to identify children who may have difficulties that require special services. The checklists are sent to the educational psychologists of the Education Department who will then decide if the child needs an assessment. An assessment using attainment tests on Chinese, English, and math will then be administered. If a child is found to be performing at least two grades behind in two of the three subjects, he/she is considered having learning difficulties. Retention or

remedial help is a common recommendation. Formats of remedial help include pull-out resource classes, before- or after-school in-school tutorials, and after-school or weekend tutorials at designated resource teaching centers.

Resource class. Because schools are not ordered to provide remedial help, only a small number of primary schools have established resource classes. Resource classes generally only serve students from Primary 3 to 6. Schools will arrange up to 16 students from two grades to attend a resource class at the same time, generally Primary 3 and 4 together and Primary 5 and 6 for the same period. Resource teachers do not usually have any training in working with children with various types of learning difficulties. Both resource teachers and their students are responsible for covering the standard curriculum and students have to take the same examinations at the end of the semester.

Non-pull-out in-school tutorials. Schools that do not want to pull students out of the classrooms may choose to provide small-group tutorials, normally up to 10 per class, to students identified with learning difficulties. Because many elementary schools are still operating on a half-day schedule, schools may offer tutorials either before or after school, depending on the school session to which students belong.

Resource teaching centers. The Education Department of Hong Kong has also established some resource teaching centers for students whose schools do not offer any remedial help. Students may choose to attend two sessions after school during the week or one session on Saturdays.

Provisions at the Secondary School Level

Under the current system, mainstream secondary schools are classified into three leagues, namely 'bands', based on the performance of their students in public examinations. 'Band One' schools admit students with most promising academic potentials based on their performance in school and public examinations upon completing Primary 6. Understandably,

‘Band Three’ schools admit students with the poorest performance. As mentioned earlier, students with severe learning difficulties may be placed in practical schools or skills opportunity schools. Students with mild to moderate learning difficulties, however, are likely to remain in mainstream schools and to be placed in schools of lower banding.

Identification of secondary students with learning difficulties relies on the Secondary School Placement Allocation. If students are ranked in bottom 10% of the general secondary schools, they will be shortlisted for the School-based Remedial Support Program. In this program, the class of 40 students of the bottom 10% will be split into two classes of 20 students. For those who are in schools without the support program, they will be offered after-school group tutoring at resource teaching centers. Students with learning difficulties at the secondary level are largely taught in mainstream schools. Students and their teachers are still responsible for the standard curriculum. Students mostly take the same examinations as others at the end of the semester.

Provision Under the Integration Project

In September 1997, the Education Department of Hong Kong launched a pilot project on integrating students with disabilities into mainstream schools. Seven primary and two secondary schools participated during the two-year pilot stage. The number of participating schools continues to rise every year after the completion of the pilot project. Each participating school is given HK\$50,000 non-recurring funds, HK\$1,000 per student per year, an additional teaching assistant for admitting five students, and a resource teacher for admitting eight students. Educational psychologists also support the schools by serving as consultants on curriculum and instructional adaptation as well as handling behavioral problems. School-based and non-school-based training workshops and seminars are arranged from time to time.

Provisions Within the Reform Framework

Going against the world trend of placing more emphasis on standards, the education reform intends to decentralize the education systems by re-organizing the education stages into 9 years of basic education and education beyond as well as by abolishing admission examinations for first grade and 7th grade (Year 1 in secondary schools). For the pre-school education, the proposal stressed that no children will be deprived of early childhood education due to lack of financial means. For the 9-year basic education, schools are expected to reform curriculum and teaching methods so that every student can achieve an all-round development according to his/her own attributes (Education Commission, 2000). The direction is to shift from over-emphasizing academic studies to focusing on whole-person development, from compartmentalized subjects to integrated learning of different domains, from textbooks to diversified learning and teaching materials, from the community and learning beyond the confines of the classroom. The proposed re-organization and school-based initiatives attempt to create a diversified school system with curricula and assessment reforms to meet diverse needs as well as to provide quality education for all students regardless of what their needs are.

The only part of the proposal mentioned about children with special needs is in Appendix V. A few points directly relevant to children with special needs are as follows:

1. The promotion of early identification and intervention including the gifted children
2. The encouragement of continual promotion of integrated education for children with special educational needs
3. The implementation of integration in kindergartens and child care centers on a full scale
4. The promotion of gifted education

5. The need to continue the operation of special schools as they may be the most appropriate settings for some children with special educational needs

Implications for Special Needs Children

This education reform targets at nurturing life-long learners among students in the mainstream schools to meet the challenges of 21st century in which technology and globalization of economy dominate every aspect of life. The directions of identifying gifted children and providing quality education for them are clear and should be encouraged. Gifted children's education needs have long been neglected. As for children with disabilities, one can expect more students with mild to moderate physical, sensory, and intellectual disabilities to be integrated. Children with learning and behavioral difficulties will be mostly integrated. Those with severe or multiple disabilities will remain in special schools. Personnel and programs of the general and special school sectors of the education system will remain separate and independent. In general schools, teachers will be primarily occupied with their obligations to meet the expectations laid out in the reform proposal. Students with special needs may become the additional pain in the process of designing school-based curriculum and alternative assessment methods.

Even though addressing diverse needs is a key direction of this reform, the proposal reflects a lack of understanding of what will address diverse needs in the classrooms. The class size of 30+ for elementary and 40 for secondary schools is expected to remain at least in the foreseeable future. There is no intention or mention of reducing teacher workload in the midst of expecting heavy teacher involvement in the reform process. This reform proposal has no indication to include special schools in nurturing lifelong learners among students with at least average intellectual capability but restricted by physical or sensory conditions. With the goal of trying to nurture active and lifelong learners among other students, teachers continue to be stretched with their time and energy to meet new challenges and will find it

even more difficult to fulfill their roles, particularly in including children with disabilities in their classrooms. Children with special needs in the mainstream classrooms will be further marginalized while those in the special schools will be excluded from the benefit of this reform. In short, children with disabilities can expect little benefit under this reform. How could children with disabilities in general and special schools benefit from this reform?

The Way Forward

To increase the possibility of benefiting children with disabilities in various settings, improvements in four areas must be seriously considered: (a) increasing collaboration between general and special school personnel, (b) more vigorous plans of personnel preparation, (c) reducing teacher workload, and (d) nurturing all school personnel to be active learners.

Increasing Collaboration between General and Special School Personnel

There has been concern among special school personnel and tension between integration policy makers and special school personnel since the beginning of the pilot project on integrating children with special needs in 1997. The concern and tension lie in the threat of closing down special schools and job loss when more and more children with special needs are integrated. On one hand, the education reform proposal guarantees the continual existence of the special schools in Hong Kong. On the other hand, it encourages the continual expansion of integration. Therefore, this guarantee continues to create the anxiety because special school personnel cannot know how far the integration will go and how many special schools will remain.

The proposal obviously stemmed from the segregation concept, as it did not consider the idea of bringing general and special education to work together. This reform simply missed a great opportunity to bring the personnel and effort of the two sectors of the

education system together so that the ultimate benefit of the reform goes to all students and no one feels threatened with their job security.

While special school personnel may be threatened with the trend of inclusive education, general school personnel may feel unprepared and threatened by the responsibility of teaching and guiding the special needs children in their classrooms. As having been practiced in the West, this proposal will be far more constructive to provide a direction and a structure on facilitating the general school and special school personnel to work together to meet diverse needs in today's classrooms. Special school teachers' expertise, skills, and understanding of individual special needs children may thus be utilized. This collaboration will reduce, if not minimize, the marginalization of special needs children in the integrated settings.

Collaborations between general and special educators are widely practiced in the West. Current literature (e.g., Bittle, et. al., 2001; Fennick, 2001; Geiger & Drecktrah, 2001; Hughes & Murawski, 2001; Riley, 2001; Risko & Bromley, 2001) confirms the positive effect of bringing these professionals together through various collaboration models in which at least two partners interact in co-equal styles to achieve common goals in a decision making process that is influenced by cultural and systemic factors (Welch & Sheridan, 1995). More progressively, Pugach & Johnson (2002) insisted that collaboration is a way of being and should not be limited to isolated actions.

Several models for partnerships among general educators, special educators, and other support professionals have been conceptualized and practiced in an attempt to enhance each student's educational experience. Members in Individualized Education Plan (IEP) committees, team teaching, co-teaching, consulting teacher model, and resource room teacher model (Hardman, Drew, & Egan, 1999) are among some of the common collaborative models to be explored and utilized in Hong Kong.

More Vigorous Plans of Personnel Preparation

The major assumption of the reform is that by providing or allowing greater flexibility in class scheduling, integration of content of knowledge, and so on, quality education to meet the needs of the 21st century can be expected. Meanwhile, teachers are repeatedly considered not yet able to master skills necessary to meet diverse needs in the mainstream classrooms. Most teachers are not confident of handling diverse needs (Poon-McBrayer, 2002). Additionally, few teachers are trained to provide education as conceptualized in the reform proposal.

The ambitious reform proposal did not even have a section to focus on teacher education or personnel preparation. Training and support for schools and teachers were barely mentioned in two places of this proposal. First, the proposal requested (Education Commission, 2000) that ‘teacher training providers should review the teacher training courses for teachers of early childhood and primary education so that they can have a better understanding of the preceding/ensuing stage of education in terms of the curriculum, the pedagogy and child psychology’ (p. 54). Second, it mentioned that the Curriculum Development Institute would provide ‘teacher training courses on different themes to meet the needs of reform’ (Education Commission, 2000; p. 67).

The first point was merely a suggestion to higher education institutions without any binding force that those institutions would include appropriate content in their future training. The second point provided no information regarding the key content, length, and mode of the training. Training for administrators was not mentioned at all. Without supportive and competent administrators, the best teachers will find it difficult to introduce innovative strategies, not to mention how they could find time to design curriculum and alternative assessment methods. The success of this reform is heavily reliant upon teachers and school administrators; yet preparing them for those challenges is not even a key topic.

To allow this reform to be realized at the level of its intention, the current policy that allows teachers to teach, particularly in special education settings, without any teacher education must not continue. This policy greatly discourages higher education institutions from developing pre-service training programs for special education teachers, sends the wrong message to those who are aspired to be teachers that training is not important, and is the prime factor for the non-existence of pre-service special education training programs in Hong Kong. Policymakers must remember that no lawyer can practice law without training. Neither should teachers.

More vigorous plans for personnel preparation should be considered both at the pre-service and in-service stages. For pre-service training, the government must work with and provide incentives for higher education institutions to design curriculum and programs that can meet teachers' needs to fulfill their roles in the classrooms. Standards of admission to teacher education programs, standards of competence, areas of competencies, and appropriate amount of field experience should be set based on empirical data. Student teachers must meet all standards and requirements before they are given a license to teach. Policymakers could refer to guidelines and standards set by professional organizations, such as the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education for determining the accreditation of a teacher education program and Council for Exceptional Children for determining teacher competency requirements for special education prior to teaching.

In considering the training mode, the professional development school concept that allows the formation of unique partnerships between universities and schools is worth exploring. This form of partnership can bring together the university professors/researchers, experienced teachers, and student teachers. Such an arrangement provides the highest level of support for student teachers. Existing literature confirms that it serves fundamental reform in the way that teachers are prepared for the classroom, improves the quality of teacher

preparation, improves teacher retention rates, and increases student achievement (e.g., McBee & Moss, 2002; Levine, 2002; Odland, 2002; Samuels, Rodenberg, Frey, & Fisher, 2001). Voltz (2001) even explored and confirmed the benefit of training pre-service teachers for success in integrated settings by placing them in special schools with special education teachers as their cooperating teachers.

In the area of in-service training, the Education Department provided many workshops and seminars for in-service school personnel, mostly one-time ad hoc type of training in the past. Yet teachers complained about not having any follow-up or school-based support to help them. They found tremendous difficulty in translating theories or conceptual understanding into practice. Research (e.g., Leach & Conto, 1999; Waters & Vilches, 2000) has shown us that in-service training without subsequent follow-up classroom observations and feedback produced few substantial changes in teachers' behaviors. As Lam (1998) stated, life after the training is specially relevant in the case of in-service teacher education which targets at changes in the participants' teaching behaviors after returning to work. Post-training follow-ups are required in order to shape the target behaviors among participants and establish them at rates that might be maintained by natural contingencies of reinforcement in the classrooms (Leach & Conto, 1999). Improving training modes and content as well as post-training teacher behavior changes will certainly benefit students including special needs students in the classrooms. Policymakers will find it worthwhile to include follow-up coaching and feedback costs when determining future training funds.

Reducing Teacher Workload

Even though we noted earlier that there is a lack of direction in bringing general and special educators together, one must acknowledge the fact that Hong Kong policymakers did and does encourage schools implementing integration to have teachers co-teach. This new reform proposal also expects teachers to do collaborative lesson preparation during which

they spend time together as a group to discuss and work on the design, learning and teaching strategies, assessment formats of one or a series of classroom lessons to improve learning and teaching (Curriculum Development Council, 2001). This education reform clearly expects very heavy teacher involvement. Additionally, teachers are expected to receive training in various relevant areas.

In the midst of all these expectations and provisions, one fundamental issue has not been addressed: the heavy teaching and extra-curricular loads Hong Kong teachers have. There does not appear to have a plan on reducing teachers' workload but many more responsibilities and skills are demanded of them. Policymakers seem to be blind to the fact that heavy workload among teachers have seriously discouraged and will continue to discourage teachers to spend time on co-planning, to learn to design curriculum and assessment methods, and to become active learners themselves. Despite the fact that resource teachers and a key collaborating teacher are given one period per week to facilitate co-planning for integrated students, they hardly use the period for that purpose. Their rationale is simple: with the amount of work they have to do, they have to use that period to catch up with a portion of their extra duties.

It remains a question as to how teachers find time to take on the additional expectations from this reform proposal with their excessive workload and how they again use their extremely limited spare time to attend seminars or workshops with more work ahead of them. Worldwide, teacher stress have been found to be associated with heavy workload, time constraints, job demands, resources, class size, autonomy/participation in decision making, and student discipline problems (Chan & Miller, 1997). Hong Kong teachers are found to associate their stress mostly with their heavy workload (Tang & Yeung, 1999). Reducing workload is probably the most sensible and direct way of reducing teacher stress so that they can function more effectively as teachers. Investment in teacher training should be a top

priority. Some nations have set good examples in this area. On July 18, 2002, the Senate Appropriations Committee of the United States (S. 2766, Senate Report 107-216) unanimously recommended US\$100 million for personnel preparation in special education, significantly higher than research and innovation (US\$70 million), technical assistance and dissemination (US\$53.5 million), technology and media services (US\$37.7 million), and the gifted programs (US\$13.25 million). Hong Kong policymakers must be willing to invest in teacher training to allow this reform to work.

Nurturing All School Personnel to be Active Learners

For all children, children with special needs in particular, in mainstream schools, to be nurtured as active lifelong learners as intended by this education reform, a paradigm shift is necessary. Students are most convinced when the school and the society model the behavior they are expected to have. The most effective way of nurturing children to be active lifelong learners is to have active lifelong learners to nurture them. This means that school personnel need to become active lifelong learners themselves.

To nurture school personnel is, quite simply, to provide time and resources for further learning, sharpening their skills, and planning for their teaching. Special school personnel must be provided with time and resources, similar to their mainstream counterparts, to make use of training opportunities and be encouraged to do so. Their expansion of skills and knowledge will improve their effectiveness in working with children with disabilities in special schools. While some children may remain in special schools, their educational needs and opportunities will not be left out under this reform.

A Concluding Remark

If this reform can mobilize the collaboration between the two sectors of the education system, vigorously improve the teacher education at all levels and stages, provide resources to nurture school personnel to become a community of active learners, and include special

school personnel in training and nurturing, its goal of nurturing 'all' students will be met because special needs children will be among the beneficiaries.

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