

Integrative and Inclusive Classroom with Special Educational Needs (SEN) Student: Teacher's Stress and Burnout with Professional Development in Hong Kong

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1. Introduction

Teaching is a meaningful career pathway for many individuals, particularly for those who want to make a difference in the next generations of school communities and environments (Dos Santos, 2022a; Weiner & Jerome, 2016). Over the past few decades, many universities in Hong Kong have established degrees and/or qualifications for pre-service teachers to join the teaching profession (i.e., from kindergartens to secondary schools). As of 2024, there are seven colleges and universities that offer qualifying programs that allow pre-service teachers to gain their teacher licensure, including but not limited to (1) The University of Hong Kong, (2) the Chinese University of Hong Kong, (3) The Education University of Hong Kong, (4) Hong Kong Baptist University, (5) Metropolitan University, (6) Saint Francis University, and (7) Tung Wah College. Although these programs with solid internship requirements allow students to gain the foundational knowledge and practical skills for classroom management and instruction, not all pre-service teachers and even in-service teachers can handle Special Educational Needs (SEN) students in their classrooms effectively (Ho & Lam, 2020).

Theoretically, teachers who completed their teacher's qualification training (e.g., Bachelor of Education, Master of Arts in Teaching, Postgraduate Diploma in Education) are considered trained and prepared teachers in the given classroom environments, particularly in their subject matters (e.g., Mathematics) (Segalo & Dube, 2022; Smith & Foley, 2015). Teachers usually juggle various responsibilities, duties, workloads, and arrangements simultaneously. Sometimes, these responsibilities could create difficulties beyond teachers' skills, abilities, and capacities (Hester, Bridges, & Rollins, 2020; Yoon, 2002).

During the last decade, the idea of integrative education (also known as inclusive education) (IE) has been widely promoted and encouraged in many mainstream school environments in Hong Kong. According to the current principles of IE based on the

Education Bureau in Hong Kong, the following five principles are established: (1) Early Identification, (2) Early Intervention, (3) Whole School Approach, (4) Home-School Co-Operation, and (5) Cross-Sector Collaboration (Integrated Education in Practice, 2021). In other words, school leadership, teachers, parents, students, and even communities could become a combination and package for the positive experiences of students, particularly for SEN, minoritized, and marginalized students in the region.

(1) The Challenges of Teachers in the IE Classrooms: The Post-COVID Situations

There is no doubt that teachers, school staff, and school leadership always try their best to offer positive and effective school experiences for students, regardless of their backgrounds. Many teachers also understand the challenges, responsibilities, and workload of their classrooms and their subject matters. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many youths and adolescents experienced mental illness, stress, confusion, and isolation, particularly during the transition from distance learning to face-to-face classroom environments (Dos Santos, 2022b; Prowse et al., 2021). A number of students who did not develop effective interactive skills with their peers due to distance learning may experience challenges in their current face-to-face classroom environments. Teachers are the ones who need to arrange activities and handle conflicts beyond the normal curriculum and heavy workload in the classroom environment.

(2) The Challenges of Teachers in the IE Classrooms: Additional SEN Students

IE classroom is one of the leading and effective teaching and learning strategies that allow minoritized and marginalized students to study in mainstream school environments. Previously, minoritized and marginalized students could only attend special schools (e.g., SEN schools and classrooms exclusively for racially minoritized students). However, due to the application of the IE policies, some minoritized students, such as students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and autistic spectrum disorder (ASD), could also join the mainstream schools and classroom environments as SEN students. Although the policies increase the opportunities for students, the responsibilities, workload, and tasks of teachers could significantly increase, particularly for teachers who did not receive solid training in SEN and IE teaching and learning strategies (Forlin, 2010; Ho & Lam, 2020).

2. Sources of Stress of Teachers

Integrative Education or Inclusive Education (IE) has gained attention in the

educational context in Hong Kong as a tool to offer social justice and social equity to all students in the region, regardless of their backgrounds. Under the current government policy, the inclusion of SEN students in mainstream schools and classroom environments is significantly promoted and encouraged, as this could offer opportunities for SEN students to rejoin the communities after graduation (Ho & Lam, 2020). Although the policies and ideas offer excellent pathways, teachers expressed a large number of challenges, particularly the missing parts of SEN teaching and learning strategies with overloaded responsibilities. More importantly, not all teachers are well-prepared to manage SEN students in their overloaded classroom environments with assignments, exams, and peer-to-peer activities. Teachers expressed stress, burnout, negative well-being, and ideas of leaving the teaching profession due to unrealistic expectations (Chao et al., 2017).

(1) Sources of Stress in IE Classroom Environments

It is known that teachers experience significant stress and confusion in their classroom environments, regardless of the subject matter and setting (Dos Santos, 2021; Klassen & Chiu, 2010; Troesch & Bauer, 2017). Many previous studies indicated that teachers could handle their well-being and balance their workload with different tools and strategies. However, one of the sources of stress for mainstream teachers is the missing part of training in SEN education. Studies (Kurniawati et al., 2014; Srivastava et al., 2015) indicated that many teachers joined the teaching profession without solid training and preparation for IE and SEN classroom environments. Teachers expressed their professional and mental challenges when experienced with SEN students in their classroom environments. Particularly, many could not effectively handle and balance classroom management. This missing part can lead to emotional disorder as the chaotic classroom could significantly impact the self-efficacy and self-expectation of effective teachers in their classroom environments and even the profession (Chao et al., 2017).

(2) Increased Workload, Tasks, Responsibilities, and Expectations

In addition to the missing part of the SEN training, teachers in IE classroom environments could experience increased workload, tasks, responsibilities, and expectations from different channels (e.g., school leadership, students, parents, and communities) (Saloviita, 2019). For decades, SEN students have enrolled in tailored schools and classrooms where teachers are exclusively trained for SEN students. Based on the current statistics, there are 62 funded SEN schools available in Hong Kong, including (1) Schools for Children with Intellectual Disability (ID), (2) Schools for

Children with Visual Impairment (VI), (3) Schools for Children with Hearing Impairment (HI), (4) Schools for Children with Physical Disability (PD), (5) Schools for Social Development (SSD), and (6) Hospital School. Although these schools cover a large number of SEN students based on their needs, some minoritized and marginalized students, such as students with ADHD, students with ASD, and non-native speakers, should have the right to join mainstream schools (Shum et al., 2016).

The enrollment of SEN students requires teachers to upgrade and edit the curriculum, lesson plans, homework, activities, discussions, and peer-to-peer interactions for additional support that also needs to match the expectations of the government regulation (Saloviita, 2019). The additional workload, tasks, responsibilities, and expectations would go beyond the current overloaded balance of teachers, which could lead to dissatisfaction, stress, burnout, negative well-being, and turnover. Over the past decades, although the Education Bureau introduced the role of Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) for administrative and teaching support, the arrangements and management of long-term curriculum and instruction development are still in great demand (Poon-McBrayer, 2012; Szeto et al., 2020).

(3) Psychological Stress, Emotional Disorder, and Negative Well-Being

Many teachers, school leadership, and school staff experience different levels of stress, burnout, and negative well-being, regardless of the student enrollments and backgrounds (Chang, 2009; Dos Santos, 2021; Hakanen et al., 2006). One of the main problems is helplessness in their classroom environments with SEN students who cannot control their behaviors. Although many schools employ social workers, counselors, and school staff for SEN students and IE classroom management, the student-staff ratio of these school staff (i.e., SENCOs and Teaching Assistants) is overloaded, too. Although teachers are asked to refer SEN students or students with special situations to school staff for further assessment, these students continue to study in that classroom environment after counseling (Poon-McBrayer, 2012). Therefore, the fundamental problems are not significantly changed. In addition, teachers need to balance the attention between SEN and non-SEN students, particularly exams, activities, and curriculum. Such challenges continue to impact the well-being of teachers.

3. Strategies to Support Teachers with SEN Students in the IE Classroom Environment: Suggestions

(1) Teachers' Professional Development: Upgrading Teachers' Skills and Classroom Management

With the development, promotion, and employment of IE policies, schools and teachers need to arrange additional management for SEN students in a reasonable and realistic manner. To support teachers in this transition, a collaborative effort involving local universities, government departments, non-profit organizational leaders, educators, and researchers is essential. The following actions are strongly suggested.

First, relevant parties and shareholders should establish tailor-made professional development programs. By establishing tailor-made professional training programs and schemes with a concentration on SEN classroom management and students' challenges, teachers could start to understand basic skills for classroom diversity (Forlin, 2010). Although long-term development is essential, it is important to solve some immediate problems for students' achievements and outcomes.

Second, workshops and demonstrations from experts, senior-level teachers, and peers would be essential. It is not uncommon that some experts and teachers have gained unique experiences and management with their previous and current classrooms and schools with SEN students. School unions, school groups, and even government departments can invite these experts and teachers for workshops and demonstrations, particularly based on hands-on experiences and applicable skills in contemporary classroom environments (Chow, 2023). Although all schools must have unique challenges and characteristics, sharing and hands-on experiences from workshops and demonstrations allow all parties to share their ideas, challenges, and even classroom experiences with each other.

Third, SEN classroom and school environment as long-term development would be useful for some teachers and school leaders. It is worth noting that not all teachers have an interest in SEN students and classroom management. In other words, some teachers tend to work in mainstream schools (e.g., top-tier schools) with all traditional-based students. For teachers who want to contribute their energy to SEN students, school leaders, and government departments should encourage teachers to pursue a Master of Education in Inclusive Education to enhance their skills and advance their careers. In some countries, employee reimbursement and support plans are available to teachers who want to advance their skills in student and classroom management.

(2) Long-Term Support Pathways

Creating support pathways and positive networks can play significant roles in helping students manage and handle the challenges and unique situations in IE classroom environments. The following actions are strongly suggested.

First, school leadership should establish an inter-school support network for peer-to-peer level development. From the perspectives of teachers and school leadership, schools with similar backgrounds (e.g., schools under the foundation of the Tung Wah Group of Hospital and schools under the foundation of religious institutions) could establish supporting networks for sharing. As some resources could be allocated within the network, such practices could help schools to transfer resources to the right places. Based on the coordination of government departments and local universities, further collaborations and seminars could be established (Cheung et al., 2020). For example, the Department of Counselling and Psychology at Hong Kong Shue Yan University has established the teachers' professional development schemes (i.e., Basic, Advanced and/or Thematic Courses for Teacher Professional Development on Catering for Students with Special Needs for the 2024/2025, 2025/2026, and 2026/2027 School Years) for teachers who want to advance their skills in SEN management. Therefore, at the local university level, teachers are encouraged to attend courses from local universities in order to upgrade their skills (Basic, Advanced and/or Thematic Courses, 2024).

Second, from the perspectives of students, it is important to offer some training and opportunities to students for the understanding of IE classrooms and SEN classmates in the school environments. Students are one of the most important shareholders in all school environments. Positive student-teacher, student-student, and teacher-teacher networks and support are essential (Berchiatti et al., 2024). Therefore, offering some mentorship programs as student-student relationships could somehow reduce the workload of teachers.

Third, mentorship programs (e.g., student-student, student-teacher, student-counselor) could positively encourage acceptance, connections, and relationships among all shareholders in the school environments with SEN students. When students establish connections and relationships with SEN students, some minor tasks (e.g., leading to the restroom) could be offered to SEN students' mentors. Therefore, both students could establish some responsibilities in a safe and protective environment (Chan & Luo, 2022).

(3) Support from the School Leadership

It is also essential for school leadership to establish some effective management and plan of IE strategies. The following actions are strongly suggested.

First, school leadership must listen to the voices of frontline teachers and school staff who are offering teaching to SEN students in their IE classroom environments. Without active engagement from the school leadership, frontline teachers and school staff could lose their direction, which can lead to low job satisfaction and burnout (Whitaker, 2000). Although teacher turnover cannot be avoided, school leadership needs to reduce the turnover rate for long-term school human resources management.

Second, school leadership should place appropriate resources in the right places. In other words, additional resources should be offered to some special IE classrooms where teachers may need additional support (e.g., tools, technology, and even teaching assistants). For non-native Chinese-speaking students, bilingual signs and instructions could be offered in the SEN students' classroom environment (Shum et al., 2016).

Third, it is important to involve teachers and representatives in the policy-making and decision-making processes, as teachers are the ones who need to teach in the IE classroom environment (i.e., teachers as frontline workers). If teachers' voices cannot be answered, ignorance could significantly impact their stress, burnout, and negative well-being (Whitaker, 2000).

4. Contributions to Practice

The findings and discussions of this article expressed the essential voices and needs of teachers who offer excellent teaching and learning in the IE classroom environments in Hong Kong. First, this article outlines contemporary needs about the shortages, missing parts, and support network of IE classrooms and teachers in the Hong Kong context. It is known that both immediate and long-term training and support are essential for teachers who need to manage SEN students in their IE classroom environments. Workshops and training sessions should focus on the practical arrangements and skills in the IE classroom environments. For long-term development, schools could encourage teachers to gain their Master of Education in Inclusive Education for better teaching and learning strategies and practices.

Second, this article expresses the supportive network for resources, school

network sharing, and collaboration, particularly for schools with similar backgrounds, foundations, and even challenges. Senior-level and/or experienced teachers could play as mentors and/or guest speakers for additional training and sharing. Therefore, schools could further promote the supportive network and positive cultures in the IE schools and classroom environments.

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