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The Sustainable Development of Inclusive Education

Abstract: The advent of inclusive education has quietly changed the ecology of Hong Kong's educational system. Inclusive education is a product of education in the developed Western nations and has spread at the instigation of international organizations. It is a plan for educational development that is based on the concepts of human rights and peace and stresses respect for differences. However, it is also a means of managing schools that is easier to comprehend than to carry out. This paper attempts to explain the basic concepts of inclusive education, describe its operative elements, and discuss its practical problems. Drawing on research findings and developmental experience gained abroad and lo-

Translation © 2007 M.E. Sharpe, Inc., from the Chinese text. Leslie Nai-kwai Lo, "Ronghe jiaoyu de chixu fazhan," *Hong Kong Special Education Forum* 6, no. 1 (2003): 97–113. Translated by Ted Wang.

This paper is a revised version of the keynote speech titled "Mainstreaming of Special Education: A Crisis or Opportunity for Special Schools?" delivered at the Sixth Annual Symposium of the Hong Kong Special Education Society, October 25, 2003.

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cally, the author makes some suggestions for the sustained development of inclusive education.

The launching of inclusive education is a global operation, the significance of which is rooted in the concept of human rights and equality and the evidentiary grounds of which are based on a belief that the inclusion of children and youngsters with special needs in mainstream schools is beneficial for their studies and growth. At the instigation of world organizations (OECD 1999; UNESCO 1994), the theory and practice of inclusive education has spread from European and American societies to international domains and has been incorporated into the agendas for educational development in other countries.

The development of inclusive education in Hong Kong can be traced back to the 1970s. The objective of educational policy at that time was to help children with special educational needs merge into mainstream schools so that they could receive suitable education together with children of the same age (EMB 2003). That inclusive education has been able to be reborn and develop in a fairly stable manner in Hong Kong is due entirely to the active proposals and urgings on the part of warm-hearted professionals, scholars, and government officials. According to explanations relevant to inclusive education issued by the Education and Manpower Bureau (EMB), the motive force for developing inclusive education should be attributed to the government's White Paper on Rehabilitation issued in 1995. The publicity slogan raised in that official document was "Equal Opportunities and Full Participation: A Better Tomorrow for All." However, relevant official websites failed to mention the conservative attitude harbored by the members of Subcommittee on Special Education with regard to implementing inclusive education. In 1996, that Subcommittee submitted to the Board of Education an overall review of the development of inclusive education in Hong Kong (Hong Kong Board of Education 1996). A year later, the government formally launched a two-year Pilot Project on Integration that involved nine mainstream schools and forty-nine students with special education needs.

As chairman of the Subcommittee on Special Education, I frequently reflected on our "conservation." Why should a scholar who felt concerned about human rights and equality entertain doubts about the large-scale and rapid launching of inclusive education? Now that a distance exists in terms of time, space, and the events in that report, it is time to reflect on the launching of inclusive education in Hong Kong.

The Justification of and Changes in Inclusive Education

Human Rights, Equity, and “Mainstreaming”

In addition to manifesting the principle of “equal right to education for all,” inclusive education rejects the principle of segregation that has long been entrenched in education systems. The Salamanca Statement published by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (1994) affirmed that all children have the basic right to be educated in mainstream schools. The *Excellence for All Children* Green Book issued by the British government in 1997 proposed that all schoolchildren with special education needs should, with the agreement of their parents, be enrolled in mainstream schools (Department for Education and Employment 1997). The Hong Kong Special Region’s government in the same year also implemented their two-year Pilot Project on Integration that would allow forty-nine students with special education needs to enroll in nine elementary and secondary schools. The schools that participated in this pilot project were to receive extra financial subsidies that would be used to increase the salaries of teachers who would coordinate the students’ special needs. By advocating that students with special needs study in mainstream schools and benefit from their training and socialization processes, inclusive education on one hand ensures that all children enjoy the basic right to school education and on the other persists in the principle of antisegregation equality through the process of mainstreaming. Based on these principles, children should receive more or less the same education in mainstream schools, whereas education of a segregationist nature actually prevents children from enjoying their basic rights.

Integration and Inclusion

The objective of integrated education is to promote, as far as possible, social exchanges between children with disabilities and those without and thereby maintain and even improve the academic development and self-esteem of the former. The aim of integration is to normalize the studies, work, and lives of those with disabilities. In practice, integrated education could also follow three paths that would tend to “normalize” the students’ studies. The first path is to employ various means to reduce

individual differences as far as possible and assimilate children who are capable of normalization into the teaching and learning processes of mainstream schools. The second is to respect the rights of particular groups and individuals with disabilities under the overall premise of mainstreaming, give consideration to their interests and status, and have social institutions accommodate their needs. The third path is to root integrated education in mainstream schools by allowing students with disabilities and teachers and students of mainstream schools to adapt to one another. Programs for such mutual adaptation are based on a spirit of mutual benefit. First, however, it must be affirmed that the participation of students with disabilities will have a positive effect on mainstream schools. Also, as venues for teaching and socialization, the mainstream schools could also provide beneficial learning environments for students with disabilities (Labregere 1992). At the present time, the “whole school participation model” of integrated education promoted by the authorities (116 schools participated in this program in the 2002–3 school year) has adopted an integrated education plan that emphasizes mutual adaptation.

Until the mid-1990s, *integrated education* was generally recognized as a synonym for *mainstreaming* but was later replaced by the term *inclusive education*. As a professional term, *integrated education* generally refers to the teaching environment in which schoolchildren with special educational needs are placed, for example, in mainstream classrooms, special classes, support bases, and so forth, but very little consideration has been given to the quality of education. Thus, the schoolchildren who are “integrated” into mainstream schools may be isolated and segregated and end up conducting their studies in “exceptional” teaching environments specially set up for them. Such segregation gravely violates the principle of integration and seriously distorts the principle of mainstreaming.

Hence, educational circles have adopted the term *inclusive education*, which places more stress on inclusion, to convey a sort of education that can truly implement integration. Inclusive education advocates that mainstream schools view all teachers and students (including students with special educational needs) as equal members who can make contributions to the school. If inclusive education can be effectively practiced in mainstream schools, then all students should be fully accepted, participate in campus life, and have a sense of belonging. Their different interests, abilities, and achievements should also be seen as resources

that can make school life richer and more abundant (Ainscow 1999; Clark et al. 1999; Farrel 2001).

Public Support for Inclusive Education

According to estimates by scholars in the 1990s, some 2 to 20 percent of schoolchildren worldwide could be included in the basic statistical figures for “inclusion” (Evans 1994). The range of this calculation is obviously too broad, making it impossible for us to produce accurate calculations of the number of students receiving inclusive education. In the early 1990s, some scholars estimated that the inclusion rate of mainstream schools in all countries reached only 1.5 to 4 percent, and mainstream school courses with inclusive education characteristics could accommodate 1.5 to 4 percent of age-eligible schoolchildren (Pijl and Meijer 1991). Hence, it would be quite impossible for various countries to meet the needs of all schoolchildren with special educational needs in inclusive education settings.

The practice of inclusive education must be conducted in an orderly and organized manner. Generally speaking, the students who participate in inclusive education include various categories of disabled children. A good many students who have learning difficulties and minor mental handicaps have already been enrolled in mainstream schools by means of normal placement procedures and have been automatically integrated. Those with severe mental retardation and emotional and behavioral problems are still being enrolled for studies in special schools (Farrell 2000, 7). The students in Hong Kong’s integrated education system by and large also reflect the mainstreaming orientation and are comprised of the following five categories of students: the mildly mentally retarded, those with hearing impairments, those with visual impairments, those who are physically disabled, and autistic students with average intelligence.

Attitudes of Stakeholders

In terms of observable reactions, the effects of inclusive education are more conspicuous for adults than for students. Studies conducted in Britain have found that students of mainstream schools by and large accept the integrated students, and very little bullying or abuse is evident (Farrell 2000, 158). However, very few close friendships have been

formed (Evans 1994, 2908). Among the various groups of mainstream students, elementary-school students and female students take a more positive attitude toward fellow students with special educational needs than secondary-school students and male students. A study conducted in the United States found that students with learning difficulties studying in mainstream schools prefer to study in resource classrooms specially set up for them and to receive guidance on principal courses given to them by experts. Regarding studies of other courses, they prefer to attend classes in mainstream classrooms and in this way strike up friendships with other schoolmates (Farrell 2000, 157).

To the parents of children with special needs, inclusive education brings both the pleasure of increased options and the difficulties of heterogeneous learning. As a result of the decentralization trend in education, reforms in education administration, and development of the education market, parents' choices have already become a factor that can determine the orientation of school operations. A great many parents who either wish to improve their children's learning standards in mainstream schools or want to avoid the stigma of enrolling them in special schools prefer to send them to mainstream schools when they are given the choice. However, there are other parents who affirm the educational functions of special schools and want their children to receive specialized service to complement their studies. These parents may regard special schools as reliable options and oppose any mainstreaming policies of a compulsory nature. From these parents' viewpoint, inclusive education should be an option, not a policy.

Teachers and principals engaged in mainstream schools also hold differing attitudes toward inclusive education, which vary according to their educational beliefs, teaching attitudes, and experience. A survey conducted in Australia showed that 89 percent of teachers ($n = 571$) believe their teaching efficacy would be correspondingly reduced by the presence of a student with learning difficulties in their classroom. Ninety-six percent of the teachers maintained that their ability to supervise and guide other students would be affected because they would have to show special consideration for the special student (Forlin 2001, 239). Also, teaching activities schedules and the method of grouping students at mainstream schools are highly standardized. Such procedures would clearly limit the ability of teachers to respond to and satisfy students' special educational needs (SENCO Forum 2002). Many teachers are concerned that inclusive education will have negative effects on the stu-

dents' studies and performance. Principals are worried that their schools' position in ranking lists will decline as a result of inclusive education (Norwich and Lunt 2000). Due to the pressures exerted by parents, the schools must have considerable confidence and strength if they are to practice truly inclusive education (Slee 2001, 391–92).

Based on these considerations concerning parents' choices, teaching and learning qualities, and school status, in addition to the pressures of public examination, the development of inclusive education comes up against a good many obstacles. Even if inclusive education enjoys strong support from official policy, it will face a number of objective limitations, for example when some integrated students leave and enroll in special schools better suited to their needs as courses in the secondary school stage gradually become more onerous and diverse (Evans 1994, 2908).

The Efficacy of Inclusive Education and the Necessary Practical Elements

The Efficacy of Inclusive Studies

The aim of inclusive education is to enable students with special educational needs to benefit from the upbringing and socialization processes at regular schools through mainstreaming. The efficacy in practice of inclusive education will be graphically demonstrated in the improvement of the schoolchildren's academic performances and the development of social contacts with their schoolfellows.

In terms of academic performance, the efficacy of inclusive education is neither consistent nor outstanding. Although some previous research results have shown that some students with special educational needs in Switzerland, Germany, and the United States have indeed made academic progress in inclusive environments, quite a few research results have demonstrated no outstanding differences in the students' academic performances in inclusive and noninclusive teaching environments. Here, two conclusions relevant to the academic performances of such students enable us to discuss the efficacy of inclusive education in greater depth: (a) The academic performances of students with special educational needs are better in inclusive environments that provide appropriate support; and (b) The academic performances of such students are relatively poor in unfavorable inclusive environments (Farrell 2000).

Thus, the key to inclusive education giving play to its efficacy does not rest in the venue in which the students learn but rather in the quality of teaching provided in these venues.

Regarding whether inclusive education is beneficial or otherwise for the social development of students with special needs, research results by and large confirm its efficaciousness. As mentioned earlier, these students are apparently able to get along with other schoolmates, and instances of their being bullied or teased in mainstream schools are rare. When studying in mainstream schools and situated in a fairly multielemental social environment, the development of their self-esteem apparently relates to how the various elements of the inclusive environment affect their experiences. Study results regarding self-esteem are not consistent and are even mutually contradictory.

The Practical Elements Indispensable for Inclusive Education

The key to the success of inclusive education does not rest in the venue in which it is practiced. The appropriateness and quality of available support and the attitude of stakeholders have much more to do with its success. Support refers, of course, to extra resources, such as suitable funding, facilities, equipment, and teaching materials. However, the most important support consists of teachers with qualified professional knowledge and expertise (Crawford 2002), trained supportive personnel (Farrell 2000), and teachers who have sufficient expertise and the willingness to teach children with special educational needs. Whether these people exist in a particular school is a question to which all who are concerned about the practice of inclusive education must give an earnest reply.

Many researchers have queried the teachers' preparedness and their ability to handle the pedagogical challenges raised by inclusive education (Crawford 2002, 32–33; Westwood 2002, 141), and I do not go into detail here. The report submitted by the Subcommittee on Special Education and published in 1996 advising the government to exercise caution in starting up inclusive education in fact reflected the worries held by that committee about teachers of mainstream schools engaging in the practice of inclusive education. For inclusive education to become rooted in mainstream schools, the coordination of all teachers is needed; one cannot simply entrust the task of teaching and guiding students with special educational needs to a few "special teachers" at the schools.

Also, because inclusive education constitutes a shift of paradigm in pedagogy, all teachers must understand the theories and methods needed for special education. This sort of understanding can in no way be acquired during a brief period (currently consisting of thirty class hours) of “instant noodle” type training.

Another important element in the course of practice is the way teachers interpret the curricula of mainstream schools. The general understanding is that the mainstream school curricula should be appropriate for all students in the schools, whether or not they have any special educational needs. Thus the objectives and standards of teaching use “the average” as the criterion. Indeed, a clear indication of the teachers’ understanding of inclusive education is whether the conception and means of inclusion is used to assimilate students with special educational needs into mainstream curricula and insist that they adhere to mainstream learning methods to attain average standards, or whether the curricula are made to adapt to such students’ learning needs. Equity does not mean uniformity. The concept of inclusive education should already have definitively rejected the use of inclusive means to squeeze these children into a “one size fits all” curriculum (MacKay 2002, 160). Inclusive education makes both high and profound demands of teachers. No wonder a good many teachers regard the “special students” in their classrooms as a source of pressure.

In addition to adequate support and resources, the practice of inclusive education is in need of affirmation and support from all persons involved. Their attitudes are the structural elements of the inclusive environment and make it possible to create a campus atmosphere. The attitudes of students, parents, teachers, principals, and other staff members determine the quality and future of the practice of inclusive education in mainstream schools and how the communities to which they belong view it. Relevant research results shows that the attitude of students is, in general, positive, that of parents is fairly complex, and that of the principals is determined by whether they are able to control structural issues (such as the schools’ reputation, school performance indicators, standardized evaluations, and so forth). The teachers’ attitudes are influenced by their own educational beliefs, professional abilities, confidence, experience, and challenges they must face. In general, teachers will not actively oppose the concepts and principles of inclusive education, but not a few may entertain doubts about the feasibility of its practice. Their attitudes may become increasingly negative when the

challenges they encounter in special education become more complex and difficult. However, when they have acquired sufficient experience and are able to effectively resolve the problems related to special education, teachers' confidence levels grow and their attitudes tend to become positive (Avramidis and Norwich, 2002; Evans 1994; Farrell 2000). When the majority of persons involved in mainstream schools support inclusive education, students with special educational needs no longer constitute a burden on the schools but are seen as a complete entity, as students who make contributions to the schools and deserve appreciation.

The Issue of the Sustained Development of Inclusive Education

In Hong Kong's educational system, the sustained development of inclusive education does not appear to be a central topic. Perhaps the educational circle's indifference has to do with the long-time marginalization of special education, or perhaps it is only a few mainstream schools that are currently attempting to practice inclusive education, which can therefore hardly be counted as a policy-guided trend. However, pushing ahead with inclusive education in mainstream schools is a trend in postindustrial societies, because all fairly well-off societies with developed education systems are sure to come up against educational problems related to human rights and equity. The existence of inclusive education is already an indisputable fact.

The Conundrum of Human Rights and Equity

The concept that education belongs to the domain of basic human rights has already become widely accepted in the world, which is why it raises little controversy. What problems there are include considerations about the categories and quality of education. However, it is debatable whether insistence on having children with special educational needs enter mainstream schools is a manifestation of equity. In fact, we stand for their going to mainstream schools because we hope they will receive an education that is "more or less" the same as that received by other children. However, because of their disabilities and limitations, we cannot assume that their learning abilities equal those of ordinary students. If we treat equals unequally, that would be an inequity. If we treat unequals

equally, that would also be an inequity. I believe that within the perspective of inclusive education, the learning ability of students with special educational needs cannot be equal to those of ordinary students. If that is true, then mainstream schools should not treat them equally either. The principle of equity requires that we first accord preferential measures to them under the circumstances of a limited availability of resources (educational resources are always limited). The question is whether we are truly able to do so.

In the practice of inclusive education, the conundrum of human rights and equity rests in the quality and true function of school education. If “education is a basic human right” means that “education should be good education,” then the education provided by mainstream schools does not necessarily constitute “good education.” If equity means “giving the most preferential treatment to persons in the most disadvantaged situations,” then this does not necessarily constitute the basic function of mainstream schools. The function of mainstream schools is to screen and socialize students through a process of constant separation, selection, and classification (Baker 2002). Schools pay attention not only to the processes of educating and teaching people but also to how the results of educating and teaching people affect their survival and development. If “giving the most preferential treatment to persons in the most disadvantaged situations” could bring positive results for the survival and development of mainstream schools, I believe that a good many mainstream schools would actively support this principle of equity. However, current educational policy does not necessarily encourage schools to consider their operating strategies from the angle of human rights and equity.

The Contradictions of Policy

The pursuit of inclusive education is an upstream battle in a policy climate in which the performance doctrine is the dominant ideology. Its relatively progressive tendencies—respect for human rights, striving for equity, tolerance of differences, and appreciation of pluralism—reflect a level of humanist educational policy that attains the perfection of the individual by means of inclusion. Another level of educational policy that emerged at approximately the same time emphasizes the increase of value, the attainment of targets, and selection and comparison. The value orientations of these two levels of policy differ and are even mutu-

ally contradictory. The former is a manifestation of the effects of educational ideologies in the developed nations under the circumstances of globalization; the latter is a reproduction of educational policy in the developed nations under the same circumstances. Both of these coexist in the policy environment of those countries (such as Britain and the United States) (Loxley and Thomas 2001).

Actually, these two sorts of educational policy with inconsistent value orientations differ as to importance and precedence. Current educational policy takes school performance and parent choice as its keynote. The performance doctrine enshrouds education in Hong Kong, and its measures, such as increasing value by education, schools' self-evaluation, quality inspections, tests of language teachers' linguistic level, and so forth, are beginning to permeate the schools' administrative and operational mechanisms. The administrative thinking and developmental considerations at the schools' leadership levels can hardly free themselves from the spider's web of the performance doctrine. Inclusive education policy is a sort of dependent policy, the existence of which depends on whether it can avoid engaging in serious conflict with the overarching performance doctrine climate, and even on whether it is able to effectively serve some of the important policy orientations within this overarching climate, such as increasing parents' choices. If inclusive education is able to provide parents with more school enrollment choices through mainstreaming, its sustained development will not only find a humanitarian justification but will also have a substantial effect on supporting present policies.

As an educational policy, the practice of inclusive education will also depend on how it avoids running afoul of the performance doctrine in the schools. The performance doctrine attaches more importance to the results of education than to the process of education. A school's value-increasing performance and teaching quality are often evaluated from the perspective of efficacy: the systemization of school organizations, standardization of curricular practices, improvements in student academic levels, and so forth. This view of school efficacy is in many ways inconsistent with inclusive education, which stresses individual differences and multiple teaching (Lloyd 2000, 140). Performance doctrine education attaches importance to raising student academic levels and increasing the value of educational services and uses the establishment of work targets and performance criteria as the basis of evaluation but does not necessarily take into consideration the schools' history, their

operating objectives, their student sources, and such micro-elements as the teaching and evaluations they use. No wonder school principals harbor reservations about any large-scale introduction of inclusive education into their schools; they do not want their schools' overall performance to be affected. Also, we can hardly blame teachers who resist inclusive education, because in addition to changing curricular practice and teaching strategies, current policy expects that while they implement inclusive education teachers will miraculously use supplementary methods to increase the value of students with special educational needs and bring their academic levels up to certain established macroscopic standards.

Tensions Within the System

Within the educational system, the gains of mainstream schools (whether desirable or something that cannot be helped) are the losses of special schools. Special schools, which in the past toiled in silence for special needs education, suddenly find that changes in educational concepts have turned them into "tools of segregated education" and "stumbling blocks for educational reform." The teachers and students of these special schools, and the students' parents, find such accusations intolerable.

Where special schools are concerned, mainstreaming nibbles away at their student sources and threatens their very existence. Many special schools will have to close down if the authorities fail to produce feasible countermeasures, because as education policy proceeds from integration to inclusion, very few special schools will be able to depend on public funds for survival. Some special schools with long histories of operation have recently moved up their mainstreaming schedules of their own accord.

Hong Kong's special schools are in a dilemma. The advice special schools have been given is no different from that given to special schools in other societies: Cooperate with mainstream schools and provide them with assistance concerning special needs education; try to become "special education resource centers" in school districts; and enable mainstream schools to effectively conduct inclusive education (Westwood 2002, 141). They are told to let special school teachers teach in mainstream schools and in that way start up appropriate inclusive education activities (Tilstone and Rose 2000), take active stock of their own advantages and strengths, tap resources, and try to transform themselves

so that they may find a suitable place for themselves in the educational system.

Cooperation by special schools with mainstream schools is only at an initial stage. On one hand systematized systemic dispositions are absent and on the other there is little or no understanding of the other party's operating experience. Cooperation today is limited to lectures and workshops organized by special schools and to special schools sending people to mainstream schools to start up "school-based inclusive education" activities. One frequently hears of principals or teachers of special schools being invited to mainstream schools to act as "visiting fire-fighters." Rarely does it happen that teachers from both parties design and work on teaching projects together.

We hope that the cooperation between special schools and mainstream schools becomes deeper and more permanent. We also hope that teachers from both parities will design courses and teach in conjunction. However, this is not something that can be achieved all at once. To have teachers from both types of schools work in the teaching environment of the other party, they must first be aware of the fact that they do not necessarily understand the requirements and motivations of those teaching environments. In the past, many teachers of special schools felt their skills in special education could hardly find any use in mainstream schools, because the expectations and requirements at mainstream school are fundamentally different from those at special schools (SENCO Forum 2002).

Quandaries in Implementation

The practice of inclusive education depends on mainstream schools carrying out normative changes in their school management objectives and operations and on teachers, students, and parents together building up an "environment of inclusion." For such reasons, the whole-school approach recently put forward by the authorities contains a very important assumption, that is, that the teachers and students at mainstream schools are willing and capable of taking part in this lengthy reshaping project.

There are, at the very least, different assumptions concerning the abovementioned willingness and capability. The former assumes that teachers and students of mainstream schools support the concept of inclusive education and take an open attitude toward its existence. The latter assumes that teachers in mainstream schools understand the re-

quirements of inclusive education and possess some basic abilities for dealing with matters related to special needs education, and that their students are able to grow and advance in a multiple teaching environment that respects differences.

Many have questioned the attitude of Hong Kong's mainstream schools toward inclusive education and their ability to handle the needs of special education. Here, I bring up three basic issues for consideration: (a) teachers' and students' comprehension of their schools' inclusive education strategy, (b) the handling of the multiplicity of disabilities, and (c) the handling of differences. These three issues are, in fact, the keys to implementing inclusive education.

The decision makers make a simple assumption with regard to the launching of inclusive education in mainstream schools, which is that the teachers in charge of carrying it out have, to a certain extent, mastered the strategy of developing inclusive education at their schools. The actual situation, however, does not necessarily coincide with this assumption. A study that examined the Pilot Project on Integrated Education (1997–99) for inclusive education in Hong Kong shows that almost 50 percent of the working personnel ($n = 9$; first stage: 1998, $n = 380$, among whom teachers $n = 324$; second stage: 1999, $n = 325$, among whom teachers $n = 278$) were uncertain as to whether the schools had any policy that would explain inclusive education in the schools when the program was started. Many staff members were also unaware of what strategy the school authorities would adopt to carry out inclusive education (Crawford 2002, 31–32). If the teachers and staff members in the schools were unclear about why and how the school authorities would engage in inclusive education, obviously they would be at a loss as to how to carry it out. Also, the relevant implementation strategies could only take the form of directives from above or be decided by a small group of "special teachers." Hence, we cannot assume that the teachers and students of mainstream schools have a basic understanding of inclusive education. It would appear that an extensive process of consultation and acknowledgement is necessary before launching inclusive education in schools.

Another assumption on the part of decision makers regarding inclusive education is that students with special educational needs enroll in mainstream schools with a single disability or learning difficulty and that mainstream schools deal with basic disabilities that have already been tested and categorized. Such assumptions are a bit too simplistic in

the realities of special education. In 1996, a survey of all students in Hong Kong's special schools found that many students suffered from supplementary disabilities in addition to the basic disabilities that had already been categorized. The following examples illustrate this point: Some 56.1 percent of students enrolled in schools for the physically disabled ($n = 57$) had low IQs; 23.2 percent of 207 students enrolled in schools for mild mentally retarded children suffered from autism and 13.5 percent had psychological problems; and among 58 students enrolled in schools for the seriously mentally retarded, 36.2 percent were at the same time visually impaired, 37.9 percent were hyperactive, and 55.2 percent were epileptic (Lo 1998, 33–34). Whether mainstream schools have sufficient knowledge and personnel (such as support personnel and teaching assistants) to deal with the complexities of disabilities is a concern that cannot be lightly dismissed. When admitting schoolchildren with special education needs, mainstream schools should have adequate relevant information to enable them to make preparations and conduct timely coordination.

The third assumption on the part of decision makers with regard to inclusion is that students with special educational needs will smoothly integrate into mainstream curricula with the assistance of various means and methods. Based on this assumption, the teaching arrangements, standards, and anticipated results all pertain to mainstreaming, and the work of inclusive education becomes the mainstreaming of students with special needs.

The implementation of inclusive education may change this mainstreaming assumption. Sensitive and responsible teachers are bound to notice the absurdities of the mainstreaming view of education and will try to use rational methods, under policy direction, to help students with special education needs. They are also bound to recognize that if they are to genuinely help these students in their studies, curricula and teaching must possess ecological validity and teaching must be done in a way that coordinates with the students' learning circumstances and characteristics.

However, when it becomes possible for inclusive education to extend into mainstream schools, curricula and teaching will rapidly become arenas of contention between the mainstream and the special. Current observations indicate that mainstream curricula will continue to be the starting and end point for the implementation of local inclusive education. The methods of special needs education will serve as no more than

auxiliary mainstream tools. However, along with constant increases in the number of students with special education needs, any mainstream school that insists on the commonalities (instead of exceptionalities) of students will be confronted with increasingly obvious intramural contradictions and tensions (Dyson 2001, 27). One of the reasons is because it is impossible for inclusive education to take root and flourish in a school environment with mainstreamed curricula and teaching. Because the education and learning requirements of students are different, we should not teach and guide them by means of uniform viewpoints and methods. The mainstream schools' intention and desire to set aside differences and seek common ground deserve understanding and support on our part. However, the "differences" here are endowed by nature, while the "common grounds" are manmade. The most important debate on the future development of Hong Kong's inclusive education will be on the assigning of a sensible and rational position for inclusive curricula and teaching within entities where differences and common grounds stand in apposition to one another.

Conclusion

Hong Kong has been implementing inclusive education in line with the worldwide tide of educational reform and allows experimental mainstreaming of school education. The method of inclusion is changing from piecemeal intramural special education services to encouraging all teachers and students in schools to support inclusive education under the whole-school approach. We have indeed entered the era of inclusive education. However, an overview of the developments in past years shows that the implementation of inclusive education policy has been hesitant and indeterminate. Any advance from today's initial stage of an integrated education project to the realm of inclusive education, if such is possible, will be a lengthy process.

Perhaps the government's coffers truly do not have the money to meet the needs of developing inclusive education, or perhaps the government needs to calculate with trepidation the political gains and losses of extensively pursuing inclusive education, or perhaps—which is quite likely—our educational circles indeed lack a standpoint or developmental plans with regard to inclusive education. Whatever the case, no one seems to be very enthusiastic about advancing inclusive education. The 116 schools that are currently participating in the whole-school Integrated

Education Project account for only a small number of Hong Kong schools. Even if a marked quantitative increase in inclusive education has occurred, it is uncertain whether students with special educational needs are receiving high-quality mainstream education. The sustained development of inclusive education depends on coordination within and outside the education system—coordination that must be both systematic and well organized.

In both the conception and practice of educational reform, I frequently detect the assumption that the success of educational reform depends on more effective school organization, more capable and industrious teachers, and more abundant resources. However, the work of pursuing inclusive education requires first and foremost that everyone have an open attitude, tolerant perceptions, the courage to try things out, and the spirit of seeking the truth. Inclusive education does require ample manpower, efforts, and finances, but these are merely necessary elements required for its implementation. Inclusive education calls for brainstorming changes in educational thinking and elevating the art of educating people to higher levels. Let us hope we are capable of doing so.

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