Inclusive education services for children and youth with disabilities: Values, roles and challenges of school leaders

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ABSTRACT

Implementing inclusive education requires significant changes to values, systems, and practices. Hong Kong began to implement the inclusive education policy on the basis of voluntary participation in 1997. The government later launched a school partnership scheme, under which schools with proficient practices in whole-school approach to inclusive education were invited to serve as resource schools to support other schools. Data on what has led school leaders to join the reform under the policy of voluntary participation and how they tackle problems during implementation cannot be located. Thus, the purpose of this qualitative study is to uncover the reasons for school leaders' decision to participate in and what they did to facilitate the school wide effort to practice inclusive education, as well as challenges encountered. Key findings included Christianity and Confucianism as the prime reasons for practicing inclusive education, partnership with teachers and a shared vision as the key to successful implementation, and a competitive education system together with inadequate resources and teacher training as the main challenges. Recommendations consist of incorporating value development and building relationships with stakeholders in principal training programs, integrating knowledge and skills for inclusive education into the pre- and in-service teacher training programs, and appropriating resources with increased stability and autonomy.

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1. Introduction

Education services for children and youth with disabilities have been extensively reformed through the worldwide inclusive education movement in the last four decades. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defined inclusive education 'as a process of strengthening the capacity of an education system to reach out to all learners' (UNESCO, 2008a, p.9). This movement has grown rapidly, beginning with the passages of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (formerly Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975) in the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2000) that mandated the placement of students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment with the support from the UNESCO two decades later through the Salamanca Statement which represented a worldwide agreement. The Salamanca Statement (1994) reaffirmed that every child has the right to education, the system and programs of which should thus be designed to take into consideration the diverse characteristics and needs of students with disabilities through creating welcoming and inviting environments in general school.

The implementation of inclusive education implies significant reforms and changes to school practices. Most scholars hold the view that change is a process and implementation is just a phase of it (Duke, 2004; Fullan, 1982). For example, in Fullan's (1982) change model, there are three broad phases of the change process: adoption (initiation), implementation, and continuation. Initiation refers to the process of leading up to and making a decision to adopt a change. Implementation simply refers to the attempt to put the adopted change to practice. Continuation is the phase to integrate the change into the system if found useful; otherwise, the idea is discarded (Fullan, 2001). Whether the phases will move forward smoothly depends on how the problems or obstacles affecting these phases are successfully resolved or not. After conducting a thorough review on the efficacy and implementation of inclusive education, Salend (2011) concludes that it is difficult to compare because of the lack of experimental research, diverse student skills, multifaceted inclusive education programs, and differences in implementation.

The significance of leadership in successful implementation of reforms and bringing changes to schools has been repeatedly affirmed. To put it simply, school principals exert influence on teachers, who in turn affect student achievement (Slater, 2012). In addition, Wong and Cheung (2009) suggest that school leaders' value, beliefs, and agreement with an innovation make its implementation possible in school.

Nevertheless, school leaders are confronted with many challenges in their attempt to implement reforms and bring changes. Scholars

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have suggested different ways to classify implementation issues. Cheung and Wong (2012) classified implementation issues as external (e.g., scope of reforms, resources, and policies) and internal (e.g., school, teacher, student, and parent). Duke (2004) classified implementation problems as inherited problems and new problems. The inherited problems are those related to the design, decision making process and the consensus while new problems related to poor judgment on the parts of leaders, inadequate staff development, faculty divisiveness, time constraints and organizational complexity (Calabrese, 2002; Caldwell & Spinks, 1992; Morris & Scott, 2005; Whitaker, 1998; Wong, 2010).

Following the worldwide trend, Hong Kong also adopted the policy of inclusive education for support of students with disabilities in the 1970s (Hong Kong Government, 1977) and began to implement this policy on the basis of voluntary participation in 1997 and encouraged the whole-school approach (WSA) by involving all school personnel to take ownership of catering for student diversity as a key strategy (Poon-McBrayer, 1999). This significant change to general schools is supposed to entail the three inter-connected dimensions of a school namely, school policies, culture and practices. In other words, the characteristics of the WSA include a whole-school consensus, curriculum and assessment accommodation, differentiated teaching, peer support, teacher collaboration, and classroom support (Education Bureau, 2008).

In the school year of 2003–2004 (Education Bureau, 2007a), the government also initiated the school partnership scheme for general schools, under which schools with proficient practices in adopting the WSA were invited to serve as resource schools. Once appointed, the resource schools are expected to empower other schools by sharing their knowledge and practices with them through seminars, workshops, consultations, and mentorship. This scheme is meant to spread good practices and strengthen schools' ability to effectively implement education services for children and youth with disabilities in general schools.

In many countries, participation in inclusive education is mandated by legislations. The U.S. is a prime example to lead the movement with the passage of the IDEA as mentioned earlier. Hong Kong schools, however, can choose whether to participate or not. Data from such a different context can offer useful insight and implications for policies and practices elsewhere. Specifically, data on what has led the school leaders to join this reform under the policy of voluntary participation and how they build the schoolwide consensus to implement and become effective as recognized by the school partnership scheme are essential to inform future policies, improve personnel preparation for inclusive education services, and enrich our understanding of the relationship between school leadership and the successful implementation of WSA in Hong Kong and beyond. However, such data are not available. Thus, the purpose of this study is to uncover the rationale for decisions to participate in inclusive education, what leaders did to facilitate schoolwide effort to implement inclusive education, and challenges encountered. Specifically, the research questions of this study are as follows:

1. What were the main reasons for school leaders to decide to adopt inclusive education services under the current policy of voluntary participation in Hong Kong?
2. What do school leaders do to facilitate schoolwide effort to implement inclusive education?
3. What challenges do school leaders still encounter?

2. Method

2.1. Qualitative design

This inquiry aimed at more in-depth understanding of schools recognized as proficient in practicing whole-school approach to inclusive education in three major aspects: (a) basis for practicing inclusive education under a policy of voluntary participation, (b) school leaders' strategies to facilitate the whole-school approach to inclusive education, and (c) challenges school leaders continue to encounter. Thus, a qualitative approach involving individual interviews of school leaders was adopted to facilitate an in-depth examination of the situations in participating schools.

2.2. Sampling approach and data collection procedures

The participants were purposefully sampled adopting criterion sampling (Patton, 2002) to ensure that participants were directly involved in decision making and building inclusive schools. Thus, potential participants were principals from resource schools recognized for their proficient practices in adopting whole school approach to cater for student diversity (Education Bureau, 2011) under the School Partnership Scheme. In the 2011/12 school year, eight primary and five secondary schools were designated as resource schools to support other schools to implement WSA to inclusive education (Education Bureau, 2011). Thus, principals of these schools were approached for participation. Principals of six primary schools and four secondary schools agreed to participate.

The aims of the inquiry and range of data sought from potential participants were first explained on the phone followed by delivering via electronic mails the formal consent form detailing ethical procedures including their right not to participate and to terminate interviews at any time, the non-disclosure of their identity, and the confidential disposal of audiotapes after data transcription. Once consent forms were received, participants were contacted to confirm time and location of their choice to have an interview. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to ensure that the responses to the questions would be abundant, in-depth and detailed (Punch, 2009). All participants chose to be interviewed in their schools and each interview lasted between 60 and 90 min.

2.3. Interview protocol

To achieve the purpose of this study as specified in research design, the interview guide included three broad questions:

(a) What were the reasons for your school to decide to participate in practicing inclusive education and serve as a resource school?
(b) How do you motivate and empower teachers and teacher leaders as partners to effectively implement the whole-school approach to inclusive education?
(c) What are the persistent challenges for school leadership to implement the WSA policy?

2.4. Sample characteristics

The 10 principals were very experienced in that all of them had at least 10 years and half of them more than 20 years of teaching experience. In addition, 90% of them had at least 10 years and half of them at least 15 years of administrative experiences. Six (60%) of the principals also had received training in inclusive and/or special education.

2.5. Data analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim. The raw data used as examples in this article were translated from Chinese to English and moderated by two peer researchers in the field to confirm its accuracy. To ensure data credibility, each participant was asked to approve the transcript and amend or modify the preliminary themes based on individual data. The preliminary themes from each participant were then aggregated to identify patterns of experiences that may