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**SCHOOL PRINCIPALS: CHALLENGES AND TEACHER  
EFFICACY REGARDING INCLUSION OF LEARNERS WITH  
AUTISM**

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***Abstract***

Over the years, high and growing numbers of students on the autism spectrum have posted tremendous stress to the education sector. This article draws from a qualitative study and we examined practical challenges encountered when including learners with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in regular classrooms. A purposive sample of 12 primary school principals was interviewed. Content analysis and thematic induction were used to investigate insider-perspectives. The most common or serious practical challenges were reported by the participants: (i) school dilemma about inclusive education; (ii) up-skilling teacher capacity in understanding ASD behavior; (iii) teacher support to enhance peer acceptance; and (iv) expert input to improve home-school collaboration. These findings suggested the need of practical application of ASD knowledge to be provided in teacher training. Also, the provision of school-based expert support is suggested to further enhance teacher efficacy. Findings of this study may offer insight to communities experiencing similar educational changes.

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**Keywords:** Autism spectrum disorder; inclusive education; learning diversity; teacher training; teacher efficacy.



## **1. Introduction**

An increasing number of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) who have average or high intellectual and linguistic ability are being educated in regular schools (Hart & Whalon, 2013; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Moore-Gumora, 2014). This trend has demanded schools to enhance the capacity to cater for their needs. Nevertheless, recent literature highlights that this group of students is regarded as most challenging for inclusion (Frederickson & Cline, 2009; Humphrey & Symes, 2013; Jordon, 2008; Sin, 2011). Also, the process to include students on the spectrum remains a complex and poorly understood area of education (Barnard, et al., 2000; Davis & Florian, 2004; Emam & Farrell, 2009; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008).

The leadership and support of school principals can ensure the success of inclusive education for students with ASD and those with special educational needs (SEN) in general (CSENIE, 2003; 2012; Parker & Day, 1997; Sharma & Desai, 2008; Simpson, 2004). Forlin, Loreman and Sharma (2014) found improvement in inclusive practice of in-service teachers who completed professional training on inclusive education. The authors highlighted that the positive impact from the courses would be reduced if schools are set up in such a way as to make inclusive practice difficult for teachers. Florian (2012) suggested that inclusive education could be difficult to achieve in practice as a working reality.

## **2. Research Questions**

Here in Hong Kong, for almost 20 years, local schools have been promoting the capacity to implement inclusive education. A whole-school approach is adopted to provide comprehensive support leading towards 'zero rejection' of students with SEN including those with ASD. Besides, a three-tier model with increasing levels of teacher support is used to cater for student needs. The aim of tier-1 support is to enhance quality teaching in terms of appropriately differentiated teaching for individual students with mild learning difficulties. For tier-2 support, 'add-on' intervention is arranged for students with persistent learning difficulties. Intensive support is expected at the tier-3 level and individualized educational plans (IEPs), accommodations and specialist support are provided for students with significant learning difficulties such as learners with ASD (this group of students have mild intellectual disabilities or above IQ). In line with the three-tier model, the Education Bureau in 2007 contracted in-service teacher professional development courses (basic, advanced and thematic courses) on inclusive practice to tertiary institutions. The current target is by 2013-2018, 15% of teachers in each primary or secondary school to have completed the one-week basic training course on inclusive practice. In Hong Kong, there are about 500 primary schools, excluding international and special schools. The number of students with ASD in primary schools increased from 1,480 in the 2009/10 academic year to 3,800 in 2014/15. Based on these figures, there should be seven to eight students with ASD in each local primary school.

## **3. Purpose of the Study**

To date, studies on attitudes of school principals towards inclusive education mainly conducted in English-speaking western countries. More importantly, the findings remain inconsistent as some studies

suggested that school principals had negative views (Barnett & Monda-Amaya, 1998; Praisner, 2003) while other studies reported positive attitudes (Cook, Semmel & Gerber, 1999). In Hong Kong, a study on the attitudes of primary school principals found that school principals had slightly negative attitude towards inclusive education (Sharma & Chow, 2008). Another survey of school principals revealed that their acceptance of core values of inclusive education was not positive (CSENIE, 2012). All these previous research examined the attitudes of school principals towards inclusive education for students with SEN in general. For ASD research, Horrocks, White and Roberts (2008) conducted one study to examine attitudes of primary and secondary school principals regarding the inclusion of children on the spectrum and the results showed that there was positive attitude among the school principals. Nevertheless, the research gap reveals that literature on the perspectives of school principals specific to the inclusiveness of students with ASD is particularly sparse. We therefore initiated this study to examine the attitude and commitment of primary schools principals towards inclusive education for students on the spectrum.

#### **4. Research Methods**

This study targeted a purposive sample of primary schools, excluding international and special schools. Selection criteria of school principals were that the individual primary school had students with ASD and the medium of instruction was Chinese. The recruitment process started by inviting those primary schools participating in training courses on teaching students on the spectrum organized by the research team. Other schools were contacted through snow-ball connections. The data collection process was conducted in the academic year of 2014/15. Ethics approval was granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the affiliated Institution.

This was an exploratory study, and the research approach used was primarily a qualitative inquiry. In-depth but focused individual interviews were conducted in Chinese at the respective school setting, each lasted for a bit over 60 minutes. Open-ended questions asked concentrated on the school principal's belief in inclusive education for students with ASD in particular, strategies and support for students with ASD to enhance academic and social performance, successful experience and challenges faced and action to solve, home-school collaboration and communication with parents, support for teacher efficacy and future plan for school improvement. The interviews were audio tape-recorded and verbatim transcribed in Chinese language. Content analysis and thematic induction were used to examine overlapped, similarities and differences to form emerging categories. Categories were then grouped together to form themes that were salient to the practical challenges of including students on the spectrum in regular school settings and also impact on teacher efficacy. The interview quotes selected to support the themes of the present study were translated into English. Identities of the school principals were kept anonymous. Participant checking was conducted and it was expected to attain at least 90% or above of consensus from the school principals on the accuracy of the identified themes together with the interview quotes in English.

#### **5. Findings**

A total of 12 primary school principals (one retired) participated in the interviews and three of them were contacted through snow-ball connections. The retired principal was interviewed as his primary

school joined the pilot project of inclusive education in 1997 and at that time the school admitted students with ASD. After retirement, this school principal as one of the leading persons in the local education sector continued to be actively involved in teacher education on inclusive practice for students with SEN, particularly those with ASD. Among the 12 school principals, seven were males; one was below the age of 40, five were in the age range of 40-50 and the rest were over 50. The average number of years in the present position was 6.2 (range: 2-12). The retired school principal had a diploma in education, two school principals had a Bachelor degree and the rest had a Master degree. Ten school principals had teacher professional training in special or inclusive education. For the participant checking, 100% of consensus was attained from the 12 school principals on the accuracy of the identified themes and the corresponding interview quotes.

Both big, medium and small schools were included in the study. Table 1 presents the 2014/15 student populations of the 11 primary schools excluding the school of the retired school principal. The student population ranged from 149 to 1,240 and the average class size ranged from 20 to 31. Five of the 11 primary schools had high enrollment of students with SEN (the range was from 20.0 % to 37.4%). The number of students with ASD in each participating school ranged from 4 to 47; and among the 11 primary schools, five schools had high enrollment of students with ASD (the range was 12 to 47).

**Table 01.** Student populations of the participating primary schools (N=11)

Student population (2014/15)	Identity of the primary school*										
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K
Total no. of students	1240	300	280	541	149	389	474	156	230	320	190
Average class size	31	25	23	25	20	25	25	26	21	30	27
No. of students with SEN	120	25	40	97	53	106	79	41	38	64	71
% of students with SEN	9.7	8.3	14.2	17.9	35.5	27.2	16.7	26.3	16.5	20.0	37.4
No. of students with ASD	24	5	4	12	36	30	8	5	4	7	47
No. of IEPs	24	3	1	9	7	4	12	5	2	7	25

Note: \* The student population of the retired school principal is not presented.

### **Thematic analysis**

#### **5.1. Theme 1: Some dilemma encountered in including students with ASD in regular classrooms**

The 12 school principals expressed that they had the commitment of ‘Education for all’ and they had tried to create an inclusive school culture and stressed ‘zero bullying’ to all teachers, students and parents. They all stressed that among the local education sector, all schools had the mindset: Don’t be famous for inclusive education. They all showed serious concerns that high percentage of students with SEN, particularly those with ASD, would give threat to teacher workload and school reputation. The following interview quotes showed their concerns:

If a huge number of students with SEN, particularly those with ASD, enrolled into the school, there could be negative reactions from parents of typically developing students. *(Principal E)*

It has been the school's wish that while it is providing excellent support to students with ASD, the school can still maintain its reputation in particular the capacity to attract elite students. *(Principal F)*

I had tried hard to ensure a good balance of teachers' wellbeing and the number of students with ASD so that the teachers would not be overloaded. From time to time, I had to refuse admission of students with ASD when the school quota was at full capacity. This quota was set by the school management team based on the teacher capacity and school resources. *(The retired principal)*

Some of the participating schools were able to develop reputation of quality inclusive education. The following sharing showed the school achievements:

One mother who was aware that the school was successful in providing good education to students with ASD, she moved the house to be near to the school so that her child with ASD could be admitted. *(Principal D)*

There were parents of children with ASD approached the school for transfer when their children were not provided with adequate support in the former school settings. *(Principal F and Principal H)*

I know that some parents regarded the school as the 'target' school for their children with ASD. I will not refuse these parents as long as the school has placements available for this group of students. *(Principal I)*

The above perspectives demonstrated that the 12 principal had positive attitude towards the inclusiveness of students with ASD. Yet, they had concerns on the negative impact of too many students with ASD in their schools. Nevertheless, several participating schools had established reputation of quality inclusive education.

## **5.2. Theme 2: Up-skilling of teachers' practical competence for ASD behavior**

The 12 school principals were fully aware that teacher efficacy for students with ASD was still at the trial-and-error stage within the local context. All of them expressed that it was not difficult to achieve the current target set by the Education Bureau that 15% of school teachers to complete the one-week basic course on inclusive practice. The participating schools had purchased external professional services by non-government organizations to conduct social skills training and speech therapy for students with ASD and students with SEN in general. Nevertheless, the 12 school principals expressed that engaging students with ASD in regular classrooms was still very challenging as this group of students had very diverse needs and each of them was unique in terms of academic and social performance. The 12 school principals revealed that even for teachers who completed the basic training course, this group of teachers still felt underprepared and had doubt about their capacity in teaching students with ASD in regular classrooms. The following interview quotes showed the school principals' concerns related to teacher efficacy:

It has been rather difficult in arranging teachers to have further training on inclusive practice due to time constraint and heavy workload. Also, most teachers suggest that knowledge attained from the basic training course is not easily applied into the classroom context. The teachers expect the provision of school-based practical coaching from ASD experts. *(Principal A)*

One sole responsible person should be assigned in each school to take up the SEN coordination work and also provide the necessary professional input to support students with SEN, including those with ASD. The ideal person should have expertise in special or inclusive education so that he or she can provide adequate support to students with ASD and their families. (*Principals C and D*)

I witnessed that one student with ASD improved a great deal when this student had the same teacher for four years. The trust on this teacher by both the student and the family over the years is an essential factor of the success. (*Principal G*)

The 12 school principals were fully aware that a higher level of teacher efficacy was needed for students with ASD. They expected that there should be one responsible person to coordinate the support for students with SEN, including those with ASD. They also indicated the need of having school-based expert support to enhance teacher efficacy for ASD behavior.

### **5.3. Theme 3: Peer support: Win-Win outcome**

The 12 primary schools had different levels of peer support to students with ASD to enhance engagement in learning-teaching and social interaction.

**School A** in 2014 produced a film about inclusive education. The story was about the friendship among one student with ASD and the classmates. ‘I observed that during the film making process, the student with ASD and other students showed teamwork and this opportunity facilitated peer acceptance and friendship’. (*Principal A*)

**School D:** One student with ASD and hyperactive had the behaviour of running around during the school assembly sessions. One day, this student became very attentive when one teacher asked him to do some tasks for the assembly. ‘I was very impressed because the teacher was able to explore the student’s talent and positive image of the student was also projected.’ (*Principal D*)

**School J:** One student with ASD was good at English and he was assigned by one teacher as ‘little teacher’ to teach one junior form student to learn English after school hours. ‘I observed that the student with ASD enjoyed this task and also the social interaction with the junior form student.’ (*Principal J*)

One high functioning student with ASD had talent in Mathematics. One teacher asked the student to join the Mathematics team and participate in competitions. I observed that the whole team became very cohesive and helpful to each other. (*The retired principal*)

The above successful experience showed that both students with ASD and typically developing students could benefit from two-way peer support. Sharing from four school principals indicated that they had adopted the strength-based approach to explore the talents of students with ASD.

### **5.4. Theme 4: Home-school collaboration: Not an easy task**

The importance of home-school collaboration was recognized by the 12 school principals. Yet, most schools had encountered the common challenge as follows:

*Some parents tended to care much more of the academic achievement despite the fact that their children with ASD needed extra effort in learning some basic social skills. Although seminars with input from professionals had been arranged, most parents with ASD were still resistant to change their attitude.*

The school principals reflected that the work to enhance home-school collaboration was demanding, particularly parents of students with ASD.

## **6. Discussion**

The present study adopted a qualitative approach to examine mainstream primary school principals' commitments and perceived challenges faced in including students with ASD. Findings showed that the school principals had positive mind-sets regarding the local development of inclusive education. In sharp contrast to the findings of two recent local SEN survey studies that school principals showed negative attitude (CSENIE, 2012; Sharma & Chow 2008), school principals of the present study were having positive attitude in providing inclusive arrangements for students with ASD, and in general for students with SEN. They also realized the significance of responding to international trends of inclusive education. It was important to point out that some schools had quite high enrollment of students with ASD. The other observation was that most of the school principals studied had professional development in special or inclusive education. In particular, Horrocks, White and Roberts (2008) suggested that providing professional training on ASD to school principals may enhance their openness in supporting students with ASD in regular classrooms. In this regard, the positive impact of teacher professional development in special or inclusive education on school principals' leadership was again revealed by the findings of the present study.

The results of this study seem to imply that the major stumbling blocks for inclusive education have moved from the phase of questioning the inclusive philosophy to its practical implementation. Within this context, the school principals showed growing concerns of its negative implications. The reasons for these concerns are that in Hong Kong and many Asian countries, the sustainability and ranking of each school are related to the number of elite students and academic achievement in public examinations. Under the present rather rigid elite education system, examination-oriented, large class size, very limited in-class support and standards-based curricula, local schools experience the stress in providing adequate support for students with ASD and those with SEN in general. It is important to point out that this school dilemma of inclusive education is a real issue of the local school context to be solved in the process of moving towards 'zero rejection' of students with SEN. As such, governments and the education sector must find ways to reward and empower schools for being more inclusive to learning diversity.

Beside the leadership of school principal, teacher efficacy is another critical factor for success of inclusive education (Forlin, Loreman & Sharma, 2014; Hue, 2012; Jordan, 2008; Sin & Law, 2012; Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk-Hoy, 2001; Yuen & Westwood 2001). The school principals of the present study revealed that their teachers had the aspiration of up-skilling practical competence for students on the spectrum, in particular complex and challenging ASD behavior. However, knowledge gained from the current basic training on inclusive education could not fill the gap of knowledge transfer into daily inclusive practice. The findings suggested that teacher training with practical element (i.e., case studies together with effective inclusive strategies) is critical to the preparedness for understanding and managing ASD behavior. The school principals also expressed the need of input from experts to provide school-based consultation and support to further enhance teachers' capacity of teaching students with

ASD in regular classrooms. The idea of having hands-on experience or practicum-based program in teacher training on inclusive practice is suggested by teacher educators (Forlin, Loreman & Sharma, 2014; Ho, 2012). In the long run, it is ideal that each school has a team of teachers who have ASD expertise to support and sustain other teachers' competence in engaging students on the spectrum. In Hong Kong, some schools are allocated with one SEN Coordinator since the 2015/16 academic year and this pilot initiative can be considered useful for solving part of the above-mentioned problems. However, it is vital to have targeted professional development for all school staff and also this expertise must pass on for sustainability. Humphrey and Symes (2013) suggested that schools should build appropriate mentorship between senior and new teachers to facilitate the transfer of ASD expertise.

There currently is a very vibrant discussion about the use of strength-based approach for students with ASD (Strain, Wilson & Dunlap, 2011). To respond to this trend, the importance of peer support and the exploration of the talents of students on the spectrum were addressed by the school principals of this study. They also valued the win-win outcome in which students with ASD and their peers could have a higher level of academic and social engagement in inclusive classrooms. Thus, the application of strength-based approach for students on the spectrum should be further explored in the local school context.

Home-school collaboration is critical to meeting the diverse needs of students with ASD and their families. Unfortunately, some parents were found to be very resistant to change as suggested by the school principals of the present study. Similar findings have been reported by another local study that some parents of students with SEN refused to cooperate with schools and some even did not allow schools to intervene (CSENIE, 2012). The argument was that parents of children with ASD might have boarder autism phenotype which could affect their communication motivation and social understanding. This understanding is emerging in recent literature (e.g., Gerdtts et al., 2013; Taylor et al., 2013). In this respect, schools may need professional support to enhance teacher capacity in communicating with this group of parents.

The present study has limitations. It used a self-selected sample, and the school principals represented the group of schools that were accepting inclusion for students on the spectrum. Thus, they might represent the school leaders who had positive attitude and effective strategies to engage students with ASD in regular classrooms. This study employed a qualitative approach, and quantitative data were not collected. As such, triangulation of data was not conducted. Despite these limitations, the experiences of this small sample of school principals could lead us to have better understanding of practical challenges related to the inclusiveness of students on the spectrum in regular classrooms.

## **7. Conclusion**

The government and the educator sector must find way to reward and empower schools that are having success in providing inclusive education. For teacher training, the element of ASD knowledge transfer and practical application of case studies should be added to the curriculum to enhance inclusive practice for learning diversity. The need for school-based professional support from ASD experts to inspire teachers is suggested by the school principals. It is evident that the education sector wishes to see, in a medium term, each school is supported to develop a team of teachers with ASD expertise. All these



initiatives are expected to bring immediate work for future changes in the education sector, particularly the inclusion of students on the spectrum and those with SEN in general.

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