

**Secondary Pupils' Perceptions and Experiences
Towards Studying in an Inclusive Classroom**

Kwan Lan Vicky Tsang
Hong Kong Institute of Education

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Abstract

The primary aim of this research study was to investigate and compare the attitudes and perceptions of secondary pupils, with and without Special Education Needs, towards studying together on the same campus. Both qualitative and quantitative data were gathered from the use of the *On the Same Campus* questionnaire by surveying 216 secondary pupils in Hong Kong. The results were analyzed using independent sample t-test analysis. Qualitative data in the form of experience sharing were analyzed using theme identification. This paper proposes that peer support in the form of pupils' social participation plays an important role in the promotion of social inclusion in regular classrooms. Teachers in regular schools can assume more roles as social participation mediators among pupils in the classroom by facilitating social participation opportunities for all pupils on the school campus.

Keywords:

social participation,

peer support,

social inclusion,

secondary pupils' perception,

special educational needs

Introduction

Inclusive education practice has taken many forms in different countries following the first World Conference on Education for All in Jomtein in 1990 (UNESCO, 1990), the adoption of the Salamanca Statement in 1994 (UNESCO, 1994) and the opening of the World Education Forum in Dakar in 2000. Its main spirit of including pupils with special needs into regular schools is now widely practised around the world. For instance, policies that emphasize the need to educate pupils with special educational needs in regular schools have been enforced by the Hong Kong government under the adoption of the Whole School Approach (WSA) to integrated education since 2001 (Forlin & Sin, 2010). Early in 1997, the education department in Hong Kong invited schools to participate in a pilot WSA project on integrated education.

Following the enactment of the Disability Discrimination Ordinance (DDO) Code of Practice on Education in 2001 (Equal Opportunities Commission, 2001), all Hong Kong schools are required to adopt the features of a WSA to integrated education to support students with special needs by practising the following seven principles, namely, (1) full participation of all school members, students and parents, (2) curriculum accommodations, (3) differentiated teaching, (4) peer support, (5) cooperative learning, (6) assessment accommodation and (7) flexibly making use of all the available resources within the schools to accommodate students' diverse learning needs (Education Bureau, 2010).

In response to the enactment of the governmental New Funding Model in 2003 where additional government funding was made available to support Whole School Approach schools, there was a sudden surge of WSA schools in Hong Kong. The number of students with Special Education Needs (SEN) attending Whole School Approach schools had also surged to more than 4,000 by 2005 (Table 1). By 2009, 312 primary schools had joined the New Funding Model to implement inclusion using WSA (Forlin & Rose, 2010).

Table 1

Number of students with SEN attending regular schools in Hong Kong from 2001-2006

Type of SEN	2001/02	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06
Intellectual disabilities	619	722	926	1012	974
Hearing Impaired	715	783	872	902	932
Visually Impaired	110	64	55	69	117
Physically Disabled	220	209	200	214	205
Autism Spectrum Disorders	202	318	509	601	662
Specific Language Impairment	#	1109	1159	1133	1356
Total	1866	3205	3721	3931	4246

In Hong Kong, research studies related to Whole School Approach school practice have primarily focused on surveying teachers' and parents' attitudes (Tsui, Sin, & Yu, 2007; Forlin & Lian, 2008; Forlin & Sin, 2010). In a survey conducted in 2006 by the Hong Kong Special Education Society and the Hong Kong Primary Education Research Association, it was found that the primary concern of parents was the adverse impact of

the inclusion of pupils with SEN on learning and teaching in classrooms (Special Education Society of Hong Kong, 2006). Despite the fact that the majority of parents did not reject the philosophy of inclusive education, however, only a minority agreed that schools had sufficient teaching resources to implement the WSA. That is, parents are concerned about the adverse effects on the quality of teaching and learning, and on their children's academic performance with the adoption of the Whole School Approach approach in schools. According to a recent study on "equal learning opportunities for students with disabilities under the integrated education system" (Equal Opportunities Commission, 2012), parents of pupils with Special Education Needs are concerned about insufficient teaching resources and lack of curriculum and assessment modification to accommodate their learning needs. Parents of pupils without SEN are concerned that the assessment and teaching accommodation for pupils with SEN will cause unfair treatment of their children without Special Education Needs in the same classroom.

On the other hand, the governmental guideline on the use of the funding support only generally outlines the need for schools themselves to determine how to consolidate and redeploy existing resources. Many school administrators demonstrate their agreement with the parents' perspective as they have used most of the additional funds for remedial teaching, providing integrated education programmes and deploying additional teacher support staff (Forlin & Rose, 2010). Much of the funding resources have been used in organizing teacher development seminars and open-school visits, involving co-teaching and good practice pedagogies between partner schools. Again, more emphasis has been placed on the domain of teaching and learning, regarding differentiated teaching and cooperative learning. Yet the main essence of inclusion embraces the social inclusion of all pupils by their presence (studying together in the same setting), participation (engaging in learning activities), acceptance (mutual respect during interaction) and achievement (attainment of personal strengths) in mainstream schools, wherever possible (Booth & Ainscow, 2000, Farrell, 2010). So more emphasis on how to mobilize the WSA principle of peer support is warranted in Hong Kong schools.

As pupils are the primary stakeholders in the Whole School Approach school community and play an essential role in the development of social inclusion, research studies on pupils' views about WSA practice are thus warranted. What are the attitudes and perceptions of secondary school pupils, with and without Special Education Needs, towards studying together on the same campus in Hong Kong? Do they care about academic performance as much as their parents and teachers? Findings on secondary school pupils' perception may inform us more about the significance of peer support in relation to the social inclusion of pupils with SEN in schools. It may serve to complement the partial picture portrayed by the parents and teacher member groups in the WSA community.

Literature Review

The social relation that composes peer networks is seen as a strong predictor of peer support, social identity, opportunities for social participation and meaningful social roles. Peer networks provide peer support to cope with emotionally challenging situations. The well-being of peer networks was found to be largely mediated by inducing positive relationships among peers (Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2005).

In regard to relationship-building in peer networks such as inclusive Whole School Approach schools, pupils with Special Education Needs were found to have significantly fewer friends than their peers without SEN in schools. They initiate fewer interactions with their classmates and are less accepted in class (Koster, Pijl, Nakken and Van Houten, 2010). Frostad and Pijl (2007) found 25% of pupils with SEN as compared to only 8% of pupils without SEN who exhibited serious difficulties forming relationships with their

peers in class. Among pupils with Special Education Needs, it was found that pupils with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) are the least socially included due to their specific weakness in social interactions (Chamberlain, Kasari, & Rotheram-Fuller, 2007; Monchy, Pijl, & Zandberg, 2004). Their inflexibility with regard to changes in school routine and low tolerance to noisy unstructured school environments often provokes their unstable emotional behaviour which is rejected by their peers without SEN in the classroom (Wing, 2007). Hence, past research indicates that pupils with ASD are particularly vulnerable to school bullying (Humphrey, 2008).

Apart from social interaction ability, another crucial determinant of positive social relationships in schools is acceptable social behaviour. Pupils with serious behavioural problems are often rejected in class. In another study comparing peer-assessed sociometric status between pupils with moderate learning difficulties (MLD) and their matched peers without SEN, it was found that pupils with MLD who are rejected appear to exhibit low levels of positive social behaviour, while peers without SEN who are rejected manifest both low levels of positive social behaviour and high levels of negative social behaviour. On the other hand, pupils with MLD who are popular in class exhibit low levels of negative social behaviour, while their peers without SEN who are popular in class manifest both low levels of negative social behaviour and high levels of positive social behaviour (Frederickson & Furnham, 2004).

Another factor that mediates peer relationships is perceived social support (Cheung, Noel, & Hardin, 2011). Individuals with greater perceived social support were found to report less loneliness and tend to seek out social support to cope with stress (DeFronzo, Panzarella, & Butler, 2001).

The above research findings on peer support are congruent with the four key themes of social participation as recommended by Koster's team (Koster, Timmerman, Nakken, Pijl, & Van Houten, 2009). They are (1) the presence of positive social contact/interaction in class; (2) peer acceptance; (3) social relationships or friendships between classmates, and (4) the pupils' perception that they are accepted by their classmates.

Social participation is the actual life experience in a social context as distinguished from the skills needed to perform certain activities (World Health Organization, 2001). Social participation can be seen from the perception of the opportunities available to every member of a group. In a group with high participation, every member's opinion is respected and each member feels free to verbalize their ideas (Grobler, Moloji, Loock, Bisschoff, & Mestry, 2006). In a group with a low level of participation, some members feel excluded and therefore have lower perceived social status. Pupils with Special Education Needs were found to experience lower participation than their peers without SEN, both in structured and unstructured school activities. They had fewer friends and reported lower perceived autonomy in class (Ericksson & Granlund, 2004). In addition, acceptance of pupils with MLD into a working group in a classroom was found to be higher for those classmates with lower levels of help-seeking and disruptiveness. However, those with lower levels of aggressive behaviour are more readily accepted in school play activities instead (Frederickson & Furnham, 2004).

Social participation is distinguished from social inclusion as participation suggests individuals taking the autonomy to choose to commit whereas social inclusion frequently involves being enabled by others to take part. It is for this distinction that the social participation of pupils with Special Education Needs in their Whole School Approach school community is a particularly important step towards social inclusion. The term participation covers a broad continuum of involvement in decisions comprising many different processes including taking part, being present, being involved or consulted (Kirby, Lanyon, Cronin, & Sinclair, 2003; Sinclair, 2004). Involvement refers to a sense of belonging to and experience of involvement in one's ordinary community (Kjellberg,

2002; Pretty, Rapley, & Bramston, 2002). Involvement in decisions further implies an element of pupil empowerment where the views of pupils with SEN influence group decisions during social participation (Mitchell, Franklin, Greco, & Bell, 2009).

Hence, it can be seen that social participation is a key factor for successful social inclusion in schools. Social participation can only be developed through development of positive social relationships and effective social interactions with one another in a WSA school. Through social participation, positive social identities such as the identification of one's own strengths as a contributive member of a community, social relations such as how to build friendships with peers and peer support such as learning how to cope in adverse social situations can be established in WSA schools (Flem & Keller, 2000).

Research objectives

The primary aim of this research study was to investigate and compare the attitudes and perceptions of secondary pupils, with and without Special Education Needs, towards studying together on the same campus. Through this study, answers to the following research questions were sought: What is the current perception and experience of pupils, with and without special needs, about studying together in the same classroom in Hong Kong schools? Is there any difference in the attitudes and perceptions towards studying together on the same campus between pupils with and without SEN?

Methodology

This project, funded by the Hong Kong University Henry Chan Inclusive Education Fund, took place from January to September 2011. Ethics approval was sought and obtained from the University of Hong Kong research development office. Since the project fund targets students' research which is subject to strict ethical review by the university ethical review committee, we were not allowed to obtain pupils' demographic data, such as types of SEN, ages or gender, directly from the participating schools nor through the questionnaires. So the data analysis on the demographic aspects of pupil participants was missing from this study.

Questionnaire

The *On the Same Campus (SAME)* questionnaire (CAISE, 2010) consists of two sections on attitudes on including pupils with Special Education Needs in the same classroom and perceptions about the impact of studying together on the same Whole School Approach campus respectively.

Altogether 30 questions were adapted from several instruments previously used for investigating attitudes of teachers and modified to suit the research target population of secondary pupils. They included the *Attitude Towards Inclusive Education Scale (ATIES)* (Wilczenski, 1992, 1995), the *Perceptions to Inclusive Education Scale (PIES)* (Bender, Vail and Scott, 1995; Koay, Lim, Sim, & Elkins, 2006) and the *Sentiments Attitudes and Concerns about Inclusive Education Scale (SACIE)* (Sharma, Forlin, Loreman, & Earle, 2006).

For each item, the respondents were asked to indicate the extent of their agreement or disagreement using a 4-point scale: 4 = Most supportive, 3 = Quite supportive, 2 = Somewhat supportive, and 1 = Least supportive to indicate their attitudes towards inclusive education and perception of the impact of inclusive education respectively. The higher the scores, the more supportive and receptive the pupil was towards studying together on the same WSA campus (Table 2).

Table 2
Content reliability of the ‘On the Same Campus’ questionnaire

Section	Rating levels	Internal Consistency
1) Attitudes towards WSA schooling	4) Most supportive 3) Quite supportive 2) Somewhat supportive 1) Least supportive	Cronbach’s Alpha = 0.845 (n = 15 items)
2) Perceptions of impact on pupils	4) Most supportive 3) Quite supportive 2) Somewhat supportive 1) Least supportive	Cronbach’s Alpha = 0.924 (n = 15 items)

The content reliability of the *SAME* questionnaire reported in this study is confined to this pilot study only. The internal consistency of each section in the *SAME* questionnaire was very high indicating that the overall questionnaire and items within each section correlated reasonably well with each other. The Cronbach’s alpha for the overall *SAME* items was 0.887. For the first section on pupils’ attitudes, the Cronbach’s alpha was 0.845. For the second section on pupils’ perceptions, the Cronbach’s alpha was 0.924 (Table 2). It should be noted that the three instruments were originally surveyed on teachers’ attitudes but had never been used for students before. The item relevancy towards pupils is still yet to be investigated in the future.

Experience sharing section

The respondents were also invited to write and share their school experiences in the open-ended section of the *SAME* questionnaire. This formed the qualitative data for the study.

Participants

A convenience sample of 24 secondary schools which were practising Whole School Approach was contacted. These WSA schools were included on the invitation school list provided by a school principal of a secondary resource school. The resource school had taken part in holding workshops and seminars in schools to share their own development towards becoming a WSA school (Education Bureau, 2011).

Response rate

Invitation letters were sent to the principals of 24 secondary schools, out of which 11 schools agreed to participate. A package of 30 questionnaires (15 green and 15 pink) was sent to each participating school. The return rate was 65.5%. Of the 216 returned forms with consents from both pupils and their parents, 130 were from pupils without Special Education Needs (60.2%) and 86 were from pupils with SEN (39.8%).

Procedures

A cover letter enclosing the letter of consent was sent explaining the purpose of the research and the benefits to all parties of its outcomes to all potential participant school principals. After obtaining the school principals’ consent, a package containing the questionnaires and letters of invitation with consent slips to both pupils and their parents were sent to the responsible SEN coordinator in each participating school. The school

SEN coordinator who had access to the pupils' profiles categorized the pupils into two groups, with or without SEN groups according to their profile information. The questionnaires were colour-coded green and pink. The Special Education Needs coordinator was instructed to distribute the green questionnaires to pupils with SEN and the pink questionnaires to those pupils without SEN within the same class. In this way, the students were matched for age and class. Confidentiality was also ensured for all pupils as the researchers were not involved in direct distribution of the letters of invitation and questionnaires.

All pupil participation was voluntary. The Special Education Needs coordinators were only responsible for distributing to pupils and collecting the returned consent reply slips and questionnaires in sealed envelopes from pupils. No coercion was involved as the coordinators did not know which pupils had given consent to participate or not. Thus the status of the participants was kept confidential.

Data Analysis

Quantitative analysis of data from the questionnaire was carried out using SPSS, Version 18. Independent sample t-test analyses were carried out on the quantitative data. Qualitative analysis on the open-ended experience sharing section was conducted by collating the narrative data within relevant categories that subscribed to emerging themes (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Maykut & Morehouse, 2001). Such information from the pupils was useful in helping delineate what aspects of the implementation of WSA need attention.

Findings

Total scores and total section scores

Comparisons were made between both pupil groups, using Independent samples t-test analysis, across the two section total scores and the overall total scores. The results are also shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Independent sample t test results for Section scores and total scores

Section	Type	Mean	SD	t	Sig.	Effect size
						(Cohen's d)
Attitude	Without SEN	2.1665	.59724	.993	.322	--
	With SEN	2.2590	.71382			
Perception of Impact	Without SEN	2.1383	.72394	-2.707	.007*	0.37
	With SEN	2.4417	.90728			
TOTAL Scores	Without SEN	2.3072	.39637	-3.555	.000*	1.05
	With SEN	2.5218	.48634			

*p <0.05

As seen in Table 3, there is an overall significant difference in total scores ($t = -3.555$; $p = 0.000$) between the two groups, i.e., pupils with and without SEN. For total section scores, there are significant differences between the two groups for Perceptions of Impact scores ($t = -2.707$; $p = 0.007$) but not for Attitudes scores ($t = 0.993$; $p = 0.322$). The effect size ranges from 0.37 to 1.05 indicating a medium to large size with a non-overlap of 25% to 57% in the two group distributions (Cohen, 1988). The t-values for Perceptions total scores are negative but not for Attitude scores (table 3), indicating that pupils with SEN regard more positively the impact of WSA practice than pupils without

SEN. On the contrary, there is a general agreement across the two groups on attitudes towards studying with peers with SEN in the same classroom.

The total Attitude scores range between 1.43 and 2.61 from ‘Somewhat supportive’ to ‘Quite supportive’; while the total Perceptions scores range between 1.73 and 2.76 from ‘Somewhat supportive’ to ‘Quite supportive’. Generally, there is no significant difference across the total Perceptions and Attitudes scores between the two groups of pupils in terms of their support towards studying together in the same classroom. They are not extremely supportive or unsupportive of the inclusive schooling in their attitudes and perceptions. Both pupils with and without SEN are somewhat supportive of the idea of studying together in the same classroom. Both groups affirm that studying together on the same WSA campus can to some degree bring about positive impact to their learning.

Attitude item scores in Section One

Comparisons were made between both pupil groups, using independent sample t-tests, across the 15 item scores in Section One measuring the attitudes of pupils towards studying together in the same classroom. The results are shown in Table 4.

Table 4
Results of independent samples t-test for individual item scores in Attitude scores

“Which pupils with SEN __ should be in regular classes?”	Type	Mean	SD	t	Effect size (Cohen’s d)
				(sig.)	
_whose academic achievement is 2 or more years below the other pupils in the same grade	Without SEN	2.22	1.155	-1.901 (.059)	--
	With SEN	2.52	1.130		
_who are physically aggressive toward their peers	Without SEN	1.43	.906	-1.475 (.142)	--
	With SEN	1.63	1.041		
_who cannot move without help from others	Without SEN	2.61	1.070	.049 (.961)	--
	With SEN	2.60	1.249		
_who are frequently absent from schools due to illness	Without SEN	2.56	1.172	.720 (.471)	--
	With SEN	2.44	1.144		
_whose academic achievement is 2 years or more above the other pupils in the same grade	Without SEN	2.25	1.216	-1.985 (.048)*	-0.28
	With SEN	2.58	1.142		
_whose speech is difficult to understand	Without SEN	2.35	1.153	-.669 (.504)	--
	With SEN	2.45	1.155		
_who cannot read standard print & need to use Braille	Without SEN	2.06	1.184	-1.017 (.314)	--
	With SEN	2.23	1.234		
_who have difficulty expressing their thoughts verbally	Without SEN	2.32	1.162	-1.210 (.229)	--
	With SEN	2.51	1.176		
_who need training in self-help skills & activities of daily living	Without SEN	2.07	1.163	-2.564 (.011)*	-0.36
	With SEN	2.48	1.114		
_who use sign language or communication boards	Without SEN	2.04	1.164	.449 (.656)	--
	With SEN	1.96	1.200		
_who cannot control their behaviour & disrupt activities	Without SEN	1.54	.992	-.742 (.463)	--
	With SEN	1.65	1.032		
_ who need an individualized functional academic program in everyday reading & math skills	Without SEN	2.42	1.127	.100 (.921)	--
	With SEN	2.41	1.202		
_who are in extremely low mood most of the time	Without SEN	2.53	1.231	.139 (.888)	--
	With SEN	2.51	1.145		
_who do not follow school rules for conduct	Without SEN	2.12	1.159	-.314 (.753)	--
	With SEN	2.17	1.140		
_who are verbally aggressive toward	Without SEN	1.97	1.157	1.736	--

their peers	Without SEN	1.97	1.157	(.084)	--
	With SEN	1.70	1.064		

*p < 0.05

Overall, the mean Attitude values for pupils without SEN range from 1.43 (somewhat supportive of ‘physical aggression’) to 2.61 (quite supportive of ‘cannot move without help’); those for pupils with SEN range from 1.63 (somewhat supportive of ‘physical aggression’) to 2.60 (quite supportive of ‘cannot move without help’). There seems to be a general consensus between the two groups that the inclusion of peers with physical disabilities is more readily be accepted than those with physical aggression. On the other hand, pupils with autism spectrum disorders, attention deficit and hyperactivity, or emotional and behavioural disorders, may more likely exhibit physically aggressive behaviour (Chong & Ng, 2011; Gadow, DeVincent, & Drabick, 2008; Monuteaux, Biederman, Doyle, Mick, & Faraone, 2009; Sansosti, 2012). In secondary schools, these pupils tend to have more social behaviour difficulties than their peers with physical disabilities, visual or auditory impairment, or intellectual disabilities. They are more often rejected by their peers due to their social behaviour difficulties (Estell, Jones, Pearl, Van Acker, Farmer, & Rodkin, 2008; Estell, Farmer, Irvin, Crowther, Akos, & Boudah, 2009; Frederickson & Furnham, 2004) and are in turn more likely to be socially isolated (Al-Yagon & Mikulincer, 2004).

In addition, there were no significant group differences in their attitudes towards studying with peers with Special Education Needs in the same classroom except two items. They include “pupils whose academic achievement is 2 years or more above the other pupils in the same grade” ($t = -1.985$; $p = .048$) and “pupils who need training in self-help skills and activities of daily living” ($t = -0.564$; $p = .011$). There was a general agreement between the two groups of pupils on their rate of acceptance towards studying together in the same classroom. However, pupils with SEN showed more acceptance than their peers without SEN towards peers with extreme school performance at both ends, either gifted peers or those with severe physical disabilities. Pupils without SEN tend to make friends with those who appear not as different as themselves.

For the highest two mean scores items, there is general agreement between the two groups in relation to identifying the types of pupils who they are more supportive of studying together with in the same classroom. Both groups are quite supportive of those “who cannot move without help from others” (With SEN mean scores = 2.60; Without SEN mean scores = 2.61). For the lowest two mean score items, there is a general agreement between the two groups in relation to identifying the types of pupils who they are less supportive of studying together with in the same classroom. They are only somewhat supportive of those “who are physically aggressive toward their peers” (With SEN mean scores = 1.63; Without SEN mean scores = 1.43) and “who cannot control their behaviour and disrupt activities” (With SEN mean scores = 1.54; Without SEN mean scores = 1.65) only. Both groups have lower acceptance towards studying with peers who exhibit disruptive behaviour against the social rules in the WSA schools.

Perception item scores in Section Two

Comparisons were made between both pupil groups, using independent sample t-tests, across the 15 item scores in Section 3 measuring the Perceptions of Impact of Inclusive Schooling on Secondary Pupils. The results are shown in Table 5.

Table 5

Results of independent samples t-test for individual item scores in Perception Scores

“What do you think are the impacts about studying together with classmates with special educational needs in the same classroom?”	Type	Mean	SD	t	Effect size
				(sig.)	(Cohen’s d)
_enables me to make good progress in cooperating with others	Without SEN	2.45	1.107	-.039 (.969)	--
	With SEN	2.45	1.176		
_enables me to make good progress in living skill independence	Without SEN	2.09	1.089	-1.578 (.116)	--
	With SEN	2.35	1.227		
_enables me to make good progress in emotional control	Without SEN	2.42	1.190	-.201 (.841)	--
	With SEN	2.45	1.206		
_enables me to make good progress in self-identity	Without SEN	2.41	1.112	-.510 (.613)	--
	With SEN	2.49	1.146		
_enables me to make good progress in academic performance	Without SEN	1.80	1.074	-2.272 (.024)*	-0.31
	With SEN	2.15	1.177		
_is effective at developing my social skills	Without SEN	2.72	1.080	-.305 (.762)	--
	With SEN	2.76	1.104		
_enables me to make good progress in problem-solving skills	Without SEN	2.21	1.177	-2.391 (.018)*	-0.34
	With SEN	2.60	1.110		
_provides suitable teaching and learning resources for me to maximize my learning capabilities	Without SEN	1.92	1.121	-2.980 (.004)*	-0.41
	With SEN	2.40	1.199		
_provides me with a well-rounded / balanced curriculum for learning	Without SEN	1.93	1.122	-2.606 (.012)*	-0.36
	With SEN	2.36	1.238		
I feel safe in the school_	Without SEN	1.73	1.070	-3.421 (.001)*	-0.47
	With SEN	2.29	1.285		
I am motivated to learn at the school_	Without SEN	2.01	1.105	-2.452 (.018)*	-0.33
	With SEN	2.40	1.223		
I am given appropriate opportunities to contribute my strength to school life in the school_	Without SEN	2.24	1.140	-1.149 (.261)	--
	With SEN	2.43	1.245		
_teachers adapt learning and teaching strategies to suit my individual needs	Without SEN	1.99	1.124	-3.247 (.001)*	-0.45
	With SEN	2.52	1.237		
_teachers adjust assessment format in tests or examinations to my individual needs	Without SEN	1.93	1.122	-2.367 (.019)*	-0.33
	With SEN	2.32	1.263		
_offers a wide range of extra-curricular activity choices for me	Without SEN	2.24	1.180	-2.528 (.014)*	-0.35
	With SEN	2.67	1.255		

*p < 0.05

Mean perception scores for pupils without Special Education Needs range from 1.73 (somewhat supportive of “I feel safe”) to 2.72 (quite supportive of “developing social skills”); while those of pupils with SEN range from 2.15 (quite supportive of “progress in academic performance”) to 2.76 (quite supportive of “developing social skills”). There are nine items in which there are significant differences in the perception of impact towards inclusive schooling between both groups. These include “progress in academic performance (p = .024), “progress in problem-solving skills” (p = .018), “resources maximize learning capabilities” (p = .004), “well-rounded curriculum” (p = .012), “feel safe in school” (p = .001), “motivated to learn” (p = .018), “strategies suit individual needs” (p = .001), “adjust assessment format” (p = .019) and “extra-curricular activity choices” (p = .014). In general, there is agreement between the two groups that the Whole School Approach experience fosters social inclusion while there is a significant difference between their opinions about the impact of studying together on the same WSA campus with regard to teaching and learning.

The items with the highest two mean Perception scores for the With-SEN group are: “developing social skills (Quite supportive; mean scores = 2.76) and “extra-curricular activities choices” (Quite supportive; mean scores = 2.67). For the Without-SEN group,

the highest two Perception mean scores items are: “developing social skills” (Quite supportive; mean scores = 2.72) and “cooperating with others” (Quite supportive; mean scores = 2.45). All of these items are related to the promotion of social inclusion. Both groups perceive that studying together in the same classroom has quite a positive impact on promoting pupils’ social relationships between the two groups.

The items with the lowest two mean Perception scores for the With-SEN group are: “progress in academic performance” (Quite supportive; mean scores = 2.15) and “progress in living skill independence” (Quite supportive; mean scores = 2.35). For the Without-SEN group, the items with the lowest two mean Perception scores are: “feel safe in the school” (Somewhat supportive; mean scores = 1.73) and “progress in academic performance” (Somewhat supportive; mean scores = 1.80). All the lower scored Perception items are related to teaching and learning performance and classroom management. Both groups perceive that studying together in the same classroom has a somewhat negative impact on the progress of learning performance, but a positive impact on social relationships.

In sum, from the t-test statistics, we find that the perceptions of secondary pupils are quite different from those views expressed by their teachers and parents in research studies as mentioned earlier (Special Education Society of Hong Kong, 2006). Secondary school pupils, with and without SEN, generally do not object to studying together in the same classroom. They tend to reject those peers who exhibit disruptive behaviour, regardless of whether they have SEN or not because such behaviour has detrimental effects on their social learning processes in the same classroom. They tend to accept those who can relate to them socially in school contexts. The ability to initiate and maintain social relations appears to be the most crucial determinant of inclusion.

Emerging themes from the experience sharing section

The qualitative data analysis on the open-ended experience sharing section revealed the following four phenomena on the single theme of social participation: (1) lack of social interactive initiatives, (2) lack of mutual understanding, (3) lack of cooperative opportunities, and (4) lack of coping skills in bullying situations. Direct quotes from the participants are included to emphasize their perspectives.

Lack of social interactive initiatives. The pupils with Special Education Needs are portrayed by their peers without SEN as passive or as asocial beings. Pupils with SEN are often left alone because they lack the initiative or ability to initiate the making of friends with their peers. This was expressed as:

“During breaks, they quietly sit in a corner while others are chatting and playing.”

On the other hand, pupils without SEN are reluctant or lack knowledge as to how to extend an invitation of friendship.

“Most people don’t actually intend to ignore the disabled kids in a bad way; they just find it awkward and uncomfortable. They really just aren’t educated about what to do and so their first reaction is not to take notice.”

From the experiences expressed of successful friendship-building, it appears that this frequently begins by one side taking the initiative to reach out to the other side. The form of reaching out could be one friendly ‘hello’, or a frank disclosure of one’s own

individual difference, or simply the lending of a hand. Once initiated, mutual understanding and friendship can develop.

Lack of mutual understanding. Pupils without Special Education Needs tend to reject or escape from interacting with their peers with SEN because they lack understanding of the problems their peers with SEN experience. Some of their comments are like this:

“Most people who have never had experience of these people may see them as ‘weird’, ‘awkward’ or ‘scary’.”

Pupils with SEN seem ‘weird’ to others as most of them exhibit atypical social interactive styles in contrast to the social classroom norm. However, once they discover what their peers’ problems are, or who their peers are really like, this kind of fear tends to subside quickly.

Through their experience of social engagement in cooperative activities, pupils without SEN begin to realize that they both share one thing in common—that is, they both possess strengths and weaknesses. The only difference between them is that their peers with SEN possess different abilities or strengths. They might be academically falling behind but each of them has their own unique talents, such as singing, drawing and sports.

“I think most of us do not mind having disabled students in our class. They are just students, the same as us! Some students do not like having them in the same class because they do not know enough about them. I think teachers should help them understand the needs of disabled students and convince them to accept disabled students. Studying with disabled students is good for us because we can learn how to take care of others and know more about our own strengths and weaknesses.”

With this realization of what they commonly share, more equal sharing of involvement in social activities naturally develops in the WSA school community.

Lack of social participation opportunities. From their experience sharing, we can see that friendship often starts via a collaborative event or activity, such as a cooking team competition, a singing contest, a sports gala, etc. These cooperative opportunities provide common ground for them to interact and engage in and to understand each other’s learning journey more. Mutual understanding is often enhanced by an experiential learning opportunity of engaging in a collaborative activity together.

“After watching his performance in the school talent show, the school reaction changed from booing to giving him cheers of support.”

“After the paired up team cookery competition, I’ve found that my past prejudice against classmates with intellectual disabilities was due to the fact that I had never had any cooperative learning opportunities with them before. Now I think not only that I can help them out, but in turn they can help me out too.”

Through these joint ventures, some of them even went further to appreciate the talents of their peers with Special Education Needs such as the artistic talent from a peer with dyslexia, or the piano playing gift of a peer with visual impairment; or to recognize their virtues such as the perseverance and resilience shown from a peer with physical disability. They began to realize that they all share the same human characteristics: they

all are striving to be recognized by others; they all value success and commitment within the community.

“I wondered what messages she (classmate with dyslexia) is trying to portray behind her paintings. Whatever the messages are, I was deeply moved by the persistence that keeps her motivated to paint ... I suddenly realized one thing we have in common – we both are making our best effort to be true to our life using our unique abilities.”

“After the paired up team sports competition, I came to realize how much we have in common – an opportunity to contribute our best to society.”

Most sharing ended in beautiful friendship building; they eventually found a way to collaborate and complement each other's strengths in classroom tasks.

Lack of social coping skills in bullying situations. The majority of pupils without SEN shared their frustration of seeing bullying scenes in schools but felt equally helpless in dealing with such situations as those who were being bullied, i.e. their peers with SEN.

“It's not that I don't care; my friends tell me not to care. They say they're worried that I'll get myself into trouble if I do. I'll lose my reputation for standing up to some 'loser'; that I'll lose all my connections with the popular kids. I don't think I have the courage to sacrifice my eminence for a 'loser'.”

“They are ignored or picked on by others all the time... When it happens, I honestly don't know what to do and end up not doing anything about it at all, mainly because it seems troublesome to get involved.”

Discussion

Hong Kong secondary school pupils, regardless of whether they have Special Education Needs or not, share the common characteristics of not knowing how to relate to one another. In their experience sharing, most of this fear disappears once they co-participate in an activity which becomes a stepping stone for them to understand each other. Such an understanding is the starting point for developing mutual friendships in school. In this study, the findings suggest that social participation experience between pupils with and without SEN mediates peer support.

Past related studies on pupils with Special Education Needs also indicate that the effectiveness of pupils' social participation is dependent on the nature of school activities (Eriksson & Granlund, 2004; Almqvist & Granlund, 2005). If the social structure of classroom activities does not promote social interactions, negotiations and shared engagement, little social participation can take place. Therefore social participation is activity-dependent. More social interactive and cooperative activities should be designed in the formal and informal curriculum so as to foster social participation in Whole School Approach schools.

Negative social behaviour, such as disruptive or aggressive behaviour, is negatively related to social inclusion. This was supported by our findings in that both groups of pupils, with or without SEN, showed intolerance towards peers with aggressive behaviour.

Research shows that destructive behaviour is a prevalent school-wide problem across many classrooms (Gresham, Kern, & Hilt-Panahon, 2006). The evidence from this study supports that those who exhibit aggressive behaviour are often pupils without SEN in the form of school bullying towards pupils with SEN. A lot of school bullying occurs when teachers are not around and is conducted by pupils who are aggressive emotionally

and behaviourally (Fox & Boulton, 2006). In this study, pupils without Special Education Needs expressed their feeling of guilt and frustration due to not being able to offer help when they witness their classmates with SEN being bullied by others. Not only pupils with SEN need to learn how to protect themselves, but also pupils without Special Education Needs need to learn how to lend a helping hand when they witness school bullying situations. This will form part of the social participation curriculum.

This type of social participation curriculum relates not only to pupils but also to teachers in Whole School Approach schools. It was reported that teachers in WSA schools appear to lack skills with regard to addressing the emotional behavioural problems exhibited by pupils with aggression, nor do they know how to counsel those who have been bullied. Research has shown that teachers tend to overrate the social position of pupils with SEN in their class and underestimate the degree of bullying (Swearer, Wang, Maag, Siebecker, & Frerichs, 2012). This discrepancy could be accounted for by the over-emphasis on academic achievement by teachers. Teachers often do not assume their role as a counsellor, facilitator and collaborator and therefore do not know how to manage bullying situations (Forlin, 2001). There is generally a lack of classroom instruction to address the social, emotional and behavioural needs of pupils. Strategies such as structured and positive incentive programmes are seldom employed by teachers in WSA schools (Kern, Hilt-Panahon, & Sokol, 2009).

Implications for Practice

To overcome these social barriers, teachers must assume more roles as social participation mediators, such as how to help pupils to communicate, develop resiliency, adjust socially and cope with school bullying (Zipin, 2002). Teachers, as social participation mediators, need to deliberately allocate legitimate time and space for such social participation activities to take place in schools.

Teachers in Whole School Approach schools should target the preservation of academic individualization via the design of individual assessment through academic-focused assignments while legitimizing social participation opportunities via less academic-focused school activities (Pearce & Forlin, 2005). The WSA school leaders need to provide legitimate time slots and creative school programmes for teachers and pupils to interact and share co-partnership experiences. This can be in the form of social leisure scheduling and school environmental re-structuring such as lunch or break club, talent platform, free speech corner (Freeman et al., 2006; Sugai et al., 2000). Subsequently, communities where everyone belongs and personalized relationships can be built. Personalizing school relationships produces more engaged and resilient pupils (DiMartino, Clarke, & Lachat, 2002; Pearce & Forlin, 2005).

A peer supportive classroom culture should be fostered by designing more social interactive activities to increase the social relationships of pupils in schools. Negative and hierarchic peer cultures in schools should be avoided. Pupils can be encouraged to support each other as peer tutors, learning buddies and as members of a Circle of friends (Dowson, 2007). Authorities and decision-making can be decentralized such that pupils can be trained to be conflict mediators and recess prefects in WSA schools to help in monitoring informal school time and pupils can turn to them for help in crisis situations (Carter, Cushing, Clark, & Kennedy, 2005; Cushing & Kennedy, 2004; Goldstein, Kaczmarek & English, 2002). These social participation activity timeslots should be legitimized in the formal school timetable instead of squeezing them in as informal and hidden activities which are not formally recognized. In order to promote a positive social culture in the classroom, pupils reporting instances of their peers' pro-social behaviour should be encouraged and openly acknowledged in schools (Cashwell, Skinner, & Smith, 2001;

Skinner et al, 2002).

Conclusion

Although we have practised Whole School Approach in Hong Kong schools for more than a decade, the available school resources have been used primarily in the area of teaching and learning, and little has been spent on mobilizing pupil resources. There are significant indications that the principle of peer support has not been emphasized in WSA schools in Hong Kong. Pupils lack the knowledge, skills and competencies to engage socially and to communicate effectively in WSA schools. Yet it is clear that pupils are the major stakeholder group in the seven WSA principles. Pupil participation, in the form of peer support, cooperative learning or social community, is crucial to the success of effective social inclusion in WSA schools. Teachers in WSA schools need to realize the power of mobilizing pupil resources. They need to assume more roles as social participation mediators among pupils in the classroom. They need to acknowledge the essential role of social participation activities in fostering social inclusion in the classroom. More legitimate social participation experiences on the school campus should be created so that a school community of learning diversity can be built up. Through social learning processes, more knowledge of shared social value, social-identity and social relations can be developed in the WSA school community.

This kind of knowledge can be summarized by the following experience sharing quote from a pupil participant in this study:

“People with disabilities are like us in every single way, but they are just a little more special. People with disabilities do things like us, but they do them in a slightly different manner... We should not have to be taught about people who are unlike ourselves... It should be obvious that we have to include them in our daily lives and respect them for who they are.”

(cited from ‘*On the Same Campus*’, Tsang K. L. (Edited), Centre for Advancement in Inclusive and Special Education, University of Hong Kong, 2011).

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