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Inclusive Education Policy in Hong Kong Primary Music Classrooms

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## Inclusive Education Policy in the Hong Kong Primary Music Classroom

### **Abstract**

Hong Kong's education policy prioritises "the learning and participation of all students, not only those with impairments or those who are categorized as having special educational needs" (EDB 2008, 1). This priority highlights a conflation of education policies - argued here to comprise the policies of 'inclusion', 'Learning to Learn' and budget savings. This example of policy conflation is then explored within the Hong Kong Primary music classroom from where evidence challenges the view that successful policy implementation lies in the 'continuous efforts by all professionals ... starting at the classroom level' (Darrow, 2009). Instead, here the evidence supports Avramidis et al's (2002) view of interacting groupings from which emerges compromises. In the Hong Kong context these compromises lead to an inadvertent failure, since 2001, to support 'non-core' subjects such as music.

**Key words:** Education Policy, Inclusive education, primary music teachers, Hong Kong.

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Inclusive education in Hong Kong's Primary music classrooms is a site where three policies interact – the education reform policy entitled 'Learning to Learn', the policy of 'inclusive' education and the undeclared policy of 'education budget savings'. To understand how these three areas inter-relate, is the subject of this article.

#### BACKGROUND: Inclusive Education and Hong Kong's Education Reform

Commencing in 2001, Hong Kong education underwent an extensive, mandatory reform entitled "Learning to Learn" (Hong Kong Curriculum Development Council [CDC] 2000) which included the mandatory inclusion of pupils with low to moderate Special Educational Needs (SEN) into mainstream classrooms. The ethos of 'Learning to Learn' - where learning is skill-based and student-centred - also promotes the inclusion of SEN pupils within mainstream classrooms where they are seen as both enriching and being enriched by this same learning/teaching process (Education Bureau, 2001a).

However, Hong Kong's traditional societal attitudes to the role of education and to SEN pupils would consider both 'Learning to Learn' and 'SEN inclusion' as alien concepts. In Hong Kong, education is traditionally the ladder to upward social mobility and educational competition thrives producing, by necessity, winners and therefore losers. This creates a context where educational success or failure is deemed a personal marker. Accepting self-responsibility for this personal marker has led to an incomplete perception of Chinese

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teaching-learning as being achievement-oriented with its logical corollary that the Chinese usually hold strongly negative attitudes towards people with intellectual disabilities (Scior et al. 2010), underestimating their wider capabilities and perceiving them as being severely impaired (Siperstein et al. 2011). Given such local social constructs, success for both ‘Learning to Learn’ and ‘integration’ reforms involves a perceptual change from the traditional view of education as being ‘competitive’ to seeing education as supporting all students to reach their full potential.

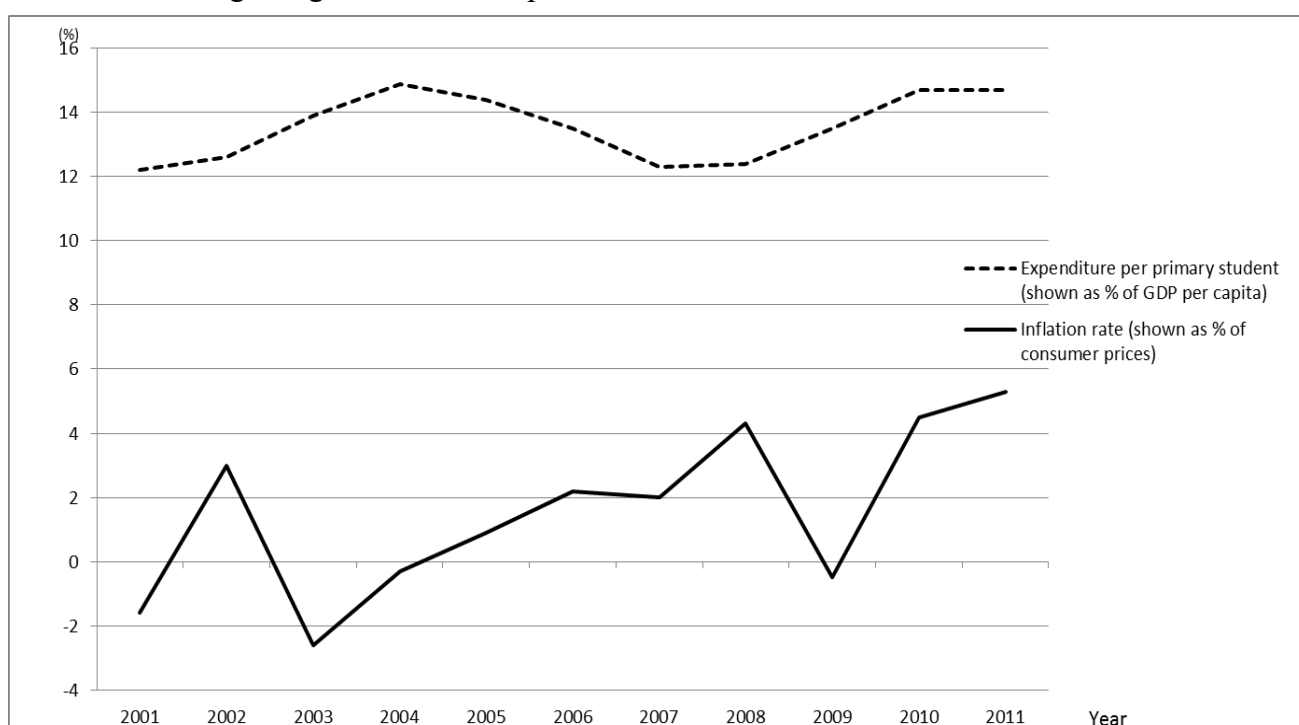
#### Structuring a perceptual change

Structural changes paved the way for a perception change from education being ‘competitive’ to supporting all to reach their full potential. For example, the former Primary One Admission System (Education Commission, 2000) was removed to “avoid using children’s ability as the admission criteria so as to reduce the incentive for drilling children in early childhood education” (EC 2000: 71). Similarly, with the introduction of the ‘through train’, transition from some primary to some secondary schools is no longer reliant on competitive exam results (EDB, 2011). Resulting from such structural changes, the primary classroom ability-spread changed from being a homogenous (academically selected) grouping to the current mixed-ability. It is within this ‘mixed-ability’ classroom setting that the perception of education as ‘supporting all to reach their full potential’ is to emerge – it is the same ‘mixed-ability’ classroom into which SEN pupils were mandated to be ‘included’.

### Counting the cost

Such extensive education reforms come at a cost. To appreciate more clearly the nature of this cost, it is helpful to consider an analysis of the Hong Kong's education expenditure (Table 1) both during and after the instigation of these reforms.

Table 1. Hong Kong's Education Expenditure.



Contrasted in Table 1 is, according to the World Bank, the percentage of Hong Kong's Gross National Product that the Government expends on each individual Primary student (% of GDP per capita). In 2001 at the inception of Hong Kong's education reforms, expenditure on Primary education was 12.2%. This figure, when compared respectively with 14.8% in the UK and 20.7% in America (ibid), perhaps signals that in Hong Kong, education reform was being modestly budgeted. By 2004, Hong Kong's expenditure per primary student peaked at 14.9%

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- however when compared respectively with 17.5% in the UK and 21.6% in America (ibid) – again the indication here is that in Hong Kong, the education reform budget was modest. The dip in funding, from 2004 to 2010, mirrors Hong Kong's financial crash and subsequent economic recovery – a mirroring that emphasizes that, in Hong Kong, education expenditure is linked to the economic market.

Two features of Hong Kong's education reforms also impact on how this education expenditure may be interpreted. The first feature is the drop in the number of primary classroom pupils. From 2001-06, the average primary classroom role fell from 35 pupils to 32 (Education Statistics, 2006). This falling number of pupils indicates that the real expenditure on primary education also fell, indicating that during this period, the inclusion of SEN pupils into mainstream primary classrooms was to be achieved without additional financial support. A second feature is the transition to the employment of primary teachers who had graduate degrees. In the academic year 2000-01 there were 41.6 % Primary teachers with degrees, by 2005-06 this percentage has increased by nearly a third to 71.4% (EDB 2007). However, this increase in higher qualified teachers was achieved without increasing the education expenditure by employing many graduate-teachers on the non-graduate (junior teaching) salary scale. This cost-saving exercise was achieved even while Hong Kong's primary education was undergoing extensive reforms, including the introduction of inclusive education into mainstream classrooms.

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Returning to Table 1, the lower graph indicates Hong Kong's inflation rate is shown as a % of consumer prices (Index Mundi 2014). Generally, the impact of inflation is to reduce the real value over time of a static budget. As Table 1 displays, from 2004-08 inflation rises while education expenditure falls – indicating that in real terms, the funding of Hong Kong's primary education reform also fell. In 2009, the dip in inflation reflects the economic crash, followed thereafter by the inflation rate rising again by 2011 to a rate of 5% - in contrast, over the same period, education expenditure rose by 3%. This comparison indicates that in Hong Kong, the impact of inflation on primary education expenditure is largely mitigated not by budget increases, but by consistently cost-saving means. Indeed, Table 1 displays that education cost-savings attained a reduction in real-terms of the education budget.

In Summary, the above interpretation of Table 1 indicates that in Hong Kong, the reform of primary education was attained in tandem with a reduction in real-terms of per capita expenditure.

Financial savings are not the sole criteria for judging the success of a Government mandated education reforms and in 2002 and again 2006 evaluations of these reforms were published (Education Commission [EC] 2002 & 2006). The former report does obliquely refer to the 'inclusion' policy by noting that 'the school system has become more diversified' (EC 2002, 35), however the latter report contains no such reference.



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The significance of the ‘Learning to Learn’ policy then lies in its tripartite conflation of student-centred learning, the inclusion of SEN pupils into mainstream classrooms and the achievement of economic savings. How this conflated policy was implemented now follows.

#### INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN HONG KONG: POLICY AND IMPLEMENTATION

The international definition of inclusive education differs significantly from that in Hong Kong. For the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization ([UNESCO] 2009), “inclusive education is a process of strengthening the capacity of the education system to reach out to all learners” (8). Fleshing-out this ideal UNESCO suggest that this ‘strengthening’ can involve “flexible teaching methods”, “responsive, child-friendly environments” and a “professional environment working deliberately and actively to promote inclusion for all” (15). In Hong Kong, “inclusion is concerned with the learning and participation of all students, not only those with impairments or those who are categorized as having special educational needs” (EDB, 2008 1). Here the phrasing ‘of all students’ indicates not only the inclusion of SEN students within mainstream education, but also a change to education as being student-centred, embracing ‘whole person development’ and fostering ‘life-long learners’ capable of success within a changing and unpredictable economy (EDB 2012a).

Problems with this conflation of student-centred and SEN pedagogies have been voiced. Crawford (2002), in his pilot study of 9 project schools where teachers undertook SEN

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literacy or mathematics in-service training, reports that these teachers found the course content was not transferrable to their classrooms, concluding that there was a ‘failure of policy makers to communicate policy and failure by senior school management personnel to manage change’ (32). More recently, Lo (2007) voiced similar concerns that the success or failure of inclusion in Hong Kong was determined by the individual teacher’s comprehension of the requisite education strategies.

Implementation of the inclusive education policy from 2001-2006 cost-effectively established a system of Resource Schools on Whole School Approach and Special Schools cum Resources Centres (SSRC) to provide appropriate support for students with SEN’ (EDB, 2011b). The EDB also offered a series of in-service SEN training courses since 2007 aimed to create a “critical mass of teachers (with) relevant training in each school (who) will guide their counterparts to implement integrated education through the Whole School Approach and to provide appropriate support for students with SEN” (EDB, 2012b). This trickle-down approach, depending on ‘a critical mass’ of SEN teachers informing their peers, appears flawed. Evaluating the situation in 2012, Hong Kong’s Equal Opportunities Commission’s [EOC] policy and research committee convenor states: "Generally speaking, integrated education in Hong Kong is lagging behind [in terms of] training of educators and policy implementation ...[Education Bureau] officials have not fulfilled their duties well." (Ho 2012). Elaborating this negative view the EQC’s head of policy and research, adds that after

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"more than 10 years ... parents, teachers and principals do not even understand its concept ...

There are still teachers and parents of regular students who think that students with special education needs should not go to regular schools ... and some parents of students with special education needs think that special schools may be better for their children," (Ho 2012). To understand where this 'integration' policy is flawed now follows.

### FAILING SEN STUDENTS

Recent research (EOC, 2012) reporting 5,136 respondents from 230 schools concluded that inclusive education is not a positive experience. First, the diagnosis of SEN pupils has dubious validity - for example, one parent reports it took only half an hour for her child to be diagnosed as autistic. Of those diagnosed as being SEN, about a third had been teased and just over a quarter had been bullied compared to 24 per cent and 18 per cent for regular pupils. As SEN pupils move through the education system, the toll of this negative experience begins to show: nearly half of the SEN pupils thought their examination results were unsatisfactory.

Why such conditions remain unaddressed may be understood in terms of SEN pupils' subsequent invisibility within the structure of secondary schooling. Hong Kong's secondary education comprises three school academic bands, i.e. Band 1 schools for students with high academic achievement, Band's 2 and 3 for students with respectively average and below-average academic achievement. Accordingly, SEN students most commonly find themselves allocated to Band 3 schools (Forlin 2007), where they become merged with other

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academically low-achieving classmates and accordingly their visibility becomes less apparent.

Although less visible, these secondary-level SEN pupils are found to be failing both academically and crucially, in their peer relationships (Wong 2002).

In summary, SEN pupils are largely failed by their ‘Learning to Learn’ education experience perversely because their very ‘inclusion’ merges them within the student-body where, lacking designated support, they drift eventually to the ‘academically-failing’ end.

### **A ‘fit-for-purpose’ Music Curriculum?**

Why SEN pupils are largely failed by their ‘Learning to Learn’ education experience can further be understood by questioning if their mandated curriculum is ‘fit-for-purpose’. A simple test of being ‘fit-for-purpose’ is to examine one example of this curriculum – the music curriculum - in terms of embodying the dual policies of ‘Learning to Learn’ and inclusion.

All mainstream students – including ~~low to moderate~~ SEN pupils – are educated according to the principle of “one curriculum framework for all” (EDB, 2013a). This principle would appear to embrace the ethos of both ‘Learning to Learn’ and ‘inclusion’. Within this common curriculum for example, the music curriculum embraces two age groups. Pupils aged 6 to 14 follow the *Music Curriculum Guide (Primary 1 – Secondary 3)*, (hereafter: *Guide*), (CDC 2003). Students aged 15 to 17 follow the *Music Curriculum and*

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*Assessment Guide (Secondary 4 – 6)*, (hereafter: *Senior Guide*) (CDC 2007).

The aim of including music within ‘Learning to Learn’ is stated as being ‘to develop creativity, the ability to appreciate music and to effectively communicate through music’ (Guide, 2003). In contrast, the 2014 National Curriculum for Music (NCM, 2014) states the primary aim of teaching music in England is to ensure that all pupils ‘perform, listen to, review and evaluate music’ (ibid). Whereas the latter focusses on students’ performance, in Hong Kong the focus is on music developing evidence of pupil creativity – an abstract concept that may be particularly challenging for SEN pupils to argue their case. From the perspective of SEN students, their mandated music curriculum would appear un-fit for their purpose.

A second major lapse in being ‘fit-for-purpose’ occurs in upper secondary school. Although the *Senior Guide* advises teachers to “set appropriate learning objectives based on students’ needs” (ibid: 44), this advice does not apply to music as an elective academic subject in the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education [HKDSE] examination. Where music is examinable, academic standards are immovable with no allowance given for SEN pupils.

A third major lapse within the music curriculum is that neither the *Guide* nor the *Senior Guide* offers any specific guidance for the ‘inclusion’ of SEN students within the mainstream music classroom.

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In summary, although Hong Kong's Music Curriculum does seek to support 'inclusion' by creating "one curriculum framework for all", this framework disadvantages SEN students' when arguing their case for being 'musically creative', makes no allowance for SEN students taking music exams and fails to offer specific guidance for SEN 'inclusion' within the mainstream music classroom. From this perspective Hong Kong's Music Curriculum may be judged not only unfit-for-purpose but also inadvertently leaving SEN students to drift, be misunderstood and eventually 'failed' both 'academically' and crucially socially.

The buck stops here

The significance of the 'Learning to Learn' policy as argued above, lies in its tripartite conflation of 'student-centred learning', the 'inclusion' of SEN pupils into mainstream classrooms and the reduction in real terms of the education budget. Emerging problems from this conflation centre on the perversity that while the 'inclusion' does merge SEN pupils within the student-body, this 'inclusion' also allows them to drift eventually to be 'failed' both 'academically' and crucially socially. Notably, this tripartite conflation also includes economic savings – a policy choice which, as shown above, determines that rather than recruit more trained SEN teaching assistants chooses a trickle-down approach, that depends on 'a critical mass' of SEN teachers informing their peers. Such policy choices have consequences as here in placing responsibility for SEN 'inclusion' effectively on to the individual classroom teacher.

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How individual teachers respond when the 'inclusion' buck stops with them now follows.

#### LITERATURE REVIEW OF TEACHERS AND 'INCLUSION'

Teachers' attitudes to inclusion are reportedly inconsistent - Scruggs et al (2011) meta-study reports positive attitudes despite the negative results of respectively, Bradshaw et al, 2005; D'Alonzo et al, 1996 and Vaughn et al, 1996). Seeking to explain such inconsistency Avramidis et al (2002) identify, within 'inclusive' education, three groupings of impacting variables viz. child-related, educational-environment and teacher-related. The child-related variable is illustrated by research that suggests that Primary teachers have more positive attitudes towards the inclusion mild to moderate SEN pupils compared to those with severe SEN (Hastings et al, 2003; Forlin, 1995). The educational-environment variable reflects Primary teachers' positive attitudes towards inclusive education where support services such as IT resources and teaching assistants are available (Boyle et al, 2012, Avramidis et al., 2000 and Minke et al, 1996).Teacher-related variables include teachers' gender, age, teaching experience, degree of contact with SEN children and training in special education. Gender-related research provides inconsistent evidence - compare Forlin et al, 2009, Avramidis et al, 2000 and Hodge et al, 2000 with Al-Zyoudi, 2006; Carroll, et al, 2003, Van Reuse et al, 2000 and Minke, et al, 1996. Age-related results are also inconsistent - compare

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Forlin et al. (2009) with Carroll et al., (2003) and Avramidis et al, (2000). Consistent results however support the view that the more experienced a teacher is, the more likely they are to display a negative attitude towards inclusion (Boyle et al, 2012 and Soodak et al, 1998). Also consistent are results that show that teachers who have regular contact with SEN individuals tend to display positive inclusion attitudes (Loreman et al, 2007, Hodge et al, 2000 and Hastings et al, 1995). Accentuating importance of personal contact, whereas the influence of higher degrees on teachers' attitudes are inconsistent - compare Forlin, et al. (2009) with Carroll et al. (2003) - individuals with SEN training do display positive views of inclusion (Lancaster et al, 2007; Loreman et al., 2007; Sharma et al., 2006; Forlin, 2006; Subban & Sharma, 2005; Campbell et al, 2003; Carroll et al., 2003;; Hastings et al, 2003; Avramidis et al., 2000).

What little research there is into inclusive education in the field of music education echoes the above research. Although some music teachers held positive views about inclusion, these views were tempered with low expectations of students' individual achievement in music (Scott et al. 2007).

Expanding our understanding of Avramidis et al's (2002) variables, Darrow (1999) reports teachers' concerns with insufficient time for curriculum planning, insufficient support from school administrators and difficulties in classroom management. More recently, Darrow (2009) cautiously seeks to broaden this responsibility to include school management,



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claiming that “eliminating the barriers related to organisation, attitudes and knowledge could set the stage for more effective inclusion practices. It takes continuous efforts by all professionals to make sure that integration and acceptance is infused in all aspects of the educational system, starting at the classroom level.” (31). To what extent Darrow’s (2009) broader responsibility and Avramidis et al (2002) three variables viz. child-related, educational-environment and teacher-related inform ‘inclusion’ in Hong Kong’s primary music classrooms will now be considered.

#### POLICY INTO PRACTICE:

##### VIEWS OF HONG KONG PRIMARY SCHOOL MUSIC TEACHER

A qualitative study was carried out to solicit the views of Hong Kong primary school music teachers on the policy of inclusion. Given the higher SEN visibility in primary schools, and the lack of direct SEN support for non-core subjects such as Music, this research focused on teachers in Hong Kong government funded primary music education. Purposeful sampling was employed for selecting respondents (Merriam 1998). All respondents were music teachers in Hong Kong primary schools with experience in inclusive music classrooms. A semi-structured interview guide was developed from research literature on inclusion (Foddy 1993). Among 500+ primary schools in Hong Kong (EDB 2012b), altogether 10 music teachers, each from from 10 different primary schools, were interviewed. Interviews were

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audio-taped and transcribed and checked by teachers before data analysis, to ensure that the study would yield credible outcomes (Guba and Lincoln 1989). To maintain informants' anonymity, pseudonyms according to alphabetical order (A to J) are used throughout this article. Interview data reported here presents teachers' views on the policy of inclusion in relation to music teaching.

To explore the impact of the tri-partite conflation of 'inclusive' education, 'Learning to Learn' and a reduced education budget, respondents' views are collated under four headings: 1) their experience of the SEN training 'trickle-down' policy; 2) 'Core-subject' versus 'whole school' SEN support; 3) their understanding of the varieties of SEN, and lastly 4) their SEN pedagogic strategies.

#### 1) 'Trickle-down' policy.

Reflecting the prevailing 'trickle-down' policy, of the ten respondents three had attended in-school SEN workshops; two attended SEN courses supporting Chinese language; one had attended EDB provided SEN courses, one an SEN module during teacher training while the remaining three had received no SEN training at all. Commenting on the value of these varied forms of 'trickle-down' SEN training

Amy: (the SEN training) workshops were brief and superficial.

Candy: (the SEN for) Chinese language teaching... (is only) about language teaching.

Fanny: (the EDB-provided SEN training) these are very basic courses.

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Jasmine: (pre-service SEN training) one module of special ed. (in my) Bachelor of Ed programme. It's a basic course and not specific for teaching music.

Germaine: (No SEN training because) it's not my turn yet, Teachers of core subjects will study first.

A notable feature of this 'trickle-down' policy is that none had received any SEN training specifically for teaching music.

## 2) 'Core-subject support' versus 'whole school support'

Interventions to support SEN vary between schools and range between offering only 'core subject support' to 'whole school support'.

Amy and Candy's schools: hire SEN teaching assistants ... but only for core subjects.

Germaine's school: directs higher ability pupils to peer-support weaker ones.

Helen's school: hires Social workers to separately educate mainstream and then SEN students how to get along.

Ivy's school: facilitates parents or learning assistants going into classrooms to help primary one SEN pupils for the first two weeks of a new semester.

Jasmine's school: appoints a 'SEN support teacher' to provide other teachers with advice and general strategies.

Crystallising these respondents' experience of school-based SEN support is the following:

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Fanny: SEN students in my school are allocated to a remedial class for learning core subjects. They will join the regular class when they have music lessons.

So, I have a big class of mixed abilities (with) disruptive SEN social behaviors.

As expressed above by Fanny, these respondents have a sense of music-teachers being marginalized, bereft of specific SEN support.

### 3) Understanding the varieties of SEN

These music teachers – marginalized from SEN training – report limited insight into the varieties that the term SEN embraces. For example, four respondents could identify specific types of SEN - ADHD, autism, dyslexia, Asperger and severe hearing disorder – the remaining six respondents employed vaguer terminology such as lack of emotional and or social control or simply the generic, all-embracing term SEN - legally, there are 102 types of SEN (Silas, 2014) educationally subsumed into 4 overlapping areas (Norfolk, 2014).

In contrast to a certain vagueness of what SEN encompasses, their reported disruption within an ‘inclusive’ classroom is keenly felt:

Betty: I feel a headache because I don’t know how to handle them.

Candy: They don’t respond to my teaching.

Diana: It’s impossible for him to learn music without any special support. It’s very unfair to him.

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Helen: The emotional problem and misbehavior of SEN in my music class caused chaos.

Ivy: Mainstream students dislike this (SEN) student and avoid having any form of communication with (him). It's very difficult to solve the problem of social inclusion.

Jasmine: I had very bad experiences of teaching SEN. one case was a child suddenly climbed up and almost fell off the window. It was scary ... Another case was a child (who) ... suddenly closed my piano and almost hurt my hand.

Not having an understanding of the behavioural causes, leaves these professional teachers exposed to classroom situations for which they are not adequately prepared.

#### 4) SEN: pedagogic strategies

Given the absence of a common level of SEN understanding these teachers' pedagogic strategies reflect a range of individual solutions:

Amy, Betty & Daisy: Keep them busy ... otherwise, they would disturb others. Design a wide range of various music learning activities ...(so) they won't feel bored.

Eva & Fanny: I usually arrange them to sit closer to/in front of me.

Helen: I would arrange them to sit at the corners so that they can't disturb others.

Germaine: Break down the learning tasks into smaller tasks and slow down my pace

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of teaching.

Ivy: I don't have special strategy to teach. I just teach as usual.

The most comprehensive pedagogical description is from Jasmine – who had attended one module of Special Education in her Bachelor of Education programme.

Jasmine: I would focus on teaching the majority and give help to SEN individually when I have time. I may also use peer assistants to give them individual help. Sometimes, I would arrange them to sit close to me if they need attention or sit at corner if they are emotional unstable. I may also use body movements or pictures to help SEN understand abstract musical concepts.

Given such a range of SEN support in these music classrooms – varying above from nil to targeted – the development of SEN primary pupils is random and uncertain.

### Examining Issues and Solutions

These teachers' opinions can now helpfully be seen as highlighting four major issues arising from the tri-partite policy conflation of 'inclusion', 'Learning to Learn' and a reduced education budget: (1) teachers' professional SEN knowledge and skills, (2) dissemination of 'best SEN music practice', 3) the role music has in both 'inclusive' and 'Learning to Learn' education and 4) clarifying who is responsible. Addressing each in turn, it is now possible to

examine both these issues and their solutions.

(1) Teachers' professional knowledge and skills

The dissemination of SEN training via the 'trickle-down' approach - where only 'core' subject teachers receive SEN training - does prioritise restricted financial resources but at the hidden cost of significantly delaying specific SEN pedagogies reaching non-core subjects such as music. Addressing this issue, respondents identify two solutions— pre-service teacher training and whole-school support.

The first solution – exemplified by Jasmine – lies in pre-service SEN teacher training. Advocates for this sole solution (Forlin et al, 2013; Leung et al 2010) however may be challenged on two points. First, they ignore the elongated time-line involved to train sufficient numbers of new teachers; second, they undervalue experienced non-core-subject professionals such as music teachers who remain excluded from receiving specific SEN pedagogic guidance.

A second solution helping teachers' professional knowledge and skills is that of whole-school SEN support – reported by these respondents as including hiring Social workers to socialise mainstream and SEN students; allowing parents or learning assistants into classrooms to help primary SEN pupils; appointing a 'SEN support teacher' to provide other teachers with advice and general strategies. This whole-school SEN support can help create a SEN-positive learning context. However respondents cite three variables that suggest

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this whole-school SEN support can be unreliable. The first variable is the quality of input: as Amy states ‘these (school-based) workshops were brief and superficial’. A second variable is the issue of values-retention, as admitted by Helen: ‘It’s so easy to forget about things learned from these (school-based) workshops’. A third variable is the relationship between SEN and other school priorities: in Diana’s school ‘My school is very positive to inclusive education’ however in Betty’s school ‘there’s an educational psychologist shared between my school and some other schools. They are very busy and I don’t think they can be of any help’. Given such variables, the whole-school SEN support is not a dependable solution.

Additional confounds to ‘whole school’ SEN support include funding support across the wide range of SEN – legally SEN ranges across 102 types (Silas, 2012). Funding support is further complicated by ‘inclusion’ mandating that each primary school open to an unpredictable and variable SEN enrolment.

In summary, the issue of teachers’ professional knowledge and skills has given rise to two possible if undependable solutions - pre-service SEN teacher training and whole-school SEN support. Restricting the dissemination of SEN training to only ‘core’ subject teachers does prioritise financial resources but at a hidden cost of significantly delaying specific SEN pedagogies reaching non-core subjects such as music. Fortuitously for some SEN pupils, their individual non-core-subject teachers can and do rise to this professional challenge but, as these respondents demonstrate, with SEN pedagogies varying from nil to targeted.



(2) Dissemination of ‘best SEN music practice’.

Dissemination of ‘best SEN music practice’ operates in Hong Kong within the broader ‘whole-school’ approach. Western (2009) defines a ‘whole-school’ approach as a ‘cohesive, collective and collaborative action in and by a school community’. Prioritising the ‘school community’ in this way can produce schools-in-isolation, carefully nurturing their in-house ‘best-practice’ at the cost of limiting sharing with perceived competitive schools. This is especially problematic in Hong Kong’s primary education where fluctuating birth-rates threatened school-closures (SCMP, 2013) and where an individual school may have little more than one teacher per each non-core-subject - such a one teacher of music.

An alternative is the dissemination of subject-free ‘best SEN practice’ via the ‘trickle-down’ policy. Although music teachers may gain SEN training insights from school colleagues, this ‘best practice’ will rarely be from other music teachers. Left in such relative isolation, individual primary music teachers are also left to individually implement their subject’s *raison d’être*, that of making primary “music education contribute significantly to student’s academic achievement” (CDC 2003:5).

From this *raison d’être* emerges a solution – that in Hong Kong primary education, the role of ‘music’ lies in its integration with other subjects (Barry 2008). Such a solution, as discussed in the following, is not without its own policy issues.

3) The role of music in the tri-partite policies of ‘inclusion’, ‘Learning to Learn’ and budget savings.

Hong Kong’s Music Curriculum does seek to support both ‘inclusion’ and ‘Learning to Learn’ by creating “one curriculum framework for all”. However, this framework has been questioned in the section ‘A fit-for-purpose Music Curriculum?’ and shown to disadvantage SEN students’ in three key areas – SEN pupils are challenged to argue their case for being ‘musically creative’, no allowance is made for SEN students taking music exams and third, there is no specific guidance for SEN ‘inclusion’ within the mainstream music classroom.

Conflating ‘inclusion’ and ‘Learning to Learn’ policies has also been shown incur a cost – Table 1. This cost has added a third policy - that of achieving education budget savings, which indirectly has created a need for resource prioritisation favouring ‘core’ against ‘non-core’ subjects such as the teaching of music. A prominent example of this prioritization is the exclusion of music teachers from SEN training.

In summary, although the role of music within ‘Learning to Learn’ is articulated clearly as “music education contributes significantly to student’s academic achievement” (CDC 2003:5), this is not the case for ‘inclusion’ - an omission that diminishes music’s potential in supporting Hong Kong SEN pupils ‘to reach their full potential’(EDB, 2013d).

#### 4. Clarifying who is responsible.

Darrow (2009) has argued that ‘eliminating the barriers related to organisation, attitudes and knowledge could set the stage for more effective inclusion practices. It takes continuous efforts by all professionals to make sure that integration and acceptance is infused in all aspects of the educational system, starting at the classroom level’ (Darrow, 2009 31). However in the Hong Kong context, such caution may seem off-target. By recognizing that education reform in Hong Kong conflates three policies – ‘inclusion’, ‘Learning to Learn’ and ‘budget savings’ – the responsibility for policy success more accurately lies within Avramidis et al’s (2002) three groupings of impacting variables viz. child-related, educational-environment and teacher-related to which this research has added an understanding of their inadvertent results.

The educational-environment in Hong Kong has here been characterized as prioritizing financial resources on ‘Learning to Learn’ while inadvertently side-lining ‘inclusion’ in order to achieve education budget savings. These three variables within the educational-environment group are then shown to impact on the ‘teacher-related’ group. Within the teacher-related group, policy variables impact by creating a context that marginalizes ‘non-core’ elements – e.g. excluding music teachers from receiving SEN training, making no allowance for SEN students taking formal examinations in music, disadvantaging SEN students by prioritizing ‘creativity’ as the aim of music. Such variables

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then impact not least on child-related groupings – which here refer to SEN students aged 6-14 mandated to be ‘included’ in mainstream classrooms but, in ‘non-core’ subjects, are left unsupported and exposed to social misunderstanding until, in upper secondary aged 15-17, ‘academically failed’.

Such impacting groupings and impacting variables within groupings here adds to our understanding of how Avramidis et al’s (2002) groupings interact, additionally this understanding challenges as perhaps being off-target, Darrow’s (2009) view that a resolution may simply be achieved by ‘eliminating the barriers’.

## CONCLUSION

In Hong Kong, inclusive education “is concerned with the learning and participation of all students, not only those with impairments or those who are categorized as having special educational needs” (EDB 2008 1). This definition makes clear that ‘inclusion’ in Hong Kong education does not necessarily include prioritising SEN support. An example of this absence of SEN support has been the case of the non-core subject of music – explained here in terms of conflating the tri-partite policies of ‘inclusion’, ‘Learning to Learn’ and budget savings. From this perspective, the view that a solution to providing SEN support lies in the ‘continuous efforts by all professionals ... starting at the classroom level’ (Darrow, 2009) seems misplaced. Instead, the evidence presented here supports Avramidis et al’s (2002) comprehensive, interacting groupings, from

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which emerges in the Hong Kong context, SEN 'inclusion' into mainstream classrooms that inadvertently fails to support 'non-core' subjects.

The implications of the policy decision that inclusive education be 'concerned with the learning and participation of all students, not only those with impairments' include the human cost of SEN students in non-core subjects being left unsupported and exposed to social misunderstanding until, in upper secondary aged 15-17, they are 'academically failed'.

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