

# POST-SCHOOL OUTCOMES OF STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS IN HONG KONG: A QUALITATIVE INVESTIGATION OF TEACHERS' OBSERVATIONS

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## **Abstract**

To help students with special educational needs (SEN) to achieve smooth transitions from secondary school to higher education, to post-school employment and other outcomes that suit their development needs is one of the core goals of special education.

It is also a key component of worldwide practices of inclusive education. Making an effort to contribute to research and practical development in this area in Asian regions, the present study examined post-school outcomes of SEN students in a Hong Kong setting.

A qualitative approach was used by conducting a series of focus group interviews to teachers. Together with our findings of teachers' relatively rich observations of post-school outcomes for SEN students and transition difficulties usually encountered by this group of students, a dilemma also emerged from teachers' perceptions and observations of SEN students and their parents' expectations to postschool outcomes and realistic outcomes they could achieve. Implications and future directions are discussed.

**Keywords:** Post-school outcomes, SEN students, teachers' perspective

### **Introduction**

In the past few decades, Western researchers started to pay attention to post-school transition of students with special educational needs (hereafter summarized as SEN)(e.g., Colley & Jamison,1998; Lawson, & Shields, 2014; Neubert & Moon, 2006; Test et al., 2009; Winn & Hay, 2009; for a recent meta-analytic review, see Haber et .a., 2015). However, comparatively, inadequate attention, effort and systematic studies have been put on this meaningful topic in Asian regions. Transition, according to Halpern (1992), refers to “a period of floundering that occurs for at least the first several years after leaving school as adolescents attempt to assume a variety of adult roles in their communities” (p. 203). Post-school transition services usually aim at facilitating students' transition from school to post-school life, which may contain a range of postschool outcomes like postsecondary education, vocational training, employment and other desirable post-school results which may SEN students' diverse needs (e.g., Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Nochajski & Schweitzer, 2014; Wehman, Kregel, & Barcus, 1984; Westbrook, Fong, Nye, Williams, & Cortopassi, 2015)

Studies regarding SEN students' post-school transition in Hong Kong may have theoretical and practical significance to enrich research on this topic. At the theoretical level, high school graduation is usually perceived as an important period filled with many challenges and changes. In this period, students are looking forward to successful access to further education or successful applications for jobs they may wish to take. At the practical level, the present educational system in Hong Kong include inadequate systematic approaches and practices to support successful transition of SEN students. Since the year of 2012, a new curriculum policy named “three-three-four” has been implemented in Hong Kong, which means students will receive education of three-year secondary school, three-year high school, and four-year university. This 3-3-4 new curriculum policy is exerting great influence on students of all the school-ages, especially on SEN students. For example, although the new curriculum policy is also applicable to SEN students in inclusive classrooms, little attention has been paid to their present

educational status (e.g., what could they benefit from the new curriculum policy and implantation?) and what career planning education practices to support their postschool transition (e.g., Compared with regular students, if SEN students may have much more challenges and difficulties to successfully enroll in four-year continuous education in universities, what could they do after senior secondary education?).

The current study aimed to explore post-school outcomes (i.e., post-school education, employment, and transition difficulties) of SEN students in Hong Kong with a special focus on the perspective of teachers. Previous literature indicated that teachers, especially teachers' knowledge to support SEN students would play a key role in SEN students' post-school outcomes (Morgan, Callow-Heusser, Horrocks, Hoffmann, & Kupferman, 2013). Noteworthy, key indicators such as employment, postsecondary education, vocational training, and barriers are important in research on students' postschool outcomes (Chambers, Rabren, & Dunn, 2009).

## **Method**

### *Participant*

Our research team sent invitation letters to all Hong Kong secondary schools and special schools. Eighteen schools agreed to assist in inviting their teachers to participate in this study. In total, 60 teachers (16 focus groups) were successfully recruited with the help of these schools: 23 teachers were from mainstream schools; 37 teachers were from special schools.

### *Focus group interview: protocol, procedure and data analysis*

Two key questions were designed in the interview to each focus group of teachers:

1. According to your knowledge, could you list possible ways for SEN secondary students to enroll in postsecondary education or apply for jobs?
2. Do you know what difficulties SEN students may usually encounter in their pursuit of postsecondary education or employment?

Each group interview lasted from 10 to 15 minutes. All focus groups' interviews were audio taped with consent gained from each participant. The interviews were conducted in Cantonese (the mother language of participants) by the research team. In the interview for each focus group of teachers, researchers asked the two key interview questions, one after the other, members of each focus group responded to the two questions, respectively and accordingly. To clearly distinguish each interviewee in follow-up transcription, two research assistants also helped to write down key words of each group member's responses.

After all interviews, the tapes were transcribed. Two research assistants assisted in discriminating all taped contents, for example, to precisely identify the voices of all members of focus group interview one by one to secure that each member's responses could be correctly transcribed for follow-up data analysis.

## Results

In our in-depth exploration to analyze all interview data, two major themes emerged from them. The first theme concerns teachers' perceptions of the current status of postschool outcomes for SEN students, while the second one pertains to teachers' perceptions of transition difficulties SEN students may usually encounter.

### *Teachers' observations of post-school outcomes for SEN students*

The interview data from teachers informed that the cases in mainstream schools and special schools are different. The teachers in mainstream schools reported that their SEN students are eligible to apply for Associate Degrees or Higher Diploma programmes of universities or Hong Kong Institute of Vocational Education (IVE). Their schools would also offer help to SEN students in related applications when these students need. However, these teachers also noted that, according to their observations, it is harder for their SEN students to enter universities as compared to regular students.

*"Our school would help the students who have difficulties with the courses of Form 6 to apply for IVE." (Teacher 16, mainstream school)<sup>1</sup>*

*"The students with SEN would take college courses as other regular students. However, few of them could enroll in universities." (Teacher 15, mainstream school)*

These mainstream school teachers also pointed out that most of their SEN students select to do some service jobs after they graduated from senior secondary schools.

*"Most of them would do some grass-roots levels of jobs after graduation. Few of them could obtain further post-school education." (Teacher 01, mainstream school)*

*"As far as I know, they would be waiters or salespersons after graduation." (Teacher 17, mainstream school)*

*"One of our SEN students with ADHD found a job to repair air-conditioning systems after he left school." (Teacher 04, mainstream school)*

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<sup>1</sup> All direct quotations from teachers are originally in Chinese Cantonese, to help good understanding of international scholars, our team made effort to translate all cited interview transcriptions into English. Interested readers of Chinese Cantonese may email Prof. Sin Kuen Fung at kfsin@ied.edu.hk .

For the cases in special schools, the interviewed teachers informed that SEN students will usually go to vocational training schools, such as Shine Skills Centre of Vocational Training Council (VTC), Day Activity Centre (DAC), or Sheltered Workshops. They also noted that because of no other better choices for some parents whose children are with severe SEN, they have to let their SEN children stay at home. Some students with mild SEN may found part-time jobs with low demand tasks, such as waiters, salespersons, security guard and alike. These are teachers' observations of post-school outcomes for SEN students in special schools. The teachers from special schools also mentioned that most of their SEN students enrolled in Associate Degrees or Higher Diploma programmes after they graduated from secondary schools.

*“The students with emotional problems who do not have either dyslexia or learning problems would go to VTC for further education. They would choose the subject of vehicle maintenance or hotel management. It is hard for us to help the students with dyslexia or learning problems.” (Teacher 60, SSD)*

*“They would do jobs in restaurants or other catering business. They would be a maintain man or salesperson.” (Teacher 57, SSD)*

#### *Teachers' observations of transition difficulties for SEN students*

Teachers also shared with the research team their concerns in relation to these students' disabilities, their deficiency in social interactions, and particularly low academic achievement.

*“SEN students' (post-school transition) difficulties depend on which type of SEN they have. For instance, the difficult thing for one of my student with Dyslexia is to write. However, the HKDSE (the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education) requires more about writing. Although the student with Dyslexia studies hard, he still gets bad academic results” (Teacher 16, mainstream school)*

*“In general, I feel that SEN students are weakest at their social skills, compared to regular students. They (also) have poorer interpersonal communications” (Teacher 15, mainstream school)*

Taking these frequently-observed disadvantaged factors into account, teachers noted that Associate Degrees, Higher Diploma and VTC are more realistic post-school outcomes for SEN students with lower academic achievement than those for regular students. They also noted that because of lacking certain social skills, SEN students usually have difficulties in the interview processes to apply for postsecondary education

or jobs. Furthermore, given that SEN students' severe disabilities usually prevent them from successful transition to higher education or other regular job positions, teachers in special schools indicated that they would like to persuade parents to apply Sheltered Workshops for their SEN children. Noteworthy, teachers also highlighted one dilemma they felt is SEN students' considerably low academic achievement scores and these students' high expectations to achieve post-school outcomes in higher education.

*“In Sheltered Workshops, the jobs are too easy and the pay is too low for some of our students. Some of our students look down upon the jobs in Sheltered Workshops. They have their own dream jobs like being a writer. Their parents would not apply for the jobs in Sheltered Workshops as the child doesn't like working there.”(Teacher 50, special school)*

### **Discussion and future directions**

When explored the interview data, we found that teachers from both mainstream and special schools provided rich information of their observations and perceptions of the current status of post-school outcomes and transition difficulties for SEN students. Regarding postsecondary education for SEN students, teachers from both mainstream and special schools reflected that SEN students are eligible to apply for Associate Degrees or Higher Diploma programmes of universities, but few of them could actually enter into universities. Taking employment as an important post-school outcome, these teachers frequently mentioned that most SEN students do service jobs or jobs with low demand of tasks. Teachers from mainstream schools pointed out that their schools would also offer help to students who have difficulties in the applications for universities. Teachers from special schools showed that parents of students with severe SEN have to let their children stay at home.

In their reflections to post-school transition difficulties SEN students may usually encounter, these teachers said that post-school transition difficulties for SEN students are mainly caused by their different SEN types, their deficiencies in social interactions, and low academic achievement. For instance, because of lacking certain social skills, SEN students usually have difficulties in the interview processes to apply for postsecondary education or jobs after these students graduate from senior secondary schools.

All these findings elaborated above indicated that concerning SEN students' postschool outcomes, a certain of discrepancies between ideal and realistic outcomes

exist. Based on the interview data, two interesting findings were worth of further exploration by adding interview data from the perspectives of parents and students. First, teachers in special schools would like to persuade parents to apply for Sheltered Workshops for their children with severe SEN. Second, teachers also noted one dilemma they may often feel is SEN students' considerably low academic achievement scores and these students' high expectations to achieve post-school outcomes in higher education. Taking account of a pivotal role teachers could play in helping SEN students to achieve post-school outcomes and overcome transition difficulties (Haber et al., 2015; Morgan, Callow-Heusser, Horrocks, Hoffmann, & Kupferman, 2013; Neubert, & Moon, 2006), one may wonder what teachers can do and would like to do when they face this dilemma? Future studies could take a special focus on examining and understanding the pivotal role of teachers in supporting smooth and productive post-school transition for SEN students.

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