

Special Schools for Children with Severe Learning Difficulties:
A Hong Kong Experience

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Abstract

Little research has been conducted to examine the education of children with severe learning difficulties in Hong Kong. This study intended to understand these children's difficulties and needs through exploring their schooling experiences. To fulfill the purpose of this study, information from various sources of qualitative and quantitative nature were required. These sources of information included children's special education files and parent interviews. Sixty first-year students from the skills opportunity school that had the highest enrolment among this type of schools participated. Results indicated that many children had early signs of difficulties, came from disadvantaged backgrounds, had been retained, had benefited little from resource class instructions with untrained teachers, had negative social experience in mainstream schools, had positive experience in the special school, and made varying degrees of progress. Implications and recommendations for sensible policies, practices, and research were discussed.

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In the United States, children with learning disabilities constitute 5.4% of the student population between 6 and 17 years of age (Smith, 1998). According to Ashman & Elkins (1990), 10.95% of 59,757 children in elementary schools and 11% of 68,934 secondary school students were considered as having learning disabilities in Australia. In New Zealand, roughly 7% of school-age children were identified with learning disabilities (Ashman & Elkins, 1990). Learning disabilities is no doubt a major type of difficulties found on school campuses.

A number of issues are of great concern to the field of learning disabilities. These issues include identification, classification and placement procedures, adherence to legal requirements, prevalence rate, barriers to service, and so on. An impressive volume of research studies (e.g., Anderson, Kutash, & Duchnowski, 2001; Christensen & Elkins, 1995; Fuchs & Fuchs, 1998; Hock, Pulvers, Deshler, & Schumaker, 2001; Lyon & Reid, 1994; Merz et. al., 1990; Miller, 1995; Soodak, 2000; Willard-Holt, 1999; Zirkel, 2001; Zurcher, 1995) associated with these topics have been conducted in various countries.

In recent decades, research in learning disabilities has been closely examined with factors such as family socioeconomic status (SES), availability of family support, linguistic and cultural diversity, mismatch of teaching and learning styles, and so on. For example, O'Connor and Spreen (1988) found that SES as a composite variable is probably the best indicator of difficulties in school. Specifically, they found a significant positive relationship between the outcome of children with learning disabilities and their fathers' SES and education level. Linguistic and cultural diversity continues to exert a significant influence within American schools and universities (Lustig & Koester, 1999). Many immigrant children quite easily find

themselves labeled as slow learners (Ramcharan, 1975). Consequently, immigrant children are over-represented in special education (National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 1988).

Concerns of the above factors led to policies to ensure appropriate education in a number of nations. The United States led the world in writing and enacting a comprehensive law, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, to guarantee an appropriate education to school-age children with disabilities and to promote greater integration between children with and without disabilities. In 1994, United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) followed suit to write up the Salamanca Statement to proclaim that education systems and programs should be designed to meet diverse needs of children with special needs and to promote integration (UNESCO, 1994). Debates over appropriate instructions and whether children with learning difficulties should be integrated remain fervent.

Learning Disabilities in Hong Kong

In Hong Kong, the term 'learning disabilities' is not used. Children with learning problems are included in the category of 'learning difficulties' or 'specific learning difficulties' that allows children to qualify for some educational services. Whether these children are recognized for their difficulties, they are in Hong Kong schools and present a great challenge to local educators. Doubtlessly, Hong Kong is not exempted from the global issues of identification, assessment, appropriate instruction, and availability of support.

Hong Kong teachers commonly complain about having a percentage of students having difficulty with reading, writing, and arithmetic as well as being slow, unmotivated, lazy, inattentive, absent-minded, and forgetful in almost every classroom. Teachers do not generally associate them with learning disabilities and perceive the difficulties as individual traits or

characteristics. Consequently, students with mild to moderate learning and associated behavioral difficulties tend to be kept in the general classrooms without any support.

Additionally, issues of linguistic and cultural diversity among school children are also present in Hong Kong. Hong Kong is a popular place to which Mainland Chinese legally and illegally immigrate because of its economic superiority over Mainland China in the last 50 years. According to the official statistics for 1999, new immigrants from the Mainland comprised 4.08% of the population of the 6.7 million people and constituted 82.3% of the total population growth in Hong Kong (Hong Kong Christian Institute, 2001). The majority of the immigrants are women and children who bear the impact of Hong Kong's discriminatory policies in housing, employment, politics (Hong Kong Christian Institute, 2001). The government has provided funds for support programs to help immigrant children and family to make adjustment in Hong Kong. With no exception, providing education for Chinese immigrant children in Hong Kong presents a great challenge.

We will briefly overview the systems of identification, assessment, and placement in Hong Kong schools to gain an insight of what is being done and what is available to help children with learning difficulties or disabilities.

Identification, Assessment, and Placement

Elementary Level

In Hong Kong, the identification of students with moderate and severe learning difficulties at the elementary level is carried out in two stages. First, teachers report children suspected with learning difficulties to the Education Department of Hong Kong. This stage primarily involves a simple screening process of using a checklist by 1st grade teachers at the end of the school year. If the educational psychologists of the Education Department agree with the

teachers' view, they will arrange for an assessment at the beginning of the children's 2nd grade. The assessment comprises an achievement evaluation in the three main school subjects: Chinese language, English language, and math. Children are considered as having learning difficulties if they are found to be two grades behind in any two of the three major subjects. Once identified as having learning difficulty, these children may be recommended for retention, school-based group tutoring before or after school, or resource class instruction when they start the 3rd grade. Essentially, students with learning difficulties are largely instructed in integrated settings.

Secondary Level

Secondary schools in Hong Kong are divided into three leagues (or commonly known as 'bands') based on their students' performance in public examinations. All students are tracked based on performance in elementary schools and placed in schools with children of similar levels of performance. Children with learning difficulties tend to be placed in the lowest league. Those with severe learning and behavioral difficulties will be referred to special schools for children with learning difficulties.

Identification of secondary students 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. Again, students with learning difficulties at the secondary level are largely instructed in integrated settings.

Children who are believed to be unable to benefit from the standard curriculum even with the help of the existing support in secondary schools may be placed in one of the seven special

schools for children with specific learning difficulties, namely skills opportunity schools (SOS) which only consist of grades 7 to 9. Students placed in SOS are estimated to account for the bottom 0.9% in academic achievement of children ages between 12 and 14 (Board of Education, 1996).

The curriculum of the SOS consists of 60% academic subjects and 40% cultural, practical, and technical subjects. The course contents of the various subjects are watered down to accommodate students' ability (Board of Education, 1996). The class size is reduced to 20 students per class. At the senior secondary level, few options are available for those who have been admitted to SOS. Mainstream schools are very reluctant to take these 'returnees' from special schools because of the differences in curriculum and of the fear that these students will drag down the overall performance of the school.

Purpose of Study

Under the umbrella term of 'learning difficulties' used in Hong Kong, the individual difficulties and needs of children with specific learning disabilities have not been properly recognized and addressed. As described earlier, procedures of identification and assessment as well as placement options do not appear to have a mechanism to recognize individual differences and meet specific needs. All the remedial programs or instructions are group-based.

The government also has a plan to convert all the SOS into mainstream schools in the next few years in light of the integration movement in Hong Kong. Such a proposal is met with tremendous resistance from those schools. However, the debates have not included necessary information such as student needs, whether those needs can be adequately met in mainstream schools, and whether the special schools provide benefits beyond what the mainstream schools can do. The effectiveness of special schools for children with severe learning difficulties has not

been examined. Information regarding children with severe learning difficulties and their education experiences is scarce. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to understand these children's needs through exploring their schooling experiences in skills opportunity schools. Such information will provide an insight into needs of the children with severe learning disabilities and allow policy makers to project and plan how their needs may be best met.

Methodology

Research Procedures & Selection of Participants

To gain an insight into who these children were, what their difficulties were, educational support they previously received and its effectiveness, and their current experiences in SOS, information from various sources were required. These sources of information included children's special education files and parents. Therefore, this study involved both quantitative and qualitative procedures.

Selection Criteria. Because of the need to reduce effects of other factors, the researcher used a stratified sample of including only 1st year students from the skills opportunity school that had the highest enrolment among this type of schools. Sixty student participants were thus included in this study.

Quantitative component. The general profile based on the students' folders constituted the quantitative component. A data collection form was designed to gather information on the child's school and retention history, parent education and occupation, birth orders, services received, and general school achievement.

Semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews of eight randomly selected parents were conducted to gain an in-depth understanding of their experiences that may not be detected from the document information. An interview guide was developed and used to guide

the questions and information sought during the interviews. The information sought included health history, learning characteristics, specific difficulties, pre-referral to placement experiences, and the effectiveness of the SOS in helping students with severe learning difficulties. In order to allow parents to be relaxed and to more easily discuss their children's experiences and conditions, locations of parent interviews were selected by parents. Seven of them chose to be interviewed in their children's school while one at home. Approval for audiotaping the conversations was sought and secured prior to the interviews. Interviews lasted from 40 minutes to one and a half hours and took place in the same week.

Data Analysis

Demographic information from students' special education files was quantified and interpreted through descriptive statistics such as means, mode, and percentages. Relevant information was directly recorded on the data collection forms, transferred, and analyzed.

The cross-case analysis was used to capture the patterns of student educational conditions that occurred across cases through parent interviews. To avoid researcher bias, the coding process went through two levels. Data for each case were analyzed using a preliminary level of data coding and a subsequent level of pattern coding. The first level coding approach was applied to the transcribed interview data. Categories serving as organizers of data were then assigned to specific units of raw, transcribed interview data. After organizing data in categories, pattern codes were used to better capture the emergence of recurring patterns and themes. The process of pattern coding served to group data segments into smaller numbers of overarching themes.

Major findings

General Profile from Student Folders

Information from the student folders included gender, student age, whether the student was an immigrant, the type of housing students lived in, parents' occupation, referral, assessment, placement, and retention history.

Demographic information. Of the 60 students, 70% of them were male and 30% female. Students' ages ranged from 12 to 16 (see Table 1). Of the 36 over-age students (60% of the student sample), 6 of them (10% of the student sample) were immigrant children from Mainland China who began schooling late or were placed in a lower grade to allow them to catch up with the curriculum in Hong Kong schools. Forty-nine (82%) fathers worked in unskilled or semi-skilled labor jobs and 39 (65%) mothers were housewives. Thirty (50%) of the sample students were the oldest of the children in their family while 12 (20%) of them were the only child in the family. As for the family financial indicator, 33 students (55%) of them lived in government-subsidized rental housing for low-income families, 17 students (28%) in family-owned housing units under the government-subsidized scheme, and 10 students (17%) in private housing.

<Table 1 here>

Referral, assessment, placement, and retention history. All students were referred to this special school after their graduation from elementary schools or assessment. All students were placed in resource classes in the elementary school. Eighteen students (30%) had been retained once. Twenty-six (43%) students were assessed between grades 2 and 5 and the rest in Grade 6 for severe learning difficulties. All students were re-assessed upon entering this school. More than half (57%) of the students were assessed with severe learning difficulties in 6th grade. Assessment results recorded in the student folders only included overall scores of each of Chinese language, English language, and math and the grade level equivalent (see Table 2).

There were no instructional recommendations or individual educational plans for any of the sample students.

<Insert Table 2 here>

Interview Data

Parent interview data targeted at information such as the child's health history, learning characteristics, retention history, referral to placement experiences, the children's current school experience, and parents' plan for their children after Grade 9.

Health history. Of the eight parents randomly selected to participate in this study, six of them (75%) reported that their child had to be placed in an incubator for 5-7 days, four of whom had a great deal of birth difficulty while the other two were premature. These six children were ill a lot during early childhood. Half of the eight children (50%) had delays in walking and talking.

Learning characteristics. All parents said that their children had difficulty in reading, writing, and arithmetic and their school achievement was well below their grade levels. Six of the children (75%) had behavioral problems in school and four parents (50%) commented that their children were immature socially and thus they had few friends. Two children (25%) had extreme difficulty in remembering spelling words and received zeroes for all dictation exercises.

Retention, referral, assessment, and placement. Four children (50%) repeated 1st grade and two (25%) 3rd grade. First grade teachers referred seven of the eight children (87.5%) and parents referred the remaining one. They were referred for poor academic performance and behavioral problems. One child, who was referred in grades 1 and 3, was first diagnosed as having mental retardation in Grade 1 and was placed in a special school for children with mental retardation. Parents then requested for him to be placed in mainstream schools, fearing that he

might not have a chance to realize his potentials. He was subsequently placed in Grade 2 after he had already completed Grade 3 in the special school.

Children's school experiences. All parents reported that their children were teased in the regular schools and thought that they were stupid. The eight students enjoyed the special school where they were not responsible for the standard curriculum and could learn at their own pace. Two of them had made more friends and were involved in a number of school activities. All parents stated that their children needed extra help in addition to the normal classroom instruction and that the teachers of this special school provided more individual attention to the children. Two children were reported to have made a lot of progress in academic achievement but the other six remained about the same. All parents expressed concerns of keeping their children in the special school and wanted to transfer their children from the special school because it only provided up to 9th grade education. There was no assurance of whether they would be accepted by mainstream schools afterwards.

Discussions

The findings of this study reflected a great deal of similar situations and scenarios as found in the existing literature. Discussions will draw from both general profile and interview data to focus on three areas: (a) the demographic patterns, (b) systems of referral, assessment, and placement and retention, and (c) experiences in mainstream and special school experiences.

Demographic Patterns

Demographic patterns and school history are drawn from the student folders. Consistent with the existing literature and findings (e.g., Fugate, Clarizio, & Phillips, 1993; Naiden, 1976; Polloway et. al., 1991), there were substantially more male than female students being identified with learning difficulties. The percentage of over-age was high and this phenomenon appeared to

be highly associated with retention and immigrants from China who began school late or had to enroll on a lower grade when first admitted to schools in Hong Kong in order to catch up with the curriculum in Hong Kong schools (Lee, 1997). The over-age situation is similar to Asian immigrants to western nations such as the United States (Poon-McBrayer & Garcia, 2000). Mainland immigrant children are known to live in households with little support for their education because parents or guardians tend to work long-hour jobs and have low education levels (Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups, 1995; Li, 1996; Liu, 2001). Cultural and linguistic adjustments as well as unfavorable home conditions have also contributed to their difficulties (Li, 2001; So, 2001; Song, 2001; Yue, 2001). The above difficulties are among the typical experiences of immigrants of other countries (e.g., Bhattacharya, 2000; Olson, 2000; Pryor, 2001; Quisenberry, 2001; Rosenthal, 1992;).

Interview data revealed that 75% of the children with severe learning disabilities had some commonalities such as complications during birth as well as delay in language acquisition and walking. Signs of difficulty manifested through immature social behaviors and low school achievement were apparent in early childhood from kindergarten to elementary schooling. Such a phenomenon indicates the possibility for earlier identification and intervention that may prevent the need for long-term remediation.

Systems of Referral, Assessment, Placement, and Retention History

Based on the data from student folders and parent interviews, students were referred between Grades 2 and 5, typical grades for referrals of learning disabilities as found in the existing literature (e.g., Ortiz, Garcia, Wheeler, Maldonado, 1986; Poon-McBrayer & Garcia, 2000). The absence of screening and services and the lack of academic demand for children with learning difficulties prior to elementary schooling as well as the establishment of the screening

system for first graders explained the situation that these children were not formally identified until at least 2nd grade.

The scope of assessment was apparently limited to only achievement tests in three subjects and the grade level discrepancy in achievement was used to determine whether the student would be considered as having learning difficulties. The assessment for learning disabilities or difficulties required more details so that specific areas of difficulty could be available to assist teachers to design instructional accommodations. The combination of insufficient details of achievement information and individual educational plans reflected a system ill-prepared to meet individual needs. In turn, there is not a mechanism to ensure meeting the student's learning needs.

Data reflected that the typical instructional arrangement for students identified with learning difficulties was resource classes in elementary schools. Resource teachers are either new hires or general education teachers given a new assignment. General education teachers are typically trained at the non-degree level or college graduates without any training. Nevertheless, very few of them have been trained to work with children with special needs. The government's policy does not require resource teachers to be trained prior to the assignment. They are only encouraged to receive some type of in-service training after they have accepted the teaching assignment. Government statistical information does not include figures of trained and untrained resource teachers while such figures are available for mainstream teachers. A lack of concern for resource teachers' qualifications is apparent. Nevertheless, informal data from school practitioners confirmed that resource teachers are typically untrained for working with children with any kind of special needs (personal communication, Marian Lo, 1999; Ida Mak, 2000; Thomas Leung, 2001). When resource classes are used as the key help to children with learning

difficulties, it is crucial to have teachers who are trained to understand and meet their needs. The fact that all the participating students received help from resource classes but still did not perform well enough to attend the mainstream secondary schools suggested a limited positive impact of the resource classes.

As for retention, the high percentage of retention found among the participating students who continued to have severe learning difficulties again suggested that retention was not an effective means to reduce the impact of having learning difficulties. Effective remediation approaches must be further explored.

Parental Views on Mainstream and Special School Experiences

As reflected in the existing literature (e.g., Knoblauch, 1998; McBrayer, 1999; Soriano-Nagurski, Bakley, Kulak, Blasi, Priestley, 1998) that children with learning difficulties tended to be easy targets for teasing, participating students were not exempted. Their being teased and called stupid together with continuous failure in school brought them unpleasant school experience. Parent interviews reflected a clear concern for children's suffering from teasing in mainstream schools:

“He came home crying and weeping because other children called him stupid or an idiot”, said Parent A.

“Children were so mean. Not only would they not play with him but they also teased him all the time. He hated school”, said Parent H.

“He was very unhappy because no one would play with him. They said he was stupid and retarded”, said Parent D.

The interview data also indicated a much more positive social experience in the special school. The need to improve the social environments in mainstream schools was apparent.

“My son had no friends in the elementary school but now he has many friends in this school. He is so much happier. He looks forward to going to school every day”, said Parent E.

“My daughter likes school now and has made a few good friends. They all have similar difficulties and help each other in their learning”, said Parent G.

As for academic progress, no academic gain in mainstream schools was reported. On the other hand, 25% of the eight children making noticeable academic progress while the primary benefit of attending the special school may remain in the social aspect.

“My son has made very good progress in school. I think he can transfer to the senior secondary school and do well. I hope they will let him do that”, said Parent E.

“The teachers are nice and patient with my daughter. She has made so much progress that she has decided that she would go to college and become a teacher in future”, said Parent G.

The parents’ concern over whether their children could have a promising future after completing Grade 9 in the special school suggested the need to examine the curriculum and structure of these special schools.

Implications for Policies, Practices, & Personnel Preparation

At present, the government of Hong Kong is seeking to convert special schools for children with severe learning difficulties into mainstream schools to accompany its policy for integration. However, findings from this study suggested that services in mainstream schools are rather inadequate with untrained teachers. The non-accepting climate in mainstream schools is unlikely to provide a positive environment conducive to learning. A great deal of improvement is

needed in mainstream schools to accommodate children with various learning needs. The rationale behind integration is amicable but a child's receiving an appropriate education precedes any ideology (Poon-McBrayer, 1999). Integrated settings may be the best option for some children but not for all (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1995; Poon-McBrayer, 1999). In light of the findings, the following implications in policies, practices, and research are apparent.

Policies on Resource Allocation and Personnel Preparation

If the government pushes on for integration and converts the SOS into mainstream schools, the government must ensure that the mainstream schools are prepared to provide an appropriate education for children with severe learning difficulties before they convert the SOS into mainstream schools that will have 40 students per class and reduced financial and personnel resources. Merely adding the number of students to each classroom of the same school and calling it a mainstream secondary school will not cure students with severe learning difficulties but will put them back into the unpleasant school environment they experienced before. All the work that has been done by placing them in SOS will be shattered. Meanwhile, closing the gap between the curriculum of SOS and mainstream schools and expanding existing SOS to provide all secondary grades can be an interim measure to remove the barriers for these children to continue on to senior secondary grades.

A much more sensible approach will be to have a policy that encourages in-service and pre-service training. The present policy that special education teachers are not required to have any training undermines the importance of having trained teachers to work with children with special needs. The absence of policy support discourages already-overworked teachers to receive training without any job-related incentive and deters higher education institutions to put in the effort of designing and providing such training.

On one hand, a policy on requiring new teachers of special needs children to have pre-service training should be established. On the other hand, the government can work with higher education institutions to provide in-service training for resource and SOS teachers who are already working with children with learning difficulties. Incentives to attend training should be provided. For example, attendance of training courses could be quantitatively recognized and given credit toward future promotion to become senior or master teachers.

Practices on Adaptations for Diversity

As for practices, two aspects of adaptations are discussed here. The first aspect is on assessment. The government should provide funds to encourage local researchers to develop more detailed and sensitive assessment tools in Chinese. The tools should focus more detecting specific difficulties which in turn facilitate instructional planning and adaptations. Assessment procedures must be refined to identify specific difficulties and assessors with living and school experiences in Mainland China should be trained to detect the degree of influence on learning and adjustment based on the child's length of stay in Hong Kong, previous schooling experience, and difference in family support after immigration. More assessment alternatives such as performance-based, curriculum-based, and dynamic assessment approaches should be explored vigorously. These approaches will not only provide a less biased assessment for the local students but also immigrant children in Hong Kong.

The second aspect of adaptations focuses on curriculum and instructional adaptations. Two scopes of diversity are included based on the findings. Within the general scope, on-going support on curriculum and instructional adaptations from educational or school psychologists should be provided for mainstream schools that have children with learning difficulties. Currently, educational psychologists only provide assessment services to mainstream schools.

The absence of support for teachers and students contribute to the failure of children with severe learning difficulties who are returned to mainstream schools and their teachers. In-service training should also expose teachers to existing strategies practiced outside Hong Kong and encourage them to modify and experiment in local contexts.

Within the specific scope, cultural and linguistic differences brought by the immigrant children must be taken into account when making accommodations. More educated Mainland Chinese should be recruited and trained to be teacher assistants or teachers to work with local teachers. Their presence will help the children feel more at ease.

Research

Finally, larger scale of research is much needed to obtain a more complete profile of children with severe learning difficulties and their needs. Combined with results of this study and future research results, policy makers will be better informed in determining educational services for these children. On-going research and evaluation of programs and services should be supported to ensure regular review and the provision of the best option for each child.

A Concluding Remark

Overall, the findings indicated that special schools such as the SOS have benefited the children with severe learning difficulties. Future directions of educating these children should base on the principal that the best option is the option within which the children can benefit most academically and socially. We are obligated to provide adequate opportunities for these children to overcome their difficulties so that their potentials and abilities rather than their disabilities may be recognized.

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Table 1 Age Distribution of Student Samples ($N=60$)

Age of Students	Number of Students	Percentage (%) of Students
12	3	5
13	21	35
14	30	50
15	3	5
16	3	5

Table 2 Students' Grade Equivalent Achievement in Three Major Subjects (N=60)

Subject	Chinese	English	Math
Grade Equivalent	%	%	%
1st	43	35	35
2 nd	8	7	42
3 rd	25	27	4
4 th	7	18	6
5 th	17	13	13