

Special Article

Educating Children with Dyslexia: What We Have Achieved Together in the Past Ten Years

B Ip

I am indeed very pleased to be invited to this special occasion to share with you my thoughts about what the various sectors have achieved together in educating children with dyslexia in the past decade. I feel particularly honoured that the Council has decided to offer this prestigious award to someone who is not a medical professional, but someone coming from Education. Your choice reflected the significance of multi-disciplinary collaboration in the advancement of health, education and well-being of children, something I learnt from my own experience in promoting educational services for dyslexic children in the past ten years.

Looking back, I recall that my very first encounter with dyslexia took place when I was a young novice teacher. I was amazed to find that one of my students always reversed the shape of the letters of the alphabet and really had a hard time learning how to write properly. Unaware of what his real difficulty was at the time, I advised him to pay more attention and to work harder. Little did I know then that it was not that he needed to work harder, but that he needed to be taught differently.

In 2000, I served as the Principal Assistant Secretary (Education Services) of the Education Bureau (EDB). It was then that I met Dr. Chan Chok-wan and Dr. Catherine Lam for the first time at a cross-sector meeting. They pointed out to me seriously that the Administration should do much more to improve the achievement of

students with dyslexic problems. Impressed by their genuine concern and enthusiasm, I began to learn more about dyslexia and its impact on children's learning. I also initiated an internal review of our services then available for these students with relevant colleagues in the Education Bureau. We concluded with internal consensus that more needed to be done for dyslexic students. We rolled up our sleeves and got on with the task. Though the way forward was not clear to us, we all worked with firm commitment and dedication. That was the situation ten years ago.

At that time, there were a lot of unanswered questions over dyslexia. What was the definition to be adopted? What were the underlying causes? What was the prevalence rate? Who should conduct the assessment and how? What were effective remediation strategies? How could schools render support to these children? How should teachers teach differently?

Although dyslexia is a universal phenomenon, its manifestation is language specific. Since most researches on dyslexia were conducted in the West on alphabetic script, we needed to do local researches to understand the cognitive characteristics of Chinese dyslexic children, so that appropriate screening and assessment tools, as well as effective remediation methods, could be developed.

To me, the development of educational services for dyslexic students can be broadly divided into three stages:

- (a) The 80s and 90s can be considered as the initial stage when the significance of this issue was first recognised in Hong Kong, and some simple assessment tools and group remediation programmes were tried out. At that time, even in the western countries where dyslexia had been known to be a learning disability for a long time, there were still a lot of controversies about dyslexia

Deputy Secretary for Education (School and Professional Development Branch), Education Bureau, Hong Kong SAR, China

Betty Ip

*Presented in The Hong Kong Paediatric Society Oration and Medal on Child Health 2010 on May 6, 2010.

among the professionals and they were still having heated debates over the definition, assessment and treatment of dyslexia.

- (b) The year 2000 is a turning point in the history of educational support for dyslexic students in Hong Kong. It was a milestone year marking the publication of the first norm-referenced screening tool for primary school students. With this tool, teachers were empowered to identify children at risk of dyslexia more effectively with the help of a checklist. The year 2000 also marked the publication of the first professional assessment tool for use by psychologists to diagnose primary school children with dyslexia. The publication, promotion and application of these tools had not only raised the awareness of teachers and the general public but also led to more students being able to receive better support from schools as a result of early identification.
- (c) From 2000 onwards, it is a period of continuing development when services are being further expanded and fine-tuned.

In order to gain a better understanding of how to support dyslexic students more effectively, I made a study visit to the UK in 2005. I was told by the government officials there that parents of dyslexic children no longer protested as hard against the government as before. They attributed this to improvements in educational services for dyslexic students, which were made possible by a number of new developments. These included:

- (a) **Teacher training and school-based support** – All language teachers are now trained in a range of "dyslexia-friendly" teaching strategies, under the basic premise that "what is good for dyslexic children is equally good, if not better, for all children". Moreover, all teachers are responsible for the teaching and effective learning for all pupils in the class. They are expected to adjust their teaching and render support to dyslexic students in each and every lesson.
- (b) Learning centres specialising in dyslexia play an important role to develop teaching resources and render additional support to dyslexic students and their parents.
- (c) Multi-disciplinary and cross-sector collaboration is emphasised.

- (d) Innovation in the application of information and communication technology (ICT) is encouraged to enhance the learning of dyslexic students.

This visit had inspired me to re-think about our situation in Hong Kong. The Administration needed to formulate an integrated framework of support for dyslexic students. I started off by organising an internal staff development for all professional staff of the Education Bureau, including those in the Curriculum Development Institute, the School-based Language Learning Support Sections, the Quality Assurance Division, the School Development Division, etc. An understanding of dyslexia by all staff concerned was requested, not only those who served in the special education sections.

We also developed a multi-focus model based on the main areas of support I learnt about during the UK trip. I would like to summarise the major developments as follows:

- (a) **Teacher training** – This has been a major focus. To further enhance teachers' capacity in supporting students with special educational needs (SEN), a 5-year professional development framework (the Framework) with training targets for in-service teachers has been put in place, starting from the 2007/08 school year. The Framework consists of structured courses on SEN at three levels as follows:
 - A Basic Course (of 30 hours) and an Advanced Course (which lasts 90 hours) on Catering for Diverse Learning Needs; and
 - A series of Thematic Courses on specific SEN Types (with a duration of 60 hours for each course)

It is expected that within the five years from the introduction of this Framework in 2007/08, at least 10% of teachers in each ordinary school will have completed the Basic Course; at least three teachers will have completed the Advanced Course; at least one Chinese Language teacher and one English Language teacher will have completed the Thematic Course on Specific Learning Difficulties.

- (b) **Whole-school policies** – Supporting students with dyslexia is a whole-school issue. EDB expects all schools to adopt a Whole-school Approach to supporting students with special needs, which is to be documented in the School Development Plan.

Measures such as raising staff awareness about dyslexia, setting up a School Support Team, identification and assessment procedures, subject-specific teaching strategies, organisation of interventions, accommodations in learning and examinations and parent involvement should be in place and regularly reviewed by the schools.

- (c) **Funding and professional support for schools** – Schools are provided with funding to address student diversity in their school. The Learning Support Grant (LSG), first introduced in primary schools in the 2003/04 school year and in secondary schools in the 2008/09 school year, is provided to schools according to the number of SEN students in need, including those with Dyslexia. EDB encourages schools to use the funding flexibly to address the varying degrees of needs of the students through the following 3-tier intervention model:

- Tier-1 support, which is preventive in nature and refers to quality language teaching in the classroom for all students. It takes the form of differentiated teaching in handling early signs of learning difficulties.
- Tier-2 support, which refers to the "add-on" intervention for students assessed to have persistent learning difficulties. This may involve small group learning, pull-out programmes, etc.
- Tier-3 support, which targets at a relatively small number of students who need intensive support, special accommodations, specialist support, etc. in the light of their more severe learning difficulties.

In addition to financial resources, we also initiated the School Partnership Scheme and Resource Schools programmes, under which schools with good practices in catering for dyslexia management are provided with additional resources to share their experiences with other schools.

- (d) **Developing expertise and specific learning resources** – Inspired by the Dyslexia Learning Centres in the UK, I once made an effort to lobby a Japanese businessman for a donation of a hundred million dollars (!) to set up a similar centre in Hong Kong. Although that bid was not successful, I was able to realise my plan through our partnership with the Jockey Club. Together with the then Head of the Charitable Fund of the Jockey Club, we mapped out the blue-print for the 5-year READ & WRITE

Project. When we embarked on the project in June 2006, it had a budget of over \$150 million. As we can now see, this project has already achieved great success. Currently in its 4th year, the READ & WRITE project has developed a prevention programme at kindergarten level, published new assessment tools and evidenced-based learning resources for both primary and secondary students with dyslexia, conducted training for a target of 5000 primary school Chinese language teachers and introduced a district support model for parents. For this, on behalf of the Education Bureau, I would like to express our gratitude to the Jockey Club for their financial support to the Project and various sectors for their professional support for our teachers, students and their parents, without which the Project would not have been started and implemented so smoothly and successfully.

- (e) **Cross-sector collaboration** – I realised at a very early stage that, in order to provide the full range of support for dyslexic children and their families, EDB needs to reach out and work hand in hand with other organisations. We appreciate the unceasing support from tertiary institutions. We have also been working closely with Department of Health especially on assessment issues. I am also pleased to see that, through the Quality Education Fund, EDB has funded more than 30 projects of schools, tertiary institutions and NGOs on resource development and service provision to children with Specific Learning Difficulties. In consideration of the difficulties of dyslexic students and to more fairly reflect their academic abilities, we liaised with the Hong Kong Examination and Assessment Authority in 2004 to introduce special examination arrangements in public exams. Such special arrangements were also applicable to internal assessments in schools. In order to enhance the articulation pathways for these students, we have also liaised with the Vocational Training Centres to introduce special arrangements for the admission of dyslexic students. Last but not least, we are happy to have dedicated and committed parent groups such as the Hong Kong Association of Specific Learning Disabilities as our partner, which has given us plenty of valuable advice throughout the years.
- (f) **Promoting public awareness** – Dyslexic students need an equal opportunity to demonstrate their

knowledge and skills. Understanding by the general public is important to dispel prejudices about their ability and to create opportunities for them to realise their strengths and talents. In this respect, we will continue to make use of the mass media such as radio and television programmes, publicity leaflets and web-based information to promote understanding and acceptance.

Looking back on all these major developments, I am happy to say that educational services for dyslexic children in Hong Kong have come a long way. I also have some personal reflections. In the past, the Education Bureau had received its share of criticisms and strong comments. Different parties seemed to sit at different sides of the table and communication was not always easy. I am happy to see a change in all these aspects. Now, within EDB, the importance of support to dyslexic students is acknowledged at all levels and there is an equally strong awareness and consensus amongst professional and front-line staff. As regards other service and advocacy organisations, we have become partners sharing the same hope and dream for dyslexic children. We are no longer divided but united. We need to work together to make life better for our dyslexic children. Famous dyslexics such as Albert Einstein, Thomas Edison, Walt Disney, Whoopi Goldberg, Tom Cruise and Jamie Oliver etc. were all once labelled as poor students at school. I hope that with enhanced school-based support, teacher training and more evidence-based intervention resources available, our dyslexic children would be able to better succeed in schools. In particular, we should recognise their multiple intelligences and encourage them to develop their potentials.

This evening, I see myself as just a representative of EDB and all the education professionals receiving this award. The award should go to EDB and all education

professionals as a whole. Without the concerted efforts of the Bureau and the schools, we would not have made such encouraging and pleasing progress in supporting dyslexic students. There are so many people and organisations to which I need to extend my thanks but it may not be possible for me to mention them one by one here. However, it would not be right for me not to mention a key person and an important organisation tonight. The key person is Professor Connie Ho of the University of Hong Kong, who through her research efforts and team work with EDB colleagues and other academics, has developed the major screening and assessment tools now in use in Hong Kong. The important organisation is the Hong Kong Jockey Club, which has provided financial support to the READ & WRITE Project in making a real difference for dyslexic students. Incidentally, Professor Connie Ho is also the principal investigator of the Project. For those many others whom I am not able to name one by one on this occasion, I would like to extend my heart-felt thanks to you all on behalf of our dyslexic students, their parents and their teachers. As indicated in the title of my talk – what we have achieved for dyslexic children in the past ten years, I must say we have made it together.

In my recent posting, special education is no longer under my portfolio. Though I may not be actively involved in the formulation of policies relating to special education or integrated education, I will continue to promote the penetration of the support services for dyslexic students in the mainstream sector so that teachers at large will be able to cater for the needs of dyslexic students in ordinary classrooms. Timely and effective support for dyslexic students still remains a subject close to my heart. This award represents your recognition of the work of EDB and the education sector. Such encouragement will spur us on to work harder and better.