Can Integrated Education Meet the Needs of Students with SEN?

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Abstract

Background: Integration of students with special education needs (SEN) into regular classrooms has been implemented for over three decades in the western world. Asian regions, particularly Hong Kong, follow the proclamation of the Salamanca Statement. In 1996, the Disability Discrimination Ordinance was enacted in Hong Kong. In 2004, the Hong Kong Government initiated the whole-school approach of integrated education.

Focus of Discussion: The purpose of this paper was to review what recent literature has stated about integrated education or full inclusion. Research on the academic achievement of students with SEN in inclusive classrooms revealed mixed findings. As for the affective and social domains, studies indicated that the inclusive students were negative about their experiences in the mainstream classrooms and had lower self-concepts and self-esteem than their typically developing peers. Questions were raised to ask whether integration can address the special needs of students with SEN. Is integrated education the only education policy for students with SEN besides special schools?

Recommendations: Suggestions were made for education policy-makers and parents of students with SEN to design the policy and programs to help the students to attain their individual educational and social needs. The authors of this paper do not support the elimination of alternative placements in favor of a universal policy of integrated education. An individual education program (IEP) should be developed to ensure any student with SEN receives appropriate education. In addition, the instructional placements and services should be determined based on the individual educational needs of students with SEN.

Keywords: Special Education, Integrated Education, Continuum of Alternative Placements and Services

融合教育能切合有特殊教育需要的學生嗎？

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摘要

背景： 在西方社會，安排有特殊教育需要的學生在常規的課堂中已實行了三十多年，在亞洲區，特別是香港正追隨薩拉曼卡聲明。香港在 1996年制定「殘疾歧視條例」，政府在2004年發起全校參與模式的融合教育。

討論焦點： 本文的目的是回顧近年論及融合教育或全面包容的文獻。研究顯示，有特殊教育需要的學生在包容性教室中的學業成績，結果好壞參半。至於在情意及社交範疇，研究表明，有特殊教育需要的學生在主流教室中與班中其他正常的學生相比，有負面和較低的自我概念及自尊的現象。有人質疑融合是否能切合有特殊教育需要學生的個別需要 ？融合教育是否有特殊教育需要學生在特殊學校之外的唯一教育政策？

建議： 本文向教育政策制定者和有特殊教育需要學生的家長提出了一些建議--設計政策和方案，以幫助學生實現其個人的教育和社會性的需要。本文作者不支持以融合教育替代特殊學校 的政策取向。應制定個別教育計劃（IEP），以確保有特殊教育需要的任何學生得到適當的教育。此外，教學的安排和服務，應當建基於有特殊教育需要的學生個人的教育需求。

關鍵詞： 特殊教育、融合教育、一系列替代性教學的安排和服務

Introduction

Over the past 20 years, there has been a global trend for students with special education needs (SEN) or disabilities to be fully included or integrated in a regular classroom (Evans & Lunt, 2002). The trend was stimulated partially by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)'s Salamanca Statement of 1994 where it stated "those with special educational needs must have access to regular schools which should accommodate them within a child-centered pedagogy capable of meeting these needs (UNESCO, 1994, p. viii). The statement further specified that "regular schools with this inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all" (UNESCO, 1994, p. ix).

In response to the Salamanca Statement, the public polices in both the USA and the United Kingdom supported the principle of including as many students with SEN as possible in mainstream classrooms; however, at the same time mandated education authorities to maintain a continuum of special education provision (Hornby, 1999). All European Union countries now have legislation in place to promote or require inclusion. The USA has effectively led the way with its PL 94-142 of 1975, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, amended in 1990 as the Individuals with Disabilities Act, and reauthorized in 1997 and 2004, to promote whole-school approach to inclusion (Evans & Lunt, 2002).

The worldwide movement towards inclusive education is slowly occurring across the Asia-Pacific areas (Forlin, 2010). United Nations estimated that there are some 600 million people with disabilities worldwide, or 10% of the world population, with about 400 million of them living in Asian countries (Edmonds, 2005). With considerable emphasis placed on eliminating discrimination, many Asian governments have been increasingly aware that they need to develop an inclusive policy for children with SEN who have been educated in segregated facilities.

Hong Kong – An Asian Example of Integrated Education

Hong Kong, as an Asian example, has government policies on special education that follow the proclamation of the Salamanca Statement. The Disability Discrimination Ordinance (DDO) was enacted in 1996. In 2001, the Equal Opportunities Commission issued the Code of Practice in Education under the DDO. The Code emphasizes the equal opportunity in education for persons with disabilities. It also facilitates individuals with SEN, their parents, and the concerned parties to understand their rights and responsibilities. The principle of equal opportunities in education is in line with the world movement of integrated education. The Code is therefore supportive of the integrated education program. The Code itself is not a guide to integrated education, but provides practical guidance on the legal requirements under the DDO (Education Bureau, 2010a; Equal Opportunities Commission, n.d.)

From September 1997, based on an evaluation of a two-year pilot project on integration, the Hong Kong Government recommended schools to adopt the Whole School Approach (WSA) to enhance the quality of integrated education (Education Bureau, 2010a; Heung, 2005). In the 2007-2008 school year, 39 primary and 38 secondary schools participated in the program (Forlin, 2010). In addition, starting from 2004, the Hong Kong Government has implemented a new funding system to support different integration projects. Monies will be allocated to schools according to the number of students with learning needs. Under this funding mode, schools have the flexibility in resource usage. Schools are encouraged to establish their annual development

plan on catering for diversity. Student Support Team is formed in each funded school to coordinate and monitor development programs (Heung, 2005).

Currently, there are 60 aided special schools in Hong Kong serving students with visual and hearing impairments, physical disabilities, social development difficulties, and intellectual disabilities (Education Bureau, 2010b). Moreover, there are three secondary schools, which were previously Skills Opportunity Schools, serving mainly students with severe learning difficulties. These schools offer both ordinary and adapted curricula to meet the students' learning needs.

Moreover, the principle of "one curriculum framework for all" has been emphasized in the special education of Hong Kong. Students with SEN are provided with opportunities to access the mainstream curriculum and to gain essential life-long learning experiences just like their typically developing peers. To achieve these objectives, the Committee on Special Educational Needs of the Curriculum Development Council is charged to formulate policy and oversee curriculum development for students with SEN (Education Bureau, 2010c).

In addition, the Education Bureau adopts a 3-tier support model to implement integrated education. To tie in with the support model, a 5-year teacher professional development framework has been formulated. Starting from the 2007-2008 school year, teachers of primary, secondary, and special schools have been provided with in-service training on Basic, Advanced, and Thematic Courses to equip them with professional knowledge in supporting students with SEN (Education Bureau, 2007).

Students with SEN have been included in regular classrooms for more than a decade in Hong Kong. However, local educators generally feel that the implementation of inclusive education in Hong Kong is far from satisfactory (e.g. Law, 2011; Pang, 2007; Tang, 2006).

Purpose of the Paper

Integration of inclusive students with SEN into mainstream schools has been implemented as an educational policy and practice for over three decades in the western world. Asian regions, particularly Hong Kong, keep abreast of the initiatives and get on the bandwagon of integrated education. The questions are: Is integrated education an effective special education policy? Can integrated education meet the learning and social needs of students with SEN? What does research say about inclusion?

In fact, conducting research studies on the effects of integration raises different methodological questions (Nakken & Pijl, 2002). First, there are problems in matching students in regular and special education. In numerous studies on integrated education, students were matched for certain traits, for instance, intellectual quotient, behavioral problems, sensory disabilities, and so on. Nevertheless, often the groups were only partially matched, as students with relatively mild disabilities were rarely found in special education, while students with severe disabilities were less likely to attend regular schools. This made a correct interpretation of the research findings difficult.

Another difficulty is found in describing the differences and similarities of the two experimental settings, namely integration and segregation. In addition, it is difficult to control other factors that influenced the study results such as educational programs and teacher qualifications (Nakken & Pijl, 2002).

Since integrated education implemented is based on the issues of human rights and equal opportunity, some inclusionists even believe that empirical studies are not necessary. Hall (as cited in Pijl & Hamstra, 2005), for instance, stressed that there is no point to conduct any research on integration because all children are entitled to attend a regular school. Also, research

studies take time; politicians and public opinion generally have little patience in waiting for the results and findings to examine whether integration actually works (Nakken & Pijl, 2002).

Apparently, integrated education remains controversial. This paper was written to review what recent literature has stated about such practice. Areas of investigation and concerns included academic and social needs of SEN students as well as perspectives of parents and general education teachers on inclusive education. Questions are raised to ask whether integration can address the special needs of this particular group of students. Recommendations are made to assist the education decision-makers and parents to design the policy and programs to help students with SEN to attain their individual learning and social needs which in turn leads to a successful school life.

Recent Literature about Integrated Education
Affective and Social domains of Inclusive Students in a Mainstream Classroom

The whole-school approach of integrated education was released by the Hong Kong Government in 2004. In 2005, Lam and Yeung conducted a study where 152 Hong Kong elementary students were studied on their affective and social outcomes in a school which practiced an inclusive policy. Among the 152 samples, 16 of them were inclusive students who were with various learning difficulties and were engaged in the remedial teaching scheme and were low academic achievers. Both the normal student group and inclusive student group were asked to complete five questionnaires from the Assessment Program for Affective and Social Outcomes (APASO) Manual to measure students' attitude to self-concept, interpersonal relationships, school, attitudes to learning, and problem solving. The differences between the groups were examined by a series of one-way ANOVA tests. The outcome was triangulated with teachers' perspectives through a teacher conference and a school profile report to derive a descriptive account of the situation of the school.

The research findings indicated that the inclusive students did not feel that they developed trust from their peers in the school (Lam & Yeung, 2005). They also did not think that they had a positive teacher-student relationship. In addition, they possessed a lower academic self-concept than their typically developing peers and they were worried about their school work. Nevertheless, the teachers in the study had a different point of view. The triangulation of data between the students' responses and the teachers' perspectives and school documents did reveal a wide gap between the views of the students and teachers. The combination of the research findings also strongly suggested that the inclusive students had a negative self-image. They did not seem to have a very positive experience in their school. It was likely that they developed pressure and anxiety in both social life and study in school (Lam & Yeung, 2005).

Lam and Yeung (2005) believed that teachers have not been able to appreciate the idea of the whole approach to integrated schooling. The teachers' main focus may still be the majority normal students. Teachers may only observe the inclusive policy as giving more care and attention for students with SEN but not trying to meet the diverse learning needs of the students as a whole. The significant differences on social and academic self-concept could be explained by a concept called "positive discrimination". This concept suggests that the acceptance from teachers and normal developing peers toward the inclusive students is a kind of superiority; their acceptance stems from the inferiority of the inclusive students who need sympathy and help. Such perceptive may cause some impact on inclusive

students' self-perception, thinking that they were being different, causing a psychological distance towards their social environment. Literature has pointed out that low levels of social acceptance may lead to emotional and mental health problems in the students' adulthood and the occurrence of disruptive and aggressive behavior (see Asher, Oden, & Gottman, 1977; Gottlieb, Semmel, & Veldman, 1978; and Kaufman, Agvard, & Semmel, 1985).

Learning and Emotional Functioning of Students with Learning Disabilities (LD)

Heward (2009) remarked that research on the academic achievement of students with LD in inclusive settings indicated mixed results. Some investigations reported better learning outcomes for students with LD in inclusive regular classrooms than in pull-out programs (e.g., Baker, Wang, & Walberg, 1995; Rea, McLaughlin, & Walther-Thomas, 2002). On the contrary, other studies reported disappointing performance results (e.g., Schumm, Moody, & Vaughn, 2000), concerns about inadequate instruction (e.g., Chard & Kame'enui, 2000), and teachers' insufficient understanding of the learning needs of students with LD (e.g., DeSimone & Parmar, 2006).

In a meta-analysis of 36 research studies comparing the self-concepts of students with LD in various instructional settings, Elbaum (2002) stated that there was no overall association between the self-concept and educational placements. Surprisingly, students with LD placed in regular classrooms full-time did not exhibit higher self-concept than those who were either placed part-time or full-time in special education classrooms. Nevertheless, although no one placement is more preferable for the development of self-concepts, Elbaum noted that "individual students may be profoundly affected by a placement that jeopardizes their self-esteem" (p. 222). In addition, the author stressed that the

foremost practical implication of the findings was that when making the decision for an educational placement, the student's social and emotional needs as well as his/her own preferences should be taken into consideration.

In another study, Wiener and Tardif (2004) examined the social and emotional functioning of 117 students with LD in Grade 4 through 8 classrooms in nine schools in two suburban school districts near Toronto, Canada. The participants received their instruction in four educational placements: in-class support, resource rooms, inclusive classrooms, and self-contained special education classrooms. The findings suggested a "slight superiority of the more inclusive programs" (p. 30) with respect to peer acceptance, number of friends, self-perceptions of math competence, and behavior problems. The authors noted, however, that "the differences between groups were not large" and were "especially small" when compared to the differences between students with and without LD." They cautioned, "It would be inappropriate to conclude that the major variable influencing the social and emotional adjustment of students with LD is the special education placement" (p. 30). Further, the authors concurred with the suggestions made by Elbaum (2002) that several students in the less inclusive placements might enhance their social and emotional functioning. As a result, schools should provide a wider range of instructional placements for students with LD.

Disability Culture

Hallahan and Kauffman (1997) asserted that people with disabilities had been treated similarly to oppressed minority groups, such as women, African Americans, and Hispanics. These individuals have experienced discrimination on the basis of their disability, and, therefore, can be considered an oppressed minority group.

In the light of similar premise, Hall (2002)

contended that inclusion proponents overlooked the value of the disability culture. Gill (as cited in Hall, 2002) referred disability culture to "including shared, long-standing social oppression; art; humor; history' evolving language and symbols; a unified worldview; beliefs and values; and strategies for surviving and thriving". Such culture is significant to students with disabilities because it helps them fortify against oppression; it facilitates communication with the world and others with disabilities about individuals' uniqueness; and it offers a sense of belonging to marginalized individuals. Hall maintained that disability culture was fostered when individuals with disabilities had the opportunity to associate with and learn alongside with others who shared similar identities and life experiences. She further argued that "by blindly pursuing absolute adherence to a concept, inclusionists have neglected the educational and social needs of individual children" (p.148).

Full inclusionists criticize the negative aspects of special education which include lower academic standards and expectations for students with disabilities and advocate the discontinuation of such a system. On the other hand, full inclusion opponents base their arguments on the drawbacks of full inclusion to justify the complete abolition of the practice. Debates and arguments continue without resolution. Hall (2002) suggested that it is more logical to seek a middle ground that is sensitive to the needs of the SEN students as well as provide a quality education for them.

Hall (2002) identified some recommendations for improved practices that might build a foundation for future policies that incorporate the positive aspects of both inclusive and segregated settings. The recommendations include: (a) parents, educators, and administrators should begin to recognize and learn about disability culture and its importance in the social and emotional development of SEN students; (b) school

systems should aggressively recruit special education teachers and other service providers with disabilities because they understand disability culture the most and they serve as appropriate role models for the students; (c) schools should establish high expectations for all students and be held accountable for the results; (d) school systems should provide an array of services to best meet the needs of students with disabilities; and (e) school administrators should support students with disabilities to form peer groups or clubs.

Learning Experiences of Students with Emotional and Behavioral Difficulties (EBD) about Mainstream Schools

In a recent follow-up study, Hornby and Witte (2008) interviewed 21 adult graduates of a residential special school for children with emotional and behavioral difficulties in New Zealand. The graduates were interviewed 10 to 14 years after they had left the residential school. The residential special school provided special education for students who were aged between seven and 13 years. These former students returned to mainstream schools after attending the residential school. The interview captured the graduates' views on their education both at the residential school and at the mainstream schools. The results of the study showed that all 21 participants made mostly negative comments about the mainstream schools, whereas 8 out of the 21 had provided positive statements about their time at the residential school.

Hornby and Witte (2008) commented that a key finding of their study was that the graduates' feedback was overwhelmingly positive about the help received from the residential school in addressing their academic needs and behavioral difficulties. Other positive aspects of special schools includes: (a) smaller class sizes, (b) more individual attention, (c) a clear disciplinary structure, and (d) the high quality of relationships

between students, teachers, and staff.

Moreover, the graduates were consistently negative about their experiences in the mainstream schools to where they returned after attending the residential schools (Hornby & Witte, 2008). They all experienced the labeling and stereotyping from teachers in mainstream schools. Some other negative comments included: (a) being teased or put down by their peers, (b) not receiving enough support or help, (c) inappropriate punishments, (d) not being listened to, and (e) lack of understanding.

The main implication of the study finding was that to carefully identify the elements of which the residential school program were successful in managing these students' special needs so that they could be implemented in mainstream schools. Based on the findings of the study, Hornby and Witte (2008) concluded that to improve the ability of mainstream schools to serve students with emotional and behavioral difficulties effectively, the provision of better pre-service and in-service training for mainstream teachers on managing and teaching such students would be definitely essential.

Parents' Attitudes towards Inclusive Education

de Boer, Pijl and Minnaert (2010) conducted a literature review about parents' attitudes towards inclusive education. A comprehensive search was performed which resulted in 346 references. The authors applied the selection criteria and 10 empirical studies were selected for the review. These studies were conducted in different parts of the world, including the United States of America, Australia, and Greece, between 1998 and 2007. The results were divided into three groups: (a) describing attitudes of parents of children with disabilities; (b) describing attitudes of parents of typically developing children; and (c)

comparing attitudes of parents of children with and without special needs.

This literature review revealed that the overall parental perspectives towards inclusive education were from neutral to positive (e.g. Elkins, van Kraayenoord & Jobling, 2003). Nevertheless, parents of children with disabilities scored lower than those of typically developing children. They often indicated that inclusion was not a good placement for their child and held concerns about their child's emotional development, the individualization of instruction, and the availability of services in regular schools (de Boer, Pijl & Minnaert, 2010).

On the contrary, parents of typically developing children showed more positive attitudes towards inclusive education and viewed it as an opportunity for their children to experience social benefits, such as developing sensitivity to others. However, parents also indicated that inclusive education had potential risks for children with and without disabilities (de Boer, Pijl & Minnaert, 2010).

de Boer, Pijl and Minnaert (2010) remarked that the review results did not support the perceptions that parents of children with disabilities as being the main advocate for inclusive education. The authors explained that this unexpected finding might have to do with the time factor. The studies reviewed in this study were published in or after 1998. The parent movement for inclusion had successfully changed the laws, regulations, and funding policies before 1995 in the United States and European countries. Hence, the authors concluded, "This new generation of parents is more critical towards inclusive education as it functions in practice" and "they are not always pleased with what they find" (de Boer, Pijl & Minnaert, 2010, p. 178).

Voices of General Education Teachers

Classroom teachers and full inclusion policy.

In a recent study, Ratcliff (2009) conducted a qualitative research by interviewing three regular classroom teachers who worked in an urban public elementary school with full inclusion policy. Three themes were emerged in the study: (a) frustration about full inclusion, (b) full inclusion did not benefit student learning, and (c) full inclusion was not "one-size fits all".

All of the regular education teachers interviewed were frustrated about full inclusion. Their frustrations arose from various aspects which included lacking of professional training; frustrations in lesson planning and test modifications; underachievement of students; not being heard by administrators; and lacking of collaborating efforts from special education personnel (Ratcliff, 2009).

The teachers believed that full inclusion did not benefit student learning. The academic performance of students with SEN was hindered by the fast pace and requirements of the general education curriculum. Two of the teachers stated that because they needed to spend part of the instructional time to assist those students who had academic difficulties, both students of regular and special education, they did not have enough time to provide enrichment activities for the gifted students. They felt that the gifted students were left behind. Moreover, the issue of student behavior was regarded as another impediment to inclusion. The teachers were overwhelmed by the students' behavior problems which added more stress they already felt about making instructional accommodations (Ratcliff, 2009).

In addition, the participants in the study believed that full inclusion was not for every student with SEN. They believed that because of the nature of the general education curriculum, only high functioning students with SEN could keep up with the pace of the curriculum

and make progress (Ratcliff, 2009).

The perspectives of elementary teachers about successful inclusion.

In another qualitative study, Lohrmann and Bambara (2006) interviewed 14 elementary teachers who shared their successful experiences of including students with SEN in their classrooms. These students were having developmental disabilities and engaged in disruptive classroom behaviors. Among the 14 participants, 10 revealed having initial apprehensions about including the students with SEN. The lack of training and unfamiliarity with students caused them to question about their ability. Moreover, their initial apprehensions were influenced by what they heard about their students from other colleagues. The apprehensive feelings made these 10 teachers wonder whether including the students would be appropriate and worried about the upcoming school year. Then, when the first day of school arrived, most of the teachers realized that the situation was not as bad as they had imagined. They became optimistic. Their realization was met with a sense of relief.

The teachers expressed that their feelings of initial apprehension also stemmed from concerns about working with other personnel, including paraprofessionals or special education teachers. Some teachers said that they were uncomfortable with having other adults in the classroom and worried that they would be watched or judged as well as their working relationships (Lohrmann & Bambara, 2006).

In contrast to having initial apprehensions, four teachers, who were certified in both elementary and special education, believed that they were capable to handle the students with SEN in their classroom. These teachers had experiences of working with students with emotional and behavioral disorders or aggressive behavior problems. They considered that their training

and experience in special education contributed to their feelings of confidence (Lohrmann & Bambara, 2006).

Nevertheless, regardless of the initial apprehensive feelings or confidence, it was challenging to include students with disruptive behaviors in the classroom. To overcome these challenges, the teachers described two levels of support: a school-wide level of support and a situation-specific level of support. The school-wide level of support included the presence of a school-wide culture that promoted inclusion, the existence of collegial atmosphere where teachers were comfortable asking colleagues and administrators for assistance, and the availability of in-class support personnel, specifically paraprofessionals or special education teachers (Lohrmann & Bambara, 2006).

The situation-specific level of supports was referred to interpersonal supports, collaboration opportunities, direct assistance from administrators, and parental support. Interpersonal supports were related to the availability of listeners to the teachers and the extension of encouragement and validation. Lohrmann and Bambara (2006) noted that although interpersonal support was not emphasized in the inclusion literature, this additional form of support was needed to help cope with stress.

Furthermore, Lohrmann and Bambara (2006) maintained that the participants commonly held a set of core beliefs that enabled them to work through their frustrations. These beliefs include being flexible and meeting the needs of the individual student, looking for the positive qualities of the inclusive student, and understanding the student.

Middle school mathematics teachers and students with learning disabilities (LD).

DeSimone and Parmar (2006) conducted a national survey on middle school mathematics teachers about their beliefs and self-perceived knowledge regarding teaching students with LD in their inclusive classrooms. There were 228 sixth to eighth grade mathematics teachers in 19 states in the U.S. participating in the survey.

The study showed that a majority of the respondents (80.3 percent) agreed or strongly agreed that students with LD should be provided with every opportunity to learn mathematics with their general education peers. However, fewer than one-half of the respondents (41.6 percent) believed that the students were best taught in an inclusive setting. In addition, 37.3 percent of the respondents were still undecided on this issue. DeSimone and Parmar (2006) stressed that the responses would indicate that many of the teachers did not find that the instructional placement in a regular classroom would be the best for the students with LD.

Moreover, when asking to indicate their beliefs about implementing inclusion, the responses indicated that many middle school mathematics teachers were uncertain whether the resource room model effectively facilitate student learning. However, the teachers also observed that the students were not learning effectively in inclusive classrooms either (DeSimone & Parmar, 2006).

The teachers were asked whether they felt comfortable adapting instruction to meet the learning needs of the students with LD. More than half of the respondents expressed that they were either quite comfortable or very comfortable in doing so. Seasoned teachers with more years of experience felt more comfortable than teachers with fewer years of experience. Workshop training was found to be beneficial to the teachers in helping students with LD with attention, memory, and communication difficulties (DeSimone & Parmar, 2006).

When asked to rate the level of administrative support, a majority of the respondents (72.3 percent) believed that students with LD required more time from

teachers than the general education students. However, more than half of the respondents felt that administrators did not provide them with sufficient time to prepare for their mathematics inclusive classes. Also, more than one-fourth of the teachers were still undecided about their comfort with team teaching, which seemed to be an integral resource (DeSimone & Parmar, 2006).

In addition, the respondents were asked about their perceptions regarding the preparation they received in pre-service programs to teach in inclusive classrooms. The findings revealed an inadequacy of pre-service and in-service teacher preparation for inclusion (DeSimone & Parmar, 2006).

Based on the findings of the survey, DeSimone and Parmar (2006) made several suggestions which included (a) teachers needed to expand their knowledge of instructional and curricular modifications to meet the special learning needs of students with LD; (b) teacher preparation programs should be restructured to provide more pedagogical practices for diverse learners; and (c) it was necessary to conduct in-service training focusing on particular mathematics topics and strategies for teaching students with LD.

Discussion

Can integrated education cater the needs of students with SEN? Apparently, including students with SEN into mainstream classroom does not guarantee their social and academic needs are met. Is integrated education the only education policy for students with SEN besides special schools? Shanker (1994/1995) asserted that educational policy makers and administrators as well as politicians support integrated education because they perceive it as an opportunity to reduce the funding for expensive special education services.

The fact is in the United States, the policy of inclusion is not required by federal and state laws (Stout

& Huston, 2007). The Public Law 108-466, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), as amended in 2004, recognizes that it is inappropriate to place all students with disabilities in regular classrooms. Thus, it requires every student with disabilities be educated in the "least restrictive environment" (LRE), that is, when appropriate, students with disabilities are to be educated with students who are not disabled. LRE is the setting that is most similar to a regular classroom and also appropriate to meet the special needs of the students. Hence, the placement begins with the regular classroom settings. To ensure that each student with disabilities is educated in the LRE, the law requires the school districts to provide continuum of alternative placements, from regular classroom to residential school, to accommodate the needs of the special education students (Heward, 2009; Stout & Huston, 2007).

The main purpose of IDEA is to provide free appropriate public education (FAPE) to all students with disabilities (Bateman & Herr, 2006). The provision of the law, since the passing of the landmark special education legislation, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, in 1975, emphasizes individualization (Blackhurst & Berdine, 1981). An individualized education program (IEP), a detailed document, must be developed for each student enrolled in special education and implemented to meet the special needs of the student. The IEP specifies the unique educational needs of the student with disabilities, states current level of performance, identifies measurable annual goals and objectives, and describes the related services provided to help the student attain the goals (Heward, 2009).

Each IEP should be the product of the collaborative efforts of the members of an IEP team (Heward, 2009). The law specifies the membership of an IEP team should include the parents of the student with disabilities and school personnel. The IEP states explicitly the services provided for the student with disabilities constitute the

requirement of full appropriate public education (FAPE). The team also determines the proper placement for the student to meet his or her learning needs. Therefore, the IEP is "the heart of IDEA" and "the make or break component in FAPE for every IDEA child" (Bateman & Herr, 2006, p. 10).

Moreover, the law requires the IEP team to consider placing students with disabilities in regular classrooms as the starting point in determining the appropriate placement (Stout & Huston, 2007). The law also requires the team to provide a justification and explanation of the extent to which the student will not participate with nondisabled peers in the general education curriculum, extracurricular activities, and other nonacademic activities (such as lunch, recess, and transportation) (Heward, 2009). The purpose of these requirements is to fulfill the intent of the IDEA, which is to educate as many students with disabilities as possible in the regular classroom, while still catering their unique, individual needs (Stout & Huston, 2007). The law does not require placement of all students with disabilities in regular classrooms (Heward, 2009).

To address our previous question: Is integrated education the only education policy for students with SEN besides special schools? No. Wright (1999) contended that the adoption of full inclusion policy as classroom practice for SEN students would eliminate the parents and guardians' power of decision-making. Parents and guardians will no longer be able to participate meaningfully in deciding where their child should be educated.

The concept of the continuum ensures that each student with disabilities would be placed in an environment that is specifically appropriate to meet his/her needs. The law contemplates that the extent of "inclusion" be driven by an individual student's needs determined by the IEP team, not by the school district's convenience or the parents' wishes (Stout & Huston,

2007).

As for the educational placement alternatives, Heward (2009) maintained that in the United States, all of the major professional and advocacy associations had published position papers against full inclusion. These associations include Council for Learning Disabilities, Learning Disabilities Association of America, and National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities. Each association supports the practice of including students with LD in the regular classroom as much as possible, given that their individualized educational needs are met by the instructional and related services. However, they are strongly against any one-size-fits-all policy mandated from the top, that is, the same placement and instruction for all students with LD. Each association supports the concept of continuum placement where instruction takes place in the environment other than the regular classroom.

Heward (2009) stressed that a regular classroom might be a more restrictive environment for some students with LD than other placements, such as a resource room or special class because of their academic deficit and remedial needs. Nevertheless, simply placing a student with LD in a resource room does not guarantee that he/she will receive the appropriate instruction to meet his/her needs. Therefore, Heward concluded that "where a student is taught is not as important as the quality of instruction that student receives" (p. 207).

Recommendations

In December 2006, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and its Optional Protocol was adopted at the United Nations Headquarters in New York (United Nations, 2011). In order to recognize and respect the human rights of individuals with disabilities to education as stated in the Convention and to help meet their social and academic needs, the following recommendations would help education policy

makers and administrators in designing an appropriate instructional environment and the provision of services, particularly the officials in Hong Kong.

a)A continuum of alternative placements and services should be provided to all students with SEN and the starting placement begins in regular classrooms. As shown in Appendix I, the continuum of placements and services starts from the regular classroom. As the severity of disability increases, the placements and services become more restrictive and the number of students in the classroom decreases.

b)An individualized education program (IEP) should be developed to ensure the student with SEN receives appropriate education. The program should focus on catering the student's unique special needs. An IEP team should be composed of the parent(s) or guardian(s) of the student with SEN as well as the student, general and special education teachers, school administrator(s), related service provider(s), and a representative from the Education Bureau. The program should be reviewed once a year or upon the request of the parent. The student with SEN should be re-evaluated every 3 years to maintain a current record of the academic, psychological and behavioral performances.

c)All educational placements should be determined by the IEP team. The team should take into account the student's education, social and emotional needs as well as his/her own preferences about the placement options.

d)No full inclusion of students with SEN as mandated policy unless determined appropriate by the IEP team.

e)Extensive professional development should be provided to all teachers and classroom assistants in the area of: (a) identifying the individual learning and social needs of students with SEN, (b) using effective teaching methods and strategies (such as explicit instruction, differentiated instruction, and graphic organizers) and resources to assist the students to attain their individual learning goals, and (c) disability culture.

f)Schools should support students with SEN in establishing peers social groups or club(s).

g)Regular and special education teachers as well as other related service providers (such as speech therapists, physical therapists, occupational therapists, and adaptive physical education teachers) should work as a team and eliminate the territorial attitude to provide instructional support and appropriate services to students with SEN.

h)The education bureau or department should employ sufficient licensed practitioners to address the social, emotional, and cognitive needs of all students. In inclusive settings, it is imperative to reduce class sizes and/or increase numbers of teachers.

Moreover, parents of students with SEN are advised to be involved actively in the placement decisions and service delivery of their children. Research studies have revealed that simply placing students with SEN in an inclusive classroom does not mean that their social and learning needs can be met. General education system with its fast and competitive pace and whole-group focus is not appropriate for all students with SEN. Hence, it is unrealistic to expect general education teachers to provide the individualized attention required by learners with disabilities (Hallahan & Kauffman, 1997). In addition, to alleviate the emotional stress and frustrations of students with SEN, parents are suggested to listen to their children's feelings and educational preferences. Further, attending parent support group meetings and having conversations with other parents of students with SEN can help gain knowledge about how to assist their children to have a successful schooling career as well as their psychological development and better classroom behavior.

Conclusions

In the Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, n.d.), it states explicitly that reasonable accommodations to meet the requirements of individuals of disabilities should be ensured. "Reasonable accommodation" is defined in the Convention as:

> necessary and appropriate modification and adjustments not imposing a disproportionate or undue burden, where needed in a particular case, to ensure to persons with disabilities the enjoyment or exercise on an equal basis with others of all human rights and fundamental freedoms (p. 4).

When the reasonable accommodation cannot be provided in the general classroom, other placements should be considered. The authors of this paper do not support the elimination of alternative placements in favor of a universal policy of full inclusion. Their beliefs mirror the policy on inclusive schools of the Council for Exceptional Children, the major professional organization in special education in the U.S. that the placement decisions should be based on the student's individual educational needs (Council for Exceptional Children, 2011). In conclusion, the authors echo the statement made by Garry Hornby in 1999:

> Policies of working towards including all children with SEN in mainstream schools and classes should be abandoned. Instead, the level of inclusion, either locational, social or functional, should be decided on the needs of each individual child and the exigencies of each situation. Once the necessary for this is accepted, then the focus of special educators can return to that of meeting the individual needs of children with SEN rather than attempting to make 'one size fit all' (Hornby, 1999, p. 157).

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Appendix I: Continuum of Alternative Placements and Services
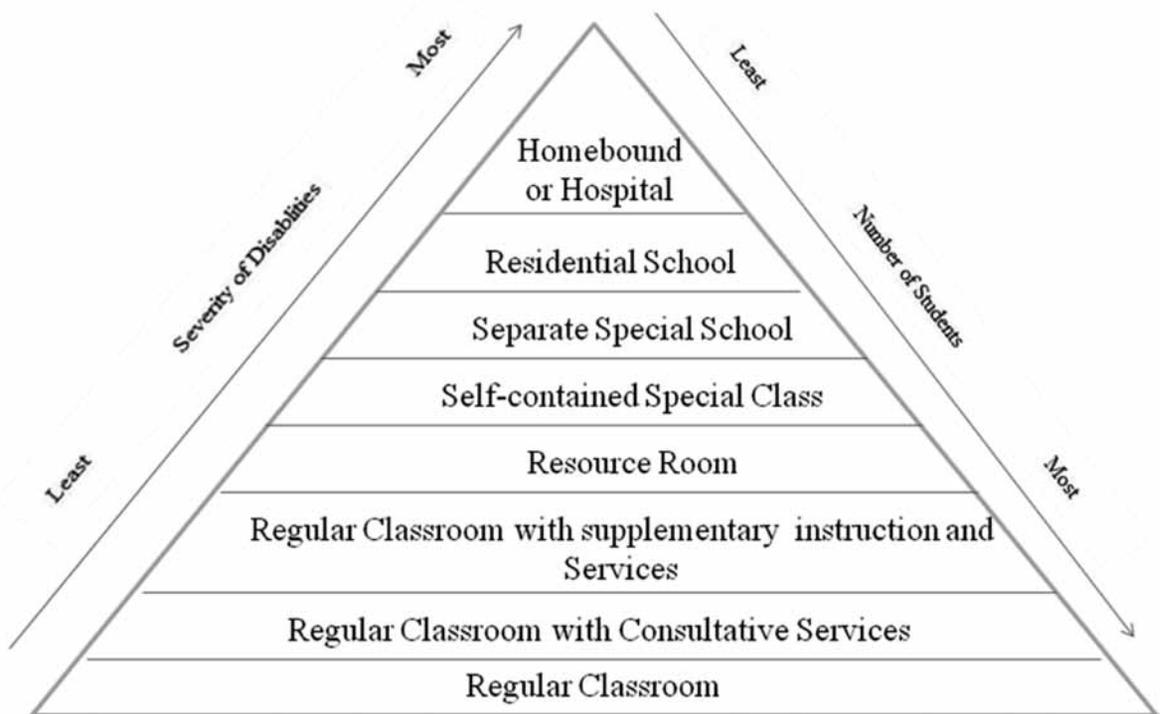
Note. This diagram is an adaptation from Heward, W. L. (2009). Exceptional children: An introduction to special education (9th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.