Inclusion is not a Matter of Location: Implications from a Case Study

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Abstract

The inclusion movement was used as the reason for converting all seven special schools for students with severe learning disabilities, Skills Opportunity Schools (SOSs), into general secondary schools. Parental criticism and demand eventually resulted in keeping three of them as so-called mainstreamed-SOSs that are to accommodate students with learning disabilities and others. Part of this ethnographic study is used to illustrate how inclusion is actually practiced in one of the schools. Factors significant to such practices consist of a team of experienced staff for students with disabilities and a pervasive culture of acceptance, accommodation, continual trial and error for more effective learning among the staff.

1. Introduction

In 1997, the Hong Kong government formally implemented integrated education for a pilot period of 2 years through the participation of seven elementary and two secondary schools. Despite fierce criticisms on issues related to its implementation from relevant stakeholders, integrated education was nonetheless expanded to over 800 (around 500 elementary and 300 schools) out of 1,060 public schools in the school year of 2008-09. Anyhow, the government has repeatedly asserted that special schools continue to serve important roles in educating students with intellectual disabilities, sensory impairments, physical disabilities, and emotional/behavioral disabilities. The only type of special schools considered unnecessary under the direction of integration are those serving students with severe learning disabilities, known as skills opportunity schools (SOSs), and they have been converted to general secondary schools. Parental criticisms and demands resulted in three of them maintaining the mission of targeting at students with disabilities. These schools, now referred to as mainstreamed-SOSs by the government, receive the same resources as other general secondary schools. All their extra funds and resources no longer apply.

Despite extra resources and personnel training, there was never a shortage of criticisms on the lack of effective accommodation in integrated settings. Various studies (e.g., [1] Hong Kong Primary Education Research Association and Special Education Society of Hong Kong, 2006; [2] Mittler & Poon-McBrayer, 1998; [3] Poon-McBrayer, 2004; [4] Wong, 2002) investigated and reported the issues in the last decade. To this date, no study has investigated how the mainstreamed-SOSs are accommodating students with learning disabilities while functioning as general secondary schools without extra resources. In addition, parents of students with special needs regard these three schools as special schools and are frequently referred by the Education Bureau to enroll their children who cannot cope and/or are bullied in general schools that practice inclusive education. Data of this article are part of a larger ethnographic study and this article focuses on how and how well one of the schools fulfills its dual mission and factors contributing to the fulfillment. To achieve the purposes, I will first provide the background information regarding the establishment of the SOSs, followed by the details of research methodology, themed results, discussions and conclusions.

2. Skills Opportunity Schools

In 1990, the Education Commission recommended the establishment of eight SOSs for children with severe learning difficulties who cannot benefit from the standard curriculum even with the help of intensive remedial services. These schools were to accommodate the 12 to 14 age group, offering equal opportunities for appropriate schooling. Each SOS was to provide 300 places through the operation of 15 classes of Grades 7 to 9 (i.e. 15 classes x 20 students).

The curriculum of SOSs comprised 60% academic subjects and 40% cultural, practical and technical subjects (Education Commission, 1996), such as social skills and skills-related subjects such as clerical skills, home economics, woodwork and metalwork.

3. Methodology

Focus group interviews of the principal and teachers, informal interviews with students, participant observations of interactions among students and among teachers and students were the main data sources. To keep the groups homogeneous, one focus group session was conducted for the three principals and teachers of each participating school respectively, totaling four sessions.

The principal interviews centered on administrative effort and teacher interviews on effort in curriculum, instructional and assessment aspects. Informal dialogues with students in the playgrounds intended to understand student sentiment of their learning and growth as well as their comparison of experiences in this type of school and others if they have been in other secondary schools. Informal dialogues with students and participant observations would be conducted simultaneously in school playgrounds during lunch hours or right after school.

3.1. Data Analysis

To ensure data credibility, two levels of member checks were carried out. I first summarized the data at the end of each interview to ensure sufficient understanding of the information. I then presented identified themes to verify with the participants after coding had been completed. For data dependability, transcription margin memos, which included observation summaries, were written. Remarks and suggestions made by a bilingual transcription auditor who will check the accuracy of translation and transcription of focus group and informal interview data were retained. Cross-case analysis will be adopted to capture the patterns of perceptions of experiences of principals, teachers, and students across schools. Data will be clustered and organized into themes that represented similarity in relevant issues.

4. Initial Findings

Initial findings of one of the three participating schools, School A, are selected for this case study as the final part of the study has not yet completed. An informal individual interview with the principal of School A was conducted the day after the focus group interview for all principals to gain a more in-depth understanding of the challenges confronting the school. Data relevant to this school's attempt to and how well it succeeds to achieve the dual mission of accommodating diverse needs are extracted and grouped under diversified student profiles, administrative facilitation, and adaptations in curricula, instruction, and assessment. A few themes emerged to reflect the presence of characteristics of inclusive practices.

4.1. Effective Partnership

Established in 1998 as an SOS, School A was converted to a mainstreamed-SOS in September 2003. In spite of the reduced resources, the founding principal who has served the same role for 11 years has determined to continue the school's mission of serving students with severe learning disabilities. He firmly believes that his role is significant in making positive changes to these students' lives. He also believes that he will be most effective if he works in partnership with teachers and parents. He makes it clear that one of his major roles is to help teachers teach effectively. Therefore, he wants them to come to him if they have issues to be resolved. Teachers have confirmed that they greet him by his first name and feel perfectly comfortable to talk to him about their needs and difficulties. He has therefore sought donations to maintain the same number of social workers as an SOS, launch new vocational training programs, provide diversified curricular and assessment materials to accommodate individual needs, offer extra-curricular activities to increase parents' knowledge and skills for more effective intervention and reinforcement at home, and so on. The effective partnership between the school administration and teachers is further indicated by the fact that most of his 30 teachers have worked there since the school's establishment.

4.2. Pervasive Culture of Acceptance

Data have revealed a pervasive culture of acceptance in three closely related aspects. First, providing accommodation to meet learning needs is considered fundamental. Second, both the principal and the teachers are willing to take multiple roles. Third, it exists between staff and students a strong positive rapport.

The school now has to open places for all who apply. All common categories of special needs are now found in these schools: varying degrees of intellectual disabilities, learning disabilities, autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, speech impairments, hearing/visual impairments, physical disabilities, and former psychiatric patients. Students with learning disabilities only constituted 30% of the student population for the school year of 2008/09. Instead of taking it as burden uncalled for, both the principal and the teachers perceive meeting diverse

needs through additional resources and innovative instructions, daily assignments, and summative assessment of student performance as part of their basic responsibilities. As such, the principal willingly seeks additional resources while teachers routinely design alternative curricula, diversify instructional and assessment arrangements. The authority responsible for Hong Kong public examinations even consults and models after them in examination accommodations.

The pervasive culture of acceptance is further demonstrated by the willingness among staff to take on a heavier workload and become more versatile in their multiple roles, be it fundraiser, counselor, or job coach. Teacher morale is maintained at a reasonably high level as they consider their work important in making a difference in the children's life.

Lastly, the pervasive culture of acceptance is made apparent through students' views of the high level of comfort to discuss their concerns and needs with the principal and their teachers. In their own words, "We are like a family." Such a rapport between staff and students was further confirmed during participant observations in the school playground.

5. Conclusions

According to Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities ([5] United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2006), an inclusive education system is one in which all children can be equally valued, treated with respect, provided with equal opportunities to an appropriate education with reasonable accommodation. Barton ([6] 1997) asserted that inclusion is about changing existing school systems in terms of physical factors, curriculum aspects, teaching expectations and styles, and leadership roles. The initial findings of this special-general school reveal the existence of these characteristics of inclusive schooling environment through apparent staff commitment, culture of acceptance, and supportive leadership. In essence, inclusion is practiced in this specialized school for students with diverse needs. The findings call for a serious reconsideration of whether inclusion is a matter of location or a matter of school culture and practices.

6. References

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