

Final Evaluation Report of the Pilot Project on Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (SENCOs) Executive Summary

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1. Executive summary

1.1 The SENCO Pilot Project in context

1.1.1 Over recent years, the Education Bureau (EDB) in Hong Kong has provided schools with additional resources, professional support and teacher training to further the development of inclusive education – more usually referred to as integrated education (IE) locally. Schools have been encouraged to incorporate support for student diversity in school policies and in their overall cultures and practices but schools with relatively high populations of students with special educational needs (SEN) have found it challenging to implement IE effectively.

1.1.2 In response, EDB initiated a three-year Pilot Project to assess the impact in schools of the provision of special educational needs co-ordinators (SENCOs). The project ran from the 2015 to 2016 school year to the 2017 to 2018 school year and EDB recruited 124 public sector schools to join the Pilot Project (59 primary schools and 65 secondary schools). The schools participating in the Pilot Project were selected from those ordinary (that is, rather than special) primary and secondary schools admitting relatively more students with SEN and/or students from challenging financial backgrounds and a cash grant was provided to the schools using resources from the Community Care Fund to enable schools to allow a designated teacher to be deployed as SENCO.

1.1.3 EDB established a range of duties to be undertaken by the SENCOs in carrying out their roles which were intended to occupy each SENCO for between 50% and 70% of their working time. A dedicated programme of professional development was established and new-to-role SENCOs were expected to complete this programme during the three years of the Pilot Project. An evaluation strand was also established and the findings from that evaluation are the subject of this report.

1.1.4 The key objectives for the evaluation included:

- To assess the impact of the provision of SENCO on whole school approaches to IE
- To identify the evolving contribution that the SENCO can make to policy and practice for IE

- To identify factors that facilitate the effective development of the SENCO role
- To identify factors that present barriers to the effective development of the SENCO role.

1.1.5 It was expected that addressing these objectives would enable the evaluation team to make recommendations for the potential future deployment of SENCOs in public sector ordinary primary and secondary schools in Hong Kong.

1.1.6 The approach adopted by the evaluation team was based on diversity, using a variety of methods to ensure that data from different sources would be complementary. Thus quantitative data were drawn from all 124 participating schools in order to reveal broad trends. Further contextual data were taken from 19 (15%) of these schools. In-depth contacts, including school visits, were maintained with 27 (22%) of schools to provide qualitative data, including interviews and case studies. Using these combinations of data enabled the evaluation team to triangulate findings and to illuminate wider issues with fine-grained detail.

1.1.7 The quantitative data obtained from all 124 schools included:

- basic information about students and staff
- data on student attainments in core subjects
- questionnaires to SENCOs, principals, teachers and parents.

1.1.8 The contextual data drawn from a sample of schools included:

- the job specification and work schedule for the SENCO
- the school development plan and the SENCO action plan
- data on SEN provision, interventions and support for students with SEN
- professional development activities related to SEN and IE.

1.1.9 The qualitative data gathered during school visits included:

- interviews with school principals and SENCOs
- classroom observations
- focus groups of students
- focus groups of parents of children with SEN.

1.2 Core findings from the evaluation

1.2.1 Data revealed that there were high expectations for the impact that the introduction of SENCOs might have. SENCOs were viewed as potential ‘agents of change’ and it was anticipated that their introduction would lead to a ‘paradigm shift’ in school responses to SEN and IE. To a large extent, these optimistic expectations have been realised.

1.2.2 However, the data also demonstrated that the backgrounds of the SENCOs appointed into schools during the Pilot Project were diverse and that the levels of prior relevant experience of the SENCOs were highly variable. For example, SENCOs were drawn into their new roles from a variety of prior positions in school hierarchies and yet it was acknowledged

that proven experience of SEN-related work and involvement in quality teaching helped to establish the credibility of the SENCO.

1.2.3 It also became clear that schools adopted different approaches and deployed SENCOs in a variety of different ways. For example, in some schools, there was a continued reliance upon the SENCO for providing individual support for students with SEN. In other schools, the SENCO was regarded as a member of the leadership team who committed their energies to whole school development. This sense of diversity also extended to practice. The balance for SENCOs in different schools between day-to-day support and strategic work was highly variable. SENCOs in different schools had different ranking, status and seniority. Schools also constructed different responses to workload and teaching commitments for SENCOs.

1.2.4 In spite of this variation, the SENCOs in the Pilot Project have made significant contributions. In general, SENCOs have had a positive impact on IE and on whole school development in their schools. It is also clear that SENCOs are engaging in more strategic activity as the new role develops and these activities include, for example, curriculum development and monitoring and evaluation activities.

1.2.5 The introduction of SENCOs into schools in the Pilot Project has had a positive impact on learning and teaching. In some schools, SENCOs have promoted deep changes in inclusive classroom practices. These changes have led to improved learning and teaching for all students as SENCOs ensure that curriculum access for all is enhanced through differentiation. In these ways, SENCOs have achieved positive impacts for students, for example, fostering greater personalisation and ensuring that teaching promotes greater student involvement. Data have shown how SENCOs have worked to promote greater diversity in teaching approaches and modes of learning in their schools to the benefit of all learners.

1.2.6 The introduction of SENCOs into participating schools has also yielded benefits for school staff. SENCOs have been found to be involved in providing professional development for their colleagues. SENCOs have been responsible for ensuring that more teachers, in the participating schools, are attending more SEN- and IE-related training courses. SENCOs have also initiated and fostered greater commitment to in-school development, for example, through engaging with colleagues in participative action research. These initiatives have often started in small groups of teachers but have led in time to wider improvements based on evidence established in small-scale enquiry.

1.2.7 Parents have also found that positive changes have been associated with the introduction of SENCOs into schools. The SENCOs in the schools participating in the Pilot Project have become more involved in working with the parents of children with SEN. Data show that there has been greater communication between schools and parents as SENCOs engage with their wider duties and, in some schools at least, the parents of children with SEN are becoming more involved, sometimes effectively as partners, in the education of their children.

1.3 Effective SENCO practices

1.3.1 There has been some evidence, especially during the earlier phases of the Pilot Project, of barriers that have not helped SENCOs to develop their roles effectively. In some schools, for example, the perceptions and attitudes of other school staff have made it difficult for the SENCO to carry out their duties in the ways envisaged by EDB and recommended during the new-to-role SENCO professional development programme. There has been reluctance among some staff to accept their share of responsibility for SEN and IE, rendering whole school approaches (that is, a range of ways of working that contribute towards the whole school approach to IE advocated by EDB) difficult to achieve. In some schools, senior managers have tended to encumber SENCOs with lower-level responsibilities rather than helping them to free up time to devote to more strategic activity.

1.3.2 Becoming aware of these barriers has helped schools in the Pilot Project to focus on those factors that have been demonstrated to facilitate the SENCO role. It must be acknowledged that support from senior staff has emerged from the evaluation as the most significant single factor in enabling SENCOs to carry out their roles effectively. School leaders understand the importance of whole school culture and ethos and can use their positions to draw SENCOs into activity at these levels. The promotion of participative action research has also proved to be a significant facilitating factor in schools where this has been used, enabling the positive results from small-scale development and enquiry activities to influence wider practices in schools. The results of these kinds of initiatives have often also been shared at the gatherings of SENCOs that have been promoted as part of the new-to-role SENCO professional development programme that has been running throughout the SENCO Pilot Project. Respondents have argued that these kinds of networks among schools have contributed very positively to professional development for SENCOs and other school staff and have proved to be, in themselves, a powerful factor facilitating SENCO involvement in whole school change. SENCOs also report that achieving transparency in SEN systems and funding strategies is another important factor in the successes observed during the SENCO Pilot Project.

1.3.3 It has been possible to draw from the data collected during the SENCO Pilot Project a series of insights into those SENCO practices that are recognised, by SENCOs, senior leaders, school staff and other interested observers, as being effective in terms of their impact upon the whole school approach to IE. These practices are likely to be at their most effective when SENCOs are able to work directly with their colleagues in school on teaching and learning issues. In addition to leading joint curriculum planning and co-teaching initiatives, this might entail SENCOs providing mentoring, training and professional development for their teaching colleagues in relation to IE and SEN provision. SENCOs have, in many instances, also been observed working in close collaboration with staff from other agencies, including therapists.

1.3.4 SENCOs have also worked to review and revise previously existing models of student support. This has often led to SENCOs steering their schools away from individualised or separate models of support for students with SEN and working to make general classrooms, and the teaching and learning opportunities they offer, more inclusive. This has sometimes meant that SENCOs have sought to diversify aspects of the wider curriculum, including

extra-curricular activities, other learning experiences and electives. Significantly, SENCOs have also supported their class- and subject-teaching colleagues in the personalisation of learning, for example, using one-page profiles to help teachers effectively to differentiate their classes to produce high quality teaching for all.

1.3.5 SENCOs have also been effective in their work beyond the classroom. There is evidence from the Pilot Project of SENCOs working much more closely with parents in order to generate powerful partnerships for learning at home, in the community and at school. Effective partnerships with students have also become a characteristic of the work of many SENCOs during the Pilot Project. SENCOs have taken leading roles in facilitating the voices of students in their schools and SENCOs have involved learners with SEN actively and productively in dialogue about their learning and about their plans for the future. A focus on transition planning, at various points of change in the lives of students with SEN, constitutes another key characteristic of SENCO effectiveness.

1.4 Discussion, conclusions and recommendations

1.4.1 In the closing section of the full report, we discuss a number of key issues that arise from the Pilot Project, draw conclusions and make a series of recommendations. Our discussions, conclusions and recommendations address the following issues:

1.4.2 Recommendations about broad policy in relation to the provision of SENCOs in public sector ordinary primary and secondary schools:

R1: We recommend that SENCOs should be deployed in all public sector ordinary primary and secondary schools in Hong Kong through a phased programme.

R2: We recommend that schools should be provided with a SENCO manual offering clear guidance, including authentic examples of practice, setting out the role of the SENCO in relation to IE and whole school development.

R3: We recommend that a set of indicators of effectiveness should be used in the form of a SENCO or school success planner, together with IE indicators and information about the factors that can facilitate the work of SENCOs, to steer the introduction of SENCOs into all schools.

R4: We recommend that the deployment of SENCOs into all schools should be carefully supported and monitored.

R5: We recommend that expectations of SENCOs should be carefully managed.

R6: We recommend that the introduction of SENCOs should ensure that all schools continue to make progress towards IE in terms of both policy and practice.

1.4.3 Recommendations addressing the positioning of the SENCO post within school leadership structures:

R7: We recommend that ultimately SENCOs should take up a strategic role within decision making, school development and leadership structures in their schools.

R8: We recommend that seniority should be offered as a potential entitlement for SENCOs and that the transition of SENCOs into senior posts should be phased in over time as SENCOs gain in confidence and experience and as schools make plans for enabling SENCOs to engage in more strategic, higher level activity.

R9: We recommend that a set of criteria should be developed that could easily be applied as indicators of the readiness of a SENCO to take on a senior position in school and that these criteria might comprise:

- the prior experience of the SENCO in leading school developments in relation to SEN issues and IE (including time spent in a SENCO post)
- the prior relevant professional development of the SENCO (for example, completing the Basic, Advanced and Thematic (BAT) Courses plus the SENCO professional development programme)
- the level of Learning Support Grant (LSG) received by the school (as a reliable indicator of the range of types of SEN addressed and the numbers of students receiving support at Tier 2 and Tier 3)
- confirmation by school self-evaluation, co-signed by the SENCO and the school principal, of the existence of a budgeted SENCO action plan for IE that is integrated with whole school development.

R10: We recommend that the proposed SENCO senior post should be dedicated to the SENCO position

1.4.4 Recommendations concerning the management of the teaching load of SENCOs at the school level:

R11: We recommend that a significant proportion of each SENCO's workload should be protected for SEN- and IE-related activity on an ongoing basis.

R12: We recommend that SENCOs should always maintain a regular teaching commitment to sustain expertise in high quality teaching.

R13: We recommend that SENCOs, as standard practice, should devote around 70% of their working time to SENCO duties and retain a teaching commitment of around 30%; where schools wish to make adjustments in the distribution of the SENCO's work in recognition of exceptional local circumstances, we recommend that the time spent on SEN- and IE-related duties should not be less than 50%.

R14: We recommend that calculations relating to SENCO teaching workload should be based on total working time of the SENCO during regular school hours.

R15: We recommend that the teaching load of SENCOs in all schools should normally be less than the teaching load of other teachers working at an equivalent rank.

R16: We recommend that some schools should be able to make individual cases in support of applications to vary the standard allocation of SENCO teaching load.

R17: We recommend that, in exceptional situations in which schools seek to increase the SENCO's teaching load beyond 30%, this additional teaching should be devoted to SENCO activity (for example, co-planning, co-teaching, lesson observation and lesson study) focused on developing: quality first teaching for all; enhanced responses in the school to diversity; and more inclusive classrooms.

R18: In future, if schools wish to explore the potential for enabling SENCOs to devote more time (beyond 70%) to their SENCO duties, we recommend that practice should adhere to the position that all SENCOs should undertake some teaching on a regular basis.

R19: We recommend that SENCOs should not be required to carry significant responsibilities in terms of school administration and leadership in addition to their SENCO role.

1.4.5 Recommendations focusing on policy relating to further support for the development of the SENCO role and IE:

R20: We recommend that provision should be made for:

- ongoing processes of induction and initial professional development for new-to-role SENCOs in cohorts beyond the Pilot Project
- ongoing processes of induction and initial professional development for new-to-role SENCOs replacing SENCOs who leave their posts in the years ahead, potentially at a rate approaching 10% of SENCOs each year
- continuing and further professional development for more experienced SENCOs, including networking opportunities and communities of practice.

R21: We recommend that careful attention should be given to the design of proposals for the initial training of further cohorts of SENCOs together with programmes of continuing professional development for established SENCOs.

R22: We recommend that experienced SENCOs should be consulted in the design and delivery of future forms of professional development for SENCOs.

R23: We recommend that the transition from the Pilot Project towards the deployment of full cohorts of SENCOs in all schools should be managed with great care in order to ensure continuity and the promotion of consistent approaches.

R24: We recommend that professional development for SENCOs and other staff should be prioritised as a key aspect in the development of IE and integrated with ongoing work on IE within EDB.

R25: We recommend that the system of networks that brings SENCOs together in communities of practice to facilitate the sharing of the outcomes of school-based practitioner enquiry, reflective practice and lesson study should be continued on an ongoing basis.

R26: We recommend that EDB officers, together with experienced SENCOs from the Pilot Project, should be involved in supporting and participating in networks, lesson study activities, communities of practice and school-based practitioner enquiry along with SENCOs and other staff in schools.

R27: We recommend that EDB should also encourage the attendance at networking events of other members of school staff, and staff from other schools, in order to develop enhanced collaboration within and among schools and in order to facilitate succession planning for staff who may ultimately become interested in taking on SENCO duties themselves.

R28: We recommend that any SENCO manual that is developed and distributed to schools should be a whole school manual for developing IE designed for use in those schools with a SENCO in post.

R29: We recommend that the SENCO manual and any associated set of guidance materials should be written in partnership with the trainers who developed and ran the SENCO professional development programme during the Pilot Project and with experienced SENCOs from the Pilot Project cohort.

R30: We recommend that a dedicated SENCO website, administered by EDB, should be provided so that useful materials such as the SENCO manual, relevant circulars, guidance and professional development materials can be made available as downloads and shared among schools.

R31: We recommend that EDB should ensure that SENCOs have ongoing opportunities, for example, through networking arrangements, to air concerns, questions and queries for comment or to engage in territory-wide discussion and the sharing of new initiatives.

R32: We recommend that future forms of professional development for SENCOs should actively encourage co-teaching, co-planning, lesson study and participatory school-based action research in order to promote more effective collaboration between SENCOs and subject or class teaching colleagues.

R33: We recommend that a focus on developing skills in team work, collaboration and multi-disciplinary work should be included in SEN- and IE-related professional development programmes for SENCOs and other school staff including, for example, educational psychologists, speech therapists, teaching assistants, student counsellors and teachers who work closely with students with SEN.

R34: We recommend that EDB should remain closely involved in negotiating the design and content specification of programmes of professional development for SENCOs in order to ensure that they remain closely aligned:

- with EDB in terms of policy on IE;
- with the role of the SENCO as set out by EDB;
- with the SENCO manual;
- with the content of the original programme of professional development for new-to-role SENCOs.

R35: We recommend that EDB officers should remain involved in co-ordinating developments in IE and in the SENCO role across the Primary and Secondary phases to ensure that:

- there is continuity of approach for students with SEN at different stages of their school careers
- SENCOs in different schools receive consistent support and advice.

R36: In addition to securing the provision of professional development for SENCOs, we recommend that EDB should ensure that professional development related to SEN and IE is provided for other staff in schools.

R37: We recommend that related programmes of training focused on SEN and IE should take account of and foreground the SENCO role.

R38: We recommend that guidance on IE and clarification of the SENCO role should in future be regarded as integral elements in initial teacher education.

R39: We recommend that training related to IE and the role of the SENCO should be provided for principals, vice principals, school leaders and subject panel heads, both at the initial stage of preparing for leadership and in terms of continuing professional development.

R40: We recommend that awareness raising, information sharing and professional development related to the SENCO role should continue to be provided for EDB officers, including advisory staff and staff in Regional Education Offices (REOs); quality assurance (QA) officers; and staff in special education sections who are directly involved in supporting schools involved in developing IE and responses to students with SEN.

1.4.6 Recommendations for policy relating to monitoring and review by EDB:

R41: We recommend that the regular processes of school inspection should, in future, recognise and support initiatives in IE and the activities of SENCOs in relation both to students with SEN and whole school development.

R42: We recommend that, in future, it will become appropriate for some inspections and school development support visits to focus specifically on IE and the SENCO role as areas of exceptional strength in the practice of some schools.

R43: We recommend that the development and maintenance of skills, knowledge and understanding in relation to IE, SEN issues and the role of the SENCO among school inspectors and officers with responsibility for supporting school development is a professional development responsibility to which EDB should respond in the short and longer term.

1.4.7 Recommendations for the wider contributions made by SENCOs at the school level:

R44: We recommend that all SENCOs should be responsible for co-ordinating the development and implementation of an action plan for IE in their schools.

R45: We recommend that all SENCOs should be responsible for managing a budget for SEN- and IE-related activity in their school.

R46: We recommend that a budgeted SENCO action plan for IE should be an integral part of whole school development planning in every school.

R47: We recommend that schools should actively promote collaboration and professional exchange, both in-school between teaching colleagues and among schools.

R48: We recommend that schools should encourage their SENCOs to work with colleagues in school on action research, lesson study, co-planning and co-teaching.

R49: We recommend that schools should share the outcomes of successful small-scale initiatives in order to drive forward wider improvements – within schools and among schools.

1.4.8 Recommendations about broad future policy in relation to IE:

R50: We recommend that central policy on IE should be maintained under a continuing and ongoing process of review and revision in order to foreground, in the *Operation Guide on the Whole-School Approach to Integrated Education* (IE Operation Guide), for example, the contribution of the SENCO.

R51: We recommend that provisions related to the Learning Support Grant (LSG) should be enhanced to provide additional teachers for those schools admitting greater numbers of students with SEN and that support for IE should be improved to offer these schools increased access to professionals from other services.

R52: In order to respond effectively to the needs of students with borderline SEN and complex, combined or co-morbid conditions and difficulties, we recommend that schools should interpret and use the nine types of SEN with greater flexibility.

R53: We recommend that schools should focus their efforts on promoting developments in high-quality, inclusive teaching for all learners so that reliance on individual forms of support for students with SEN can be reduced.

1.4.9 Recommendations relating to the wider context:

R54: We recommend that approaches to assessment, examination and accreditation should, in future, provide enhanced opportunities for students with SEN.

R55: We recommend that the relevant agencies should ensure, in future, that exit pathways provide a wider range of post-school opportunities for all students, including options suitable for students with SEN.

R56: We recommend that inclusive schools should continue to be celebrated publicly as effective schools for all learners.

1.4.10 Policy on IE and provision for students with SEN in Hong Kong have moved forward during the period of the Pilot Project. SENCOs are being introduced into public sector ordinary schools in phases over three years starting from the 2017 to 2018 school year. Agreements have been reached about the distribution of the workload of SENCOs between whole school SENCO duties and teaching. The introduction of these SENCOs into a wider group of schools will be supported by the use of a SENCO manual. A promotion rank, dedicated to the role of SENCO, is to be made available to schools with higher numbers of students with SEN.

1.4.11 The provision of resources to schools related to SEN and IE will be restructured. This will extend the Learning Support Grant to all public sector ordinary schools and will increase the grant rate for students with SEN in Tier 3. Schools with higher numbers of students with SEN will be able to deploy additional teachers and benefit from enhanced provision of school-based educational psychology services. Further, school-based speech therapy services will also be enhanced.

1.4.12 It is important that these policy initiatives, including the provision of additional staffing in terms of teachers, speech therapists and educational psychologists, should impact upon the whole school approach to IE and whole school development as well as serving the needs of students with SEN. It will be the responsibility of SENCOs to lead their expanded teams in these directions.

Richard Byers and Kitty Ho – December 2018