

Chapter 11

Post-school Transition of Students with Special Educational Needs in Hong Kong

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Abstract In Hong Kong, students with special educational needs (SEN) are able to access the senior secondary education in the 12-year free education. Teachers teaching students with SEN have to prepare their students with knowledge, skills, and competency for overcoming the challenges of lifelong learning and career planning. It is well noted the post-school transition period signifies the transition to adulthood and independent life. A successful transition may lead to students' adaptive motivation to continuing higher education or employment opportunities, which contributes to good quality of life. However, for students with SEN, they often need to face more challenges than regular students do. This chapter first discusses the contextual analysis for the education of students with SEN in Hong Kong schools by analyzing the increasing number and complexity of disabilities, concerted effort in school support and pathways of postsecondary education. However, teachers always reported the uncertainties and difficulties in supporting the smooth transition of the SEN graduates. By taking account of the research done by the authors specifically through a series of focus group interviews to a wide range of stakeholders, the chapter identifies variables affecting the post-school transition outcomes of students with SEN in Hong Kong. With reference to the contextual needs, the identified variables inform the policy change in career guidance and support for students with SEN. Implications and recommendations at individual, school, community, and policy levels are discussed. In regard to the development of career guidance and planning in schools, this chapter will finally conclude the intensive support, supporting strategies, and multiple pathways for students with SEN in Hong Kong.

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11.1 The Significance of Post-school Transition for SEN Students

Post-school transition is important for secondary students' career development. During the post-school transition period such as post-school education, career choices, and living arrangement, many decisions have to be made by regular senior secondary graduates and their peers with disabilities (Clark and Unruh 2010; Kohler 1993). This period also signifies the important transition to adulthood and independent life (Blacher 2001). This transition period for young people with SEN is often more complicated than that of their peers without disabilities (Flexer et al. 2008; Halpern 1994; Janiga and Costenbader 2002). Students with SEN are often faced with a range of problems, such as unemployment, low community participation, and inactive adult life (Wagner and Blackorby 1996; Madaus 2005). The increasing number of secondary students with disabilities integrated in regular classrooms calls for effective transition programs between senior secondary schools and higher education/post-school employment (Eckes and Ochoa 2005; Rabren et al. 2002). How do the schools prepare students with disabilities for a successful post-school transition? An increasing number of studies have made preliminary efforts to explore effective transition programs and services (e.g., Gil 2007; Janiga and Costenbader 2002; Sitlington et al. 2000; Wehman et al. 1985). However, this area of post-school transition to higher education or to employment among students with SEN is under-researched in Asian societies, particularly in Hong Kong.

11.2 The Increasing Number of Students with SEN in Hong Kong Secondary Schools

With the development of inclusive education and advances in assessment in Hong Kong, the number of secondary students identified with disabilities increases sharply. Up to 2014, 16,440 students with SEN across 8 types of disabilities (i.e., speech disorder (SD), hearing impairment (HI), visual impairment (VI), physical disabilities (PD), attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autistic spectrum disorder (ASD), intellectual disabilities (ID), and specific learning disabilities (SpLD) have been identified and integrated in the mainstream secondary schools. Table 11.1 displays detailed number for each type of disabilities ranging from 2009 to 2014. It is important to note that for secondary students integrated in regular classrooms, they are mostly identified at the mild or medium level of disabilities, receiving support levels at tiers 2 or 3 on the basis of whole-school approach. Severe cases with multiple disabilities are usually placed in special schools, so that they will receive rehabilitation, training, and education appropriately. For extreme cases (particularly those with severe and complicated problems), they are usually placed in hospital schools. In regard to the policies of early identification and early intervention, referral and assessment speed up the

Table 11.1 Number distribution of students with different types of disabilities in Hong Kong secondary schools from 2009 to 2014 (Hong Kong Legislative Council 2014)

	SpLD	ID	ASD	ADHD	PD	VI	HI	SD	<i>Total</i>
2009–2010	5050	710	570	740	190	90	470	180	<i>8,000</i>
2010–2011	6430	810	780	1250	230	90	450	230	<i>10,270</i>
2011–2012	7850	940	1050	1790	250	110	490	210	<i>12,690</i>
2012–2013	9050	930	1310	2330	250	100	420	190	<i>14,580</i>
2013–2014	9890	930	1660	3010	240	100	400	210	<i>16,440</i>

Note. Total number for each school year was highlighted in italic

identification of students with SEN in mainstreaming schools. The success of intensive support helps a huge number of students with SEN complete education up to senior secondary level. However, the features of disabilities and wide range of needs signify the complexity of school-based support. Teachers have to be empowered with the necessary skills and knowledge in catering for the diversity. In addition to attitude change, curriculum differentiation, appropriate pedagogical practice, and assessment accommodation are the key factors of success for including the students with SEN into the inclusive setting.

11.3 The Impact of New Academic Structure to Students with SEN in Hong Kong

Since 2009, the 3-3-4 scheme has been launched as a new academic structure for senior secondary education (i.e., 3-year junior secondary, 3-year senior secondary education, and 4-year higher education) in Hong Kong (Hong Kong Educational Bureau 2009). In 2012, the Diploma of Secondary Education Examination (DSE) replaced the two public examinations: Certificate of Education Examination (CEE) and Advanced Level Examination (ALE). Under the new secondary school (NSS) academic structure, thousands of students with SEN in the year complete the senior secondary curriculum and attend the Diploma of Secondary Education Examination (DSE). In the public examination, specific arrangement, extra time allowance, and other practices of support are considered by the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority. Students with SEN possibly gain the recognized learning outcome and ability for future development. With the achievement, these graduates need to make their post-school choices for further education or employment. For further education, the choices, on competitive basis, will be limited mainly to (a) degree programs, (b) nonlocal courses, (c) the mainland/overseas studies, (d) Project Yi Jin diploma, (e) associate degree courses, and (f) vocational courses. The post-school arrangement and transition of SEN integrators are thus always the concern. For vocational education for persons with disabilities, the Vocational Training Council runs courses for those with relatively higher cognitive abilities, while NGOs funded by the government provide training to persons with disabilities

at mild levels in different schemes, training programs, or sheltered workshops. In short, the new academic structure brings about implications for school practice for preparing students with SEN for further education, vocational training, or open employment. Individual lifelong learning and career planning for students with SEN are increasing concerns to be addressed in mainstream senior secondary schools.

11.4 Small Number of Students with SEN Studying in the Public-Funded Universities

Among the current eight public-funded universities in Hong Kong, the annual intake is always around 18% of the student population taking the public examination, e.g., the Diploma of Secondary Education Examination (DSE). Students with SEN are always the disadvantaged group in this competitive examination. From the government statistics submitted to Legislative Council, the ratio of SEN integrators at S.6 student population in public-funded schools increases from 1.81% at 2012/2013 and 2.49% at 2013/2014 to 2.77% at 2014/2015. Each year, thousands of students with SEN will sit for the public examinations, with the accommodation in the assessment or special arrangement approved by the examination and assessment authority. However, the statistics of SEN integrators studying in full-time degree and associate degree programs is undesirable, with 252 in 2012/2013, 270 in 2013/2014, and 412 in 2014/2015. Only a small number of students with SEN with remarkable achievement will be admitted into universities. For example, there are reported cases for students with visual impairment studying in programs of education, social work, and translation, for students with physical disabilities studying in psychological studies, and for students with ASD studying in programs of science, medical science, or mathematics. Indeed, all students including with SEN and non-SEN experience the same selective admission exercises for a place in a university. Without the special pathway, exemption, and explicit arrangement, a majority of students with SEN are always the losers.

11.5 The Current Study: A Study on Post-school Transition for Students with SEN

In regard to the contextual development in Hong Kong schools, how is post-school transition going for students with SEN in Hong Kong in reality? The current study was conducted to find answers to this question. The study is qualitative and exploratory in nature.

More specifically, this study aimed to achieve four key objectives as follows: to examine available post-school transition opportunities for students with SEN, to

Table 11.2 Summary of participants' distribution in focus group interviews

School	Student	Parent	Teacher	Social workers/professional	Total
Mainstream	38	6	27	4	75
Special	35	31	37	11	114
Total	73	37	64	15	189

identify the barriers encountered and problem-solving strategies adopted by students with SEN in this transition period, to gather information about the existing guidance and support from schools and families to students with SEN in this transition period, and to make recommendations for improvements in order to achieve equal opportunities in education and transition support to students with SEN in senior secondary schools in Hong Kong.

Focus group interviews were conducted with a wide range of stakeholders (i.e., students, parents, teachers, social workers, and professional). Seven major interview questions to probe these stakeholders' understanding and experiences of post-school transition support to SEN students were asked to gather insightful information from these stakeholders. In total, 189 stakeholders participated in interviews (for details of sample distribution, please see Table 11.2). Interview guidelines in relation to the four key research objectives listed above were also constructed to assist our research team in focus group interviews to collect information from these interviewees concerning current education and job options for students with SEN, external support they have received, barriers and difficulties encountered, and their solving strategies and suggestions to policy and education to support SEN students' post-school transition. After completion of all focus groups of interview, all the interviews' data were transcribed. Three research assistants were invited to accurately discriminate between voices of the members who participated in each focus group interview and to ensure that the contents of each interview were accurately transcribed. They did double checks, made thematic codes, and achieved good inter-rater reliability of the interview data.

Based on interview transcripts of these stakeholders, three main themes emerged: choices of post-school paths for SEN students, factors affecting post-school outcomes of SEN students, and support to post-school transition to SEN students. The following paragraphs present and discuss key findings in relation to these key themes. It is worth noting that frequently reported inadequacies, barriers, and difficulties by these interviewed stakeholders in relation to the three key themes on post-school transition of SEN students have also been summarized and presented in the following sections to reflect the status quo and call for future endeavors to this field.

11.6 Factors Affecting Post-school Outcomes of Students with SEN

The paragraphs below present research findings from the focus group interviews among parents, students, and teachers regarding their perceptions of the current state of post-school transition for SEN students. This section aims to provide in-depth interview data to inform policy and support for post-school transition and recently launched life planning education and career guidance for integrators in mainstream schools. Based on our data analyses of the interview data from these stakeholders, the key findings regarding post-school outcomes of secondary students with SEN were summarized as follows:

11.6.1 Limited Choices of Further Education for SEN Students

Overall, most students with SEN do not have very clear individual plans for post-school transition. Some may possibly apply for local or overseas tertiary institutions and make choice on their favorite majors, e.g., education, social work, music, design, hotel management, etc., in their application. However, they were also fully aware of their limitations and tended to choose the vocational courses provided by Hong Kong Vocational Training Council (VTC) and NGOs. Consistently, all interviewed students with SEN shared the similar concern that their low academic achievement is always the barriers for them to plan their post-school transition. They agreed that they lack the coping strategies for managing their poor achievement. They needed to work harder and some frequently attended the after-class tutorials. In short, due to individual competency and difficulties, students with SEN had limited choices in further education. They lacked the motivation or confidence to make attempts for career goals or further education. Their post-school transition opportunities will be more vocational training orientated.

11.6.2 High Expectation of Parents of Students with SEN for Further Education

Overall, parents of students with SEN perceived further education as the best choice for their children after secondary graduation. They expected their children to have the chance of studying in degree courses, associate degrees, or vocational training courses. These parents indicated that they expect their children with SEN would be able to continue their learning in higher education by all means available to them. They did not mind what majors their children with SEN would take. Among alternative choices after graduation, seeking jobs would be the last choice.

However, some parents were also fully aware of the poor academic scores of their children in schools. In regard to this disadvantage, they understood the difficulties for enrolling in tertiary institutions and for seeking jobs as well. They often felt hopeless or helpless in supporting their SEN children for post-school transition. They expect more opportunities of further education for their children. However, the opportunities and channels of information are always limited.

11.6.3 Barriers and Difficulties for Students with SEN for Post-school Transition

In regard to SEN students' post-school transition, teachers and professionals shared some school-based activities to support SEN students' post-school transition. Teachers also introduced some successful cases of students with SEN who were able to enroll in local universities, mainland Chinese tertiary institutions, or overseas universities. However, they also emphasized that not many students with SEN had higher education opportunities in universities. Many students with SEN might choose vocational institutes. For those who were with post-school employment, most of them were reported to get jobs without training, e.g., office workers, waiters/waitress, or site workers.

Teachers concluded that students with SEN always faced a lot of difficulties in post-school education or employment. These difficulties came from individual, families, and community. Some students with SEN were often reported to have low confidence, weak cognitive abilities, physical disabilities, or immature emotional problems, which affected their interpersonal relationships and adaptability to post-school transition and work. For the importance of adaptive emotion competence, Yang et al. (2015) found significant positive relationships between emotion competence, interpersonal relationships, and academic performance among SEN students. Yang et al.'s (2015) study also showed the predictive effect of social support on SEN students' emotion and social competences. However, based on the current qualitative study, some secondary students with SEN were found to have inadequate family support as some parents did not recognize the special educational needs of their children. Moreover, children with SEN in families with low socio-economic status were less likely to have lifelong learning and career planning or guidance services. Consequently, these students with SEN are more likely to have great difficulties in seeking jobs or working steadily, after they completed the 12-year free education compared to their peers without SEN. Reports always illustrated the frequent change of job among persons with disabilities. A number of NGOs has to offer aftercare services to persons with SEN in the first 3 months after they got the job.

11.6.4 Inadequate Support to Students with SEN

When students with SEN in mainstream schools were asked about current support from schools for lifelong planning and career guidance, this group of students could at least set some examples: after-class learning groups, tertiary institution visits, or counseling. However, for students with SEN, they had difficulties in identifying examples and were of the view that school support on organizing activities relating to post-school transition and career guidance was not tailor-made for meeting their real needs. Teachers have no knowledge of the community support and resources for students with SEN. They have difficulties to identify the resources, training, exposure, and opportunities for meeting the needs of students with SEN.

11.6.5 Lacking Home-School Partnership in Supporting Students with SEN

From the interviews, many parents of students with SEN had little knowledge of the support from schools, government, and nongovernment organizations (NGOs). Although they knew some details of the government grants for students with SEN, they lacked the full information of the funding support to their children in post-school education. For the support from NGOs to their SEN children's post-school education, they were not clear what courses would be helpful to the learning of their children. Some parents perceived their inability to advise their children with SEN for both post-school education and employment. They relied much on the support and advice from the teachers. However, some parents were not satisfied with the post-school-related support provided by schools, government, and NGOs. They were of the view that the support was not appropriate to the needs of their children with SEN.

11.6.6 Difficulties in Providing Appropriate Support and Guidance in Schools

Teachers and professionals noted that some tertiary institutions organized a team for supporting students with SEN. However, inadequate professional training in special education for the staff in these tertiary institutions was their major concern. It was noted that many teaching staff were without special education training and unable to take good care of students with SEN. Some teachers worked collaboratively with different nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to arrange the services and training their students with SEN in schools. These services would be the peripatetic support services from resource schools (e.g., special school for the

blind or special school for the deaf), NGOs for persons with disabilities, or educational psychologists for preparing the transition life of the SEN students.

In view of the difficulties, teachers summarized some practices that support students with SEN for post-school transition. Firstly, early identification and intervention are crucial. In July of each year, the school will send letters to parents of all the new students for the information of special educational needs. If the replies were positive, schools would contact the parents again for the follow-up support. Secondly, home-school collaboration should be built up. Parents were always reported to be lacking the understanding of special learning needs. When their children were referred to assessment or training by schools, they felt unacceptable or discriminated against. Teachers had great concern for gaining the support and participation from parents, particularly the collaboration in the post-school planning. Thirdly, teachers should be empowered with the knowledge and skills in supporting students with SEN. Professional development is necessary. It is also suggested to hire dedicated professional teachers, e.g., SEN coordinator, to support students with emotional problems for learning and training. Lastly, schools should set up courses with the necessary practical skills and coping skills for students with SEN for the employment needs and post-school transition.

11.7 Discussion

Smooth transitions from high schools to postsecondary education and employment would play a determining role in SEN students' independent adult life and their quality life (Halpern 1994; Janiga, and Costenbader 2002; Rabren et al. 2002). However, the body of existing literature in this area has been mainly established by research studies in Western countries and by more studies in non-SEN students. Equal opportunity and equity in education become the major concerns. The present study took a special focus in one of the Asian regions and aimed to investigate the current state of post-school transition and outcomes for students with SEN in Hong Kong. Based on the analysis of the interview data from a wide range of stakeholders, the following key results emerged: (a) students with SEN have limited choices for further education and post-school employment; (b) parents of students with SEN consistently reflected their high expectation on SEN students' further education; (c) available career-related guidance and activities have not been tailored to suit SEN students' diverse needs; (d) home-school partnership in supporting the SEN students' post-school transition was weak. Although teachers could list more post-school paths and school-based support to SEN students, they also concluded that students with SEN so often face challenges and have a lot of difficulties in achieving post-school education or employment. Teachers also reflected that these difficulties came from individuals, families, and the local community. Teachers summarized that according to their observation and teaching experiences, most students with SEN have low confidence in learning, weak cognitive abilities, feeble physical disabilities, or immature emotional problems.

Parents, teachers, social workers, and professional have strong concern for more job opportunities for SEN graduates. Jobs with less training or in sheltered workshops are undesirable. The school education, instead of academic pursuits, should be more focused on training students with SEN with academic skills, communication skills, social and interpersonal skills, and occupational and vocational skills, which are closely related to the life learning and career planning in schools. In short, concerning post-school transition outcomes for students with SEN in Hong Kong, the interviewed stakeholders do not view that schools have prepared students with SEN adequately for smooth post-school transitions. Many students with SEN are with the false hope to go to university for their further education, irrespective of the high entrance requirement, limited places, and competitive application. The choices for the vocational training are limited, while open employment is impossible for most SEN graduates.

11.8 Recommendations to Improve SEN Post-school Outcomes

With regard to these findings from the present qualitative study, uncertain and worrisome post-school outcomes are frequently reported by the interviewed stakeholders. Schools play a significant role in responding to the individual, social, and economic needs of SEN students. Recommendations for support, policy change, and strategies to improve SEN students' well-being, achievement outcomes, and quality of life in the long term are specified as below:

At the individual level, the students with SEN in senior secondary should be supported with lifelong learning and career planning, with substantial training in academic skills, communication skills, social and interpersonal skills, and occupational and vocational skills. Currently, a number of NGOs offer services, training, and mentorship to students with SEN. With additional funding support, a wide range of training and exposure in career planning is found to be effective. The students with SEN should be well informed of their identified strengths, capacity, and limitations for the needs of post-school transition and career choice. In regard to the capacity enhancement, more choices of the Applied Learning subjects should be the alternatives for the study of the SEN students.

At school level, instead of academic pursuits for university education, the school should formulate policy and take measures for supporting the post-school transition of students with different abilities. On top of the basic training in understanding the special needs, staff should be well trained and capable to adopt a wide range of supporting strategies in identifying the needs and strengths of the SEN students. More importantly, home-school collaboration should be built up for lining up the parental expectations and students capability/interest in further studies or vocational training. All parties should be communicated with frequently and be well

informed. The Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCo) plays a significant role in planning and implementing the career education for students with SEN.

At the community level, the government should uphold the right of persons with disabilities in education and disseminate the significance of lifelong learning and career planning. Through cross-sector collaboration, policy and resources for education, rehabilitation, training, and open employment for students with SEN are expected to be improved. Concerted efforts with NGOs on offering community resources, training opportunities, professional support, and job mentoring will be helpful to support the students with SEN and parents. In fact, in partnership with caring companies, many students with SEN are able to gain the training and exposure in the workplace.

At the policy level, although there is no legislation for Special Education Law in Hong Kong, the government also responded to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2008. The core value is to promote, protect, and ensure the full access and engagement of all persons with disabilities in all aspects, e.g., education, leisure and employment. In fact, the Disability Discrimination Ordinance (DDO), enacted in 1995, helps eliminate and prevent discrimination against persons with disabilities. The Code of Practice on Education in 2001 also guides the school practice for developing policies and procedures that prevent and eliminate disability discrimination. Therefore, in regard to the current contextual development, special considerations should be paid to those capable students with SEN for studying in universities. Accommodation in learning and assessment, support in learning, and subject exemptions should be considered to a great extent. Such positive discrimination should not be criticized as unfairness to other students. We are looking forward to the concerted effort for offering more learning opportunities for SEN graduates, in the areas of further education and vocational training.

11.9 Conclusion and the Way Forward

In summary, the post-school transition period is important to all students, particularly the group of students with SEN who often meet with much more challenges compared with nonstudents with SEN (Blacher 2001; Halpern 1994; Janiga and Costenbader 2002). For school stakeholders, to develop effective ways and improve available practices to facilitate smooth post-school transitions and achievable post-school outcomes are important for these students' quality of life in the long run (see also Chap. 8 for insightful discussion of career guidance and life planning among diverse students). According to the present study, we found that it would also be important for schools and teachers to help this population of students to set manageable and achievable post-school goals, for example, to select further education or post-school employment by taking account of SEN students' personal needs, interests, and capabilities as well. In regard to the identified variables, changes and support should be provided at individual, school, community, and policy level. The role of a SENCo becomes significant and important in

coordinating the career planning, guidance, and education to the group of students with SEN. School support to prepare SEN students' post-school transitions plays a salient role in their career development and social integration (Chen and Chan 2014; Flexer et al. 2008). The present study made important attempts to investigate the status quo of post-school transition in Hong Kong by collecting the in-depth data through a qualitative approach. It is hoped that the key findings of this study will contribute to researchers' and practitioners' understanding of post-school transition practices for students with disabilities in the Chinese context and hold practical implications for ongoing and further improvements of inclusive education in Asian regions from not only the perspective of innovative instruction (Wade 2014) but also the perspective of policy refinement (Colley and Jamison 1998) and implementations to achieve the core goal of education for all (EFA) through inclusive practices (UNESCO 2009; Sin 2010; Sin and Law 2012).

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