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Title	Creating a school programme to cater for learner diversity: A school administrator's journey and dialogue with an academic
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Citation	Creating a school programme to cater for learner diversity: A school administrator's journey and dialogue with an academic. In Hawkins, MR (Ed.), Social Justice Language Teacher Eduction, p. 124-161. Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2011
Issued Date	2011
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/10722/184278
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Creating a School Programme to Cater for Learner Diversity: A School Administrator's Journey and Dialogue with an Academic

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Poon, F., & Lin, A. (2011). Creating a school program to cater to learner diversity: A dialogue between a school administrator and an academic. In M. R. Hawkins (Ed.), Social justice language teacher eduction (pp. 124-161). Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

Angel's Introduction: Documenting a Journey through a Dialogue

In this essay we depart from the traditional register of an academic essay and present the journey of a school administrator's (Franky) pioneering journey to start the first school-based programme to cater for students with special education needs (SEN) in the form of a dialogue between Franky and Angel (an academic). The school is located in a working class residential area in a new town in the New Territories of Hong Kong. Although without ample resources, the school, with the committed and innovative work of the school administrator and teachers, has pioneered a programme that addresses the basic human right of SEN students to have an appropriate curriculum tailor-made for their needs. The journey is not an easy one, and as the dialogue unfolds, we see the struggles against societal and institutional constraints to create a learning space in which these students can flourish instead of being drowned in the rigid mainstream one-size-for-all curriculum. With creative human agency and innovative strategies, we see how Franky navigates and negotiates a new path with his teachers and students in this never-easy journey of working for social justice for all children.

Franky's Introduction: Starting a Resource Class to Cater for Learner Diversity

We started a resource class for Secondary One students with special educational needs (SEN) in September, 2007 in our school. It was set up in response to our 3-year school development plan (2006-2009) in which one of the main goals was to increase

our school's capacity on catering for learner diversity. With the increasing percentage of students with SEN studying in mainstream schools in Hong Kong, we believed that we should be well prepared to meet such needs by initiating the SEN program in Secondary One.

We provided resource classes in three subjects: Chinese, English and Mathematics. They were designed and monitored by a core team headed by the Vice Principal and assisted by the three junior form panel heads of the respective subjects. The resource class for English, like the other two subjects, was conducted in a way similar to an ordinary split class commonly found in schools in Hong Kong for remedial language teaching. No more than ten students were selected to join the class based on: (1) their pre-S1 attainment test results; (2) school-based diagnostic test results (focus: phonemic awareness and sight vocabulary); (3) a one-week lesson observation; (4) their previous diagnostic reports provided by educational psychologists.

The final placement would be decided if the consents of the following parties were gained: (1) Identification, Placement and Review Committee (comprising all the core SEN team members, the social worker and educational psychologist); (2) Parents; (3) students. The aim of the resource class is to prepare students for full inclusion when they are promoted to S.2.

The resource classes were funded by the Student Learning Support Grant which has been provided to schools enrolling students with SEN since 2007. In the resource class, each student will have their own individual education plan (IEP) (see Appendix 1). In the plan, their special needs will be identified and addressed. Based on a series of diagnostic tests, teachers will help each student to set their learning goals, provide learning support and monitor their progress. Each student will have individualized assessments based on their IEPs.

The resource class in English poses the biggest problems for us. English language has long been given a lot of emphasis in the local school curriculum. Despite the fact that our school adopts Chinese as the medium of instruction (CMI), students are generally pressured into mastering this foreign language well for future academic and career success. However, as most of our students come from working class families, their exposure and motivation to learn English is generally low (see Lin, 2005). In our English resource class, we also need to deal with students with learning difficulties. It is not hard to imagine the frustration that students with dyslexia face when they are

forced to learn a foreign language. Therefore, through the resource class, we aim to rebuild students' confidence and basic skills in acquiring this socioeconomically important language in Hong Kong.

While lesson materials are tailor-made for students' individual needs, all students will be provided with the following core curriculum which covers:

- Phonics
- Reading Comprehension and Strategies
- Vocabulary development & Part of Speech
- Writing (Text types & Punctuation)
- Grammar (Tenses and usage)
- Speaking / Listening
- Language Arts

Franky and Angel's Dialogue

Below we represent the dialogue between Franky and Angel, with Franky reflecting on his journey in the past few years and Angel responding to and eliciting further reflections from Franky. The dialogue has been organized into different themes which were deemed important by Franky in documenting the challenges he came across in his journey of starting the SEN programme. For each theme, we have an introduction by Franky, followed by selected passages from the exchange between Franky and Angel. The passages have not been edited. The dialogue was exchanged over email from March to May in 2010. When the dialogue came to a certain point, Angel wrote a section on summarizing feedback and then invited Franky to write a summary section to reflect on what he thought he might have gained in the process of dialoguing with Angel.

March 29, 2010

Dear Angel,

There are a few issues that we would like to address when we are implementing a pull-out program for Secondary One students who have severe difficulty in learning English.

Who should join?

We call this pull-out program "resource class" as the teacher-student ratio is less than 1:10. The first question that confronted us was "who to pull out" from the classroom. Our first idea was that those who were diagnosed with dyslexia, mild-grade intellectual disability and autism would be automatically placed in the resource class for intensive support. As an administrator, it was also a politically correct way to proceed as those students could each receive an extra grant ranging from $10,000 to $20,000 from the government. To employ an extra teacher to teach them in the resource class seemed to be the correct thing to do. However, our classroom observation (which started on the first school day and lasted for a week) revealed that some of those identified as having special educational needs could learn quite well in a bigger class. Some of them were able to listen to and understand teachers' instruction and complete tasks on their own or in groups. However, a few students who had no SEN diagnosis did not seem to benefit from our teaching in the first week. Some of them also had behavioral problems and refused to participate in class at all.

Facing this dilemma, all S.1 English teachers, the SEN coordinator and me (VP) sat together to discuss the placement of students in the resource class. We came up with a lot of conflicting views which include:

1. We shouldn't rely too much on the diagnosis reports as our aim of setting up a resource class was to give those who couldn't learn in the big class intensive support. That hopefully could help them get back to a mainstream classroom in S.2. The needs perceived by teachers were therefore more important than the clinical labels that were assigned to them a year or years ago.
2. However, some form teachers were worried that parents of students with special needs would complain if they were not given intensive support that they thought they were entitled to.

Finally, we made a compromise between the two: allowing some students who could be supported in a mainstream class to study in a resource class while reserving two places for needy students without SEN reports.

Angel, as a language teacher, what decision should we make and what should it be based on when making such a decision? What role should students' previous clinical diagnosis play in teachers' pedagogical decisions and choices?
Franky

April 3, 2010
Dear Franky,

I think your class observations provide the best guidance. However, other political and administrative issues (e.g., parents' potential misunderstanding) get in the way of exercising your educational judgment. Your solution is a compromise between what's educationally sound to do, and what's politically correct to do.

If there can be more trust between parents and the school, would the above problem be solved? If the parents can be involved in the meeting and the discussion determining who should join the pull-out programme, will there be more chances of achieving better understanding on the part of the parents? There's no single right way to do things, and I believe you and your colleagues have made the best decision based on your judgement and your constraints. What do you think?
Angel

April 4, 2010
Dear Angel
You are right! We did find that getting the parents involved in deciding the kind and level of support for their children was useful. By explicitly stating the purpose of resource classes and the selection criteria during our first meeting with S.1 parents in July, we saved a lot of time negotiating with parents the kind of support they could expect to get from school. We repeatedly emphasized that resource classes were set up to prepare students with severe difficulties for learning in an inclusive classroom in S.2. Gaining parents' trust in teachers' decisions on student placement is extremely important.
Franky

April 9 2010
Dear Franky,
That sounds great! In your working together with parents, have there been any memorable events or significant incidents that you remember you can share with others (other teachers and schools)?
Angel

April 10, 2010
Dear Angel,
One of the most extreme cases that we have this year is about a S.1 student who has spent 6 years studying in a special school before coming to our school. He has mild grade intellectual disability. However, his verbal communication is comparatively strong. We admitted him because 1) his brother is our current student; 2) the

underachievement of the student is partly due to his unsupportive parents; 3) we see lots of potential in the student despite his poor family support; 4) we are touched by the support and dedication of his old-aged grandpa who provides all the love and care for the two brothers.

The problem is that the student seemed to have learned nothing "academic" in his previous study. His lack of basic literacy and numeracy skills make it nearly impossible for him to benefit from the mainstream curriculum. To help him to start from scratch, we placed him in resources classes for Chinese, English and Mathematics. We provided him with one-to-one tutorial sessions to learn to write and read. We appointed him to be the class monitor so that his good verbal skills can be put to use. We provided him with modified examination papers to assess his learning progress. After half a year, his progress was impressive. He even asked teachers to allow him to take the mainstream examination papers.

However, starting from March this year, he began to show symptoms of epilepsy. Occasionally, he would suffer from seizures which would paralyze him for a few minutes. His parents thought it could be caused by the pressure from his study and requested that he be placed back to the special school. What impresses us most is that the student refused, saying that he enjoyed his study and life here at our school. He promised he would try to take good care of himself so that he could continue to study here. Sure, we also let all teachers know his medical conditions and suggest measures to help him. Angel, I don't know if that is a relevant case to illustrate how we communicate with parents, students and teachers in order to maximize our support to each student.
Franky

April 16, 2010
Dear Franky,

This case is touching and you and your colleagues have worked magic for this student. Sometimes parents are the sources of problems and they are tough cases to crack especially when they refuse to recognize that they might be one of the sources of the child's difficulties. What you and your school did for the student is precisely what it means to empower a student: you empower him with the ability to see his own strengths and his own power and capacity to learn: now that he knows what he can achieve under the right conditions, and he knows his own strengths (his strong verbal skills he uses when he performs his duties as monitor), and he even asks to take the

mainstream exam papers: see how much self-confidence he's gained within a short time if given the right soil and right care, just like a plant with great growing capacity if it's given the appropriate nutrients to grow (e.g., water and sunshine)! Under these circumstances: empowering the student him/herself so that they can stand up for their own rights and speak for their own benefits ('cause they know which school they enjoy and which school/programme allows them to grow and shine) against their parents who, alas, oftentimes remain a main source of the problems! When the child has been empowered, it's not just us (the school or the teachers) who are advocating for his rights and benefits, but he himself can advocate for his own benefits ☺!
That's the best kind of help one can give to another: not just material help, but also empowerment: helping another person to be able to help himself/herself!
Angel

March 29, 2010
Dear Angel
Who to teach?
Another controversial issue that took up quite a lot of our discussion time was "who to teach them?" If the resource class is an extra pull-out program funded by the Student Learning Grant for SEN students, students should be taught by contract teachers funded by the Grant. However, we had a quite heated debate over it as some teachers argued that contract teachers were often inexperienced. So our question is: Should we deploy an experienced teacher to teach the resource class?
If yes, is it unfair to the mainstream students who may be taught by inexperienced teachers? What would happen if the higher achievers were adversely affected by such an arrangement? Are we depriving their rights to be taught well?
Franky

April 3, 2010
Dear Franky,
Yes, this is indeed a tricky question! How did you overcome it? What teachers did you deploy in the end? I guess one can try out a team-teaching method; i.e., experienced teachers will be team teaching with the contract ones, and gradually letting the contract teachers take over the teaching duties of the pull-out class?
Again there's no perfect solution, but one just needs to think of creative ways of getting out of these administrative dilemmas? Let me know your views.
Angel

April 4, 2010

Dear Angel,
We decided to deploy the most experienced teachers to teach the resource classes. We believe that only experienced teachers have a more comprehensive understanding of the curriculum and, therefore, they can be more able to flexibly design and deliver the curriculum based on students' individual needs. We also invited two experienced teachers to become the mentors of the less experienced ones. Because of the constraints of manpower, we did not manage to try out a team-teaching method. We tried to compensate it with regular peer observations between the experienced and less experienced teachers.
Franky

April 9, 2010
Dear Franky,
That sounds very sensible! How long do you think it will take before the less experienced teachers can be mentored to be able to teach these classes on their own? What are the factors in making this expert-novice peer observations and mentoring successful? What do you think makes this work better in your schools than other situations (if you think this mentoring model and practice do work successfully in your school)? What do you think other schools (in a similar situation as yours) can learn from your experience in this area? What advice can you give to other school practitioners and administrators?
Angel

April 10, 2010
Dear Angel,
Those are very good and important questions. The first magic word is "system". To make it work in any school, there should be a clear mentoring system to support this kind of "expert-novice" professional relationship, which is not something optional for the less experienced teacher to enter into. We've made it very clear to the new teachers that their assigned mentors are colleagues that they need to work closely with. We've built into collaborative lesson planning and peer observations in the timetable, though the actual frequency may be decided by teachers. We also have communicated our expectations to the mentors, specifying their roles in the mentees' professional development and holding them accountable for their mentees' performance. The mentors are also involved in the appraisal of the new teachers, which significantly empowers them as mentors.
Another magic word is "trust". A system is only an empty shell if there is no trust in it. Through our internal staff sharing and development activities, we reiterate the

importance of trust between colleagues. The building of trust among colleagues ultimately benefits our students as trust allows us to be more honest and open to discover problems (either from the teachers, school policy and administration) and work out collaboratively the solutions to them. Trust is more about values and attitude and it has to be fostered in a supportive school culture. Angel, I don't know if that is too abstract for other schools to make reference to.
Franky

April 16, 2010
Dear Franky,
System and trust: that's very good organizing words to summarize~~d~~ the systematic policies and structures that you have established in your school to enable such kind of expert-novice mentoring to succeed. Good systems or structures will be a long-term guarantee of good practices, and other schools can certainly learn from the conducive structures and the productive practices that you established in your school. I guess that's how we share our experience with others: not just by describing the details, but also by summarizing the key factors, or key structures and practices which seem to work in one place, and it's up to others to explore whether they can adapt your structures and practices in their own contexts which might share similarities (albeit also with differences). That's also what we, academics or theorists, do: to summarize the key factors and structures and practices, so that these good "things" can be sharable and discussable: i.e., they can be critically reflected on, discussed, analysed, and thus they can be adapted and tried out in other contexts. What do you think? Do you think you can also do this job of summarizing and "theorizing" apart from your great role of practitioner and pioneer? As you're doing a lot of sharing work with other teachers and schools these days, do you feel that you're actually summarizing and theorizing your own practices so that you can share them with others in a systematic way? What kind of theoretical resources (or tools) do you think you can acquire to help you do this job even better?
Angel

March 29, 2010
Dear Angel
What to teach?
Instead of adapting the textbook to cater for students' needs in the resource class, we designed our own curriculum and materials for the English class focusing on phonics, sight words (high frequency words), reading aloud and comprehension strategies.

Through routine activities which aimed to develop their phonemic awareness, we found that students had marked improvement in their decoding skills and their motivation. All of them were willing to sound out unknown or unfamiliar words and were willing to communicate with teachers in English. They were also encouraged to do lots of self-access learning by using I.T. software and completing graded worksheets in their folders. Instruction was cut to the minimal so that the teacher could provide more individual support to each student.

However, some parents felt very uneasy about the absence of a textbook. Some complained that the learning of phonics was childish and could not help prepare their children for the requirement of public examinations. Some said that teachers should try to boost students' standard so that they could complete the tasks in the textbook. To throw away the textbook means teachers, parents and even students themselves had no idea about their standard. So, how should we treat the textbooks and how should they be related to students' learning? If students are engaged in communicative tasks in class and are willing to take initiative in their learning, are we preparing them for their learning in upper forms? How should a curriculum in one form be linked to another form? What should they learn before they can benefit in an inclusive classroom in S.2?

How to assess?

Assessment is also an issue puzzling us a big deal. As each student in the resource class has an individual education plan and what they learn depends on where they are, how should a summative assessment paper be set? Should we set 8 different papers for 8 different students? How individualized should the assessment be and how could we judge if a student has done his or her best when there is no comparison with others?

We ended up setting two different papers: one for the students with specific learning difficulties (dyslexia, autism and ADHD) and one for the mentally disabled and slow learners. For the latter group, more visual cues were used to help them to comprehend the texts or instructions.

As for the report card, we put an asterisk next to their subject marks to indicate that they have attempted a modified assessment paper.

Franky

April 3, 2010

Dear Franky,

These are indeed very important questions. Let's use a metaphor: a patient has been relying on a pair of glasses to correct their eyesight; however, we know that the pair of glasses is not really helpful, but psychologically it gives the person and his parents some reassurance about it, as everybody else is wearing this kind of glasses. One day, a really knowledgable doctor comes along and suggests taking away the glasses and training the person to do corrective surgery plus post-surgery viewing exercises to train the patient in correct viewing postures. The patient and his parents are very nervous and uncomfortable about trying these new ways.

So, yes, we need to design new ways of assessment so as to re-establish the confidence of the public about your new ways of teaching and developing curriculum materials which are beyond the confining boxes of textbooks. It will take some time, and some rigorous assessment and curriculum development research to prove to the public (parents, students, funding bodies, school principals, etc.) that the new teaching methods and curriculum materials will achieve those learning objectives specified / required by public exams. Does this make sense to you at all? We can have both the new curriculum and new pedagogy, plus some exam skills workshops to supplement the new curriculum; i.e., it's not an either-or situation? Do you think this might be feasible?

Angel

April 4, 2010

Dear Angel,

I totally agree with you. In fact, the new senior secondary school curriculum and its forthcoming public examinations allow a more flexible curriculum to be delivered at school. In the previous / existing public examinations, the performance of students is based on norm-referencing. The grades that students get do not tell us anything about what they are able to do in a particular subject. In fact, we are just comparing the performance of one student against that of their counterparts from the same cohort. As a result, we can only teach everything from the syllabus, hoping that our students would be able to perform better than the others. However, the new public examination is based on standards-referencing. For each level (grade), a clear set of descriptors is provided to illustrate what students should be able to do in order to reach a particular level. Here, differentiation of the CONTENT for individual students is possible. For those who experience severe learning difficulties in a particular subject, more realistic learning targets can be set and made known to students. Instead of covering the whole

examination syllabus, teachers can help select the kind of content and practices that are pitched at students' level. This gives students a sense of ownership of their learning and they are encouraged to set their own learning targets in each subject. However, to realize it in classroom teaching and learning, more research or experience needs to be gained and shared. Do you think it is feasible?
Franky

April 9, 2010
Dear Franky,
Yes, I think this is not only feasible but the only way to get these students working towards some realistic goals and not getting frustrated! I think you're doing the right thing for them. Also, setting realistic goals doesn't mean that we're "dumbing down" the curriculum for these students as long as we have got it clear in our mind and in our planning about what kind of routes these students will take to eventually reach similar targets: they might take a longer route and not the same route as other students, but we must try to map out (together with the students) the routes that will take them "there" eventually, so as not to limit their eventual success. Do you think this is what you sense to be the case in your situation?
Angel

April 10, 2010
Dear Angel,
Exactly! Through careful differentiation in curriculum, learning materials and task, pedagogy and assessment, we are trying to maximize the number of possible choices for our students with very diverse needs. At the same time, we must also clearly articulate to students, parents and the public that these multiple pathways are leading to the same goal: maximizing the potential of each student. Not only can students be allowed to learn in their own way and at their own pace, they can also be made aware of the other choices available in the classroom and the school. None of them would feel uncomfortable being different from others as they all have a respectable goal to pursue.
Franky

April 16, 2010
Dear Franky,
How successful do you think you and your colleagues have been to get this message across to the shareholders (e.g., parents, EDB, School Superviory Board members, etc.)? Any difficulties encountered? What strategies helped you to overcome them?

How, in the long run, do you think, this message should be promoted in the society at large so that the public (parents, govt officials, legislative councilors, etc.) will get this important message: respecting diversity, respecting the diverse learning needs and styles of different kinds of students? What needs to be done in the long run, by different parties, and by you, or your school? What role can you and your school play in this mission and vision?
Angel

March 29, 2010
Dear Angel,
How should they be taught?
All resource class lessons were conducted in an activity room equipped with the following facilities:
10 computers (one for each student), an electronic whiteboard, a visualiser, a desktop computer connected to a hi-fi system and a colour laser printer, 10 movable tables for flexible grouping and individual work, a board to display students' achievement and a cabinet storing their folders, dictionaries, card games and other learning materials.

The space allows students to do a lot of multi-sensory activities. We found that most of our resource class students were those who enjoyed more body movement (kinesthetic learners) while they were learning. I guess that was the main reason a crowded traditional classroom could not cater for their needs as they were always the trouble-makers. We maximized their opportunities to move around by encouraging them to go to different places to perform different tasks.

We know our students are doing very well in the resource class, however, what should be done to prepare them for their learning in a bigger and a more crowded class where physical movement / response is constrained?
Franky

April 3, 2010
Dear Franky,
Perhaps, there can be a gradual transition period for these students. After they have built their skills and confidence working in a classroom environment, we might gradually decrease the frequency with which they can move around? One way might be to explicitly and directly discuss with these students this dilemma: "Now we're in a pull-out class, we can move around easily, however, our aim is to get you back to the regular class as that's what all students need to do in the end, because

government funding will last only for a year (or a limited period of time); after that we will have to put you back; also, it's good for you to be back to the regular class as that way, you can enjoy the status of a regular student. Now, can you help us (the teachers) to think of ways of making this transition easier for you?"

If we're open and sincere and invite students to discuss with us and contribute to the possible solutions, perhaps, we can gain their understanding and their active input in solving this problem? If we think that we're not solving all the problems for them, but gradually enabling them/empowering them to gain a grasp of their own situation (including their strengths and weaknesses, and the problems and dilemmas facing them) and invite them and co-construct with them solutions (or partial solutions) to these problems, perhaps, we're really helping them to help themselves? However, I don't know if this sounds feasible to you at all?
Angel

April 4, 2010
Dear Angel,
I do agree with you that inviting students to discuss with teachers about the purpose and arrangement of school support (resource class) is the best way to empower students. The concept that we are trying to co-construct with students solutions to their problems in learning is important. More often than not, students are just passive recipients of our "assistance". As a result, they are alienated from their own problems and do not have any motivation to solve them. Teachers may see it as indifference on the part of students and fail to notice that it is actually their fault for not allowing students to actively take part in identifying and suggesting solutions to their own problems. Angel, that is a very important shift of thinking. But how can I help teachers to reflect on this issue?
Franky

April 9, 2010
Dear Franky,
I guess teachers will understand this if they see you working together with them to find their solutions to problems that they have: i.e., you're not "giving" them your well-thought-out solutions, but you're engaging them to discuss with you and to explore with you together to find solutions to the teaching problems that they face. Then by drawing a parallel between this and their students, they might be able to be led to see that in the same way, they can inviter and engage their students to work together with them to find solutions to the students' learning issues… i.e., like what

you said, students are not alienated from their own problems, and likewise, teachers are not alienated from their own problems, and we're all learning together and with each other, then perhaps we can build a community of practice that believe in the practice of "not giving solutions to others", but working together to find solutions together? What do you think? Do you feel that this might be feasible in your situation?
Angel

April 10, 2010
Dear Angel,
You nailed it. Ownership is what I have been promoting in my school. You don't feel satisfied to own someone's solutions, let alone their problems. A lot of common phrases flying around schools include: "You don't understand my problems / my class", "Your suggestions can't help solve my problems", "OK, tell me what to do?" All these show a lack of community of practice and "collaborative ownership", which may be detrimental to the development of a school.
Franky

April 16, 2010
Dear Franky,
If you're to share this belief and practice with other school principals or administrators, what are your best strategies to do so? What will you present to them to get them to understand this "idea" or this basic principle of "ownership", and how can you use your own examples to illustrate this idea? Have you ever done this sharing with other school personnel? What's your experience like? What have you learnt from these experiences?
Angel

April 29, 2010
Dear Angel,
Whom should they learn with?
After a year of implementation, we did find that students in resource class showed marked improvement in terms of phonological awareness and reading fluency. They were also more motivated and engaged. However, one thing that really worried us was the fact that they did need to get back to the big class in S.2. Unless we are able to differentiate the learning materials and employ appropriate instructional methods, the students with special needs may lag behind again and lose their motivation. What should we do to prepare them to learn with other students whose ability and language

skills are much stronger than theirs? Is there a threshold level by which we can judge whether a student can benefit from a bigger class?

More fundamentally, should we pull them out in the first place? By pulling them out from their original classroom, do we deprive them of a chance to interact with other students in a mainstream classroom?
Franky

April 3, 2010
Dear Franky,
This is indeed a dilemma: in the ideal situation, we can have a transition period to help them gradually adapt back to the mainstream class. Let's consider this metaphor: a wild lion was accidentally hurt in the forest and if left in the wild it will certainly not survive. The zoo takes the animal into its foster care and shelters it by providing special medical and nutritional care. After a while, the lion has recovered and now we're faced with the dilemma: should we keep it in the zoo or should we put it in a transition programme to gradually help the lion to get back to its wild life: i.e., to find food for itself? Perhaps we can design a transition programme to teach the students some strategies to survive in the big class context; we can also continue to have some kind of extra support class (in addition to the mainstream big class) so as to give extra help/instruction to the students to adapt to the mainstream context (if funding allows); there is no single solution, but we can try out different possible solutions, perhaps?
Angel

April 4, 2010
Dear Angel,
Thanks for the metaphor. I understand that the experience in a zoo for a lion can never substitute that of its wild life. But what if the wild life is so cruel that only the fittest can survive? There is not much that we the zoo keepers can do to prepare the most disadvantaged students for a highly selective and exclusive system of our society. Despite the attempt of many of my teachers who tried to provide additional help to students with special education needs in a mainstream classroom, some students still find their learning experience frustrating and express the view that they want to quit their studies once they reach 16. I guess there is something more fundamental concerning the kind of "wild" life that we want our society to provide to each of its inhabitant.
Franky

April 9, 2010

Dear Franky,

Yes, you're absolutely right on this. You remind me of the importance of the researcher's role in not only "describing the world", but also in "changing the world". This might need to take the form of some long-term advocacy work: trying to change the government's policy regarding resource allocation, especially to enable students with diverse learning needs and learning styles/routes to be able to do so. It takes more than just research, but also takes a lot of savvy connecting and working to change policy makers' decisions. In your work for the EDB, do you feel that you might stand a chance of getting into touch with some policy makers, and of having a rare chance of influencing them? What do you think will it take to influence EDB/govt policies? Perhaps the parents' groups can form some pressure groups to give pressure to the govt? And what will your role be in this, if any? What kind of support might you be able to give to the parents (e.g., the kind of educational principles and rationales so that they can argue and negotiate with the govt?) So, researchers and school administrators can work with parents in the long run to advocate for policy change? Does it all sound too idealistic? Do you see any possibility of achieving this in the long run?

Angel

April 10, 2010

Dear Angel,

These are not at all idealistic! For the past three years, I have been working with EDB on half-time secondment in the project titled: Whole-school approach to catering for learner diversity. I have been given a lot of opportunities to share in many teacher seminars. Many teachers have been inspired by our work and they start to initiate some school-based projects to better cater for the diverse needs of students in their schools. As for our influence at the policy level, I guess we still have a very long way to go. Our government is such a huge bureaucracy to penetrate. Many of the officials that I know are only street-level bureaucrats who have no influence on policy making. Despite the fact that most of them appreciate our work and agree with our mission and ideals, they have no say in the government to effect any significant change.

Parents are our biggest assets. This year, I started to go out more often to give parent talks in community centers. My sharing is often greeted with heavy nodding and tears from parents. Many of them are too helpless to even be aware of the basic rights of their kids. Their children's inability to fit into our rigid education system and practice

is often depicted as their own deficiency as parents. They have no one to blame but themselves. I believe that the increasing participation of parents in advocating their children's right to equity and quality education is an irreversible trend.

I also think researchers have a very important role in making such change. They are the ones who could provide well-supported evidence of the deficiency of our existing system. They can also draw upon worldwide research and literature and provide the policy makers and, most importantly, the public viable choices for public dialogues to take place. Don't forget that our society, like many others, has a very high regard for academics. Angel, do you think that is something that research can and should do?
Franky

April 16, 2010
Dear Franky,
Yes, I do think this is what research can and should do, and that's why I think our dialogues are useful as we bring different resources (my theoretical resources and your front-line experiences) to bear on the issues. I just would like to challenge you to think in a bit more political terms: if one day some parents want you to speak as an expert witness for them to negotiate with the govt on some policy issues regarding provision of educational services for their children, how would you respond to that, and what kind of systematic, professional evidence can you give to help them?
Angel

March 29, 2010
Dear Angel,
Resource class: Deficiency vs Development
We spent a lot of time identifying gaps in students' learning. Our approach – diagnostic-prescriptive teaching – does help us to identify areas for intervention. However, the focus on deficiency may prevent us from seeing and teaching to the strengths of students. Instead of relying on a deficiency model, is there a more development-oriented model on which we design our curriculum, pedagogy and assessment?
Franky

April 3, 2010
Dear Franky,
This is a very good question; yes, we must leave the deficiency model, and instead adopt a 'difference model'; i.e., they are not deficient but they have different learning

styles and require different teaching methods. The 'gaps' are not 'deficiencies' but 'differences'; these students might have strengths that do not count as strengths in the mainstream learning game. You're definitely right about this.
Angel

April 4, 2010
Dear Angel,
It is really hard for us as frontline teachers to negotiate space for our students in a system in which talent is narrowly defined and expressed. I believe that it is our society which fails to recognize, develop and celebrate many talents from our diverse student population. Your suggestion of a "difference" model may pave the way for a more inclusive education system which values diversity and its contribution to both classroom teaching and learning. It also helps us to reflect on what should be considered when we are talking about student achievement. Attached with this file please find two pieces of student works from a Form Two student who has mild-grade intellectual disability and autism. This student is actually a rare case in mainstream secondary schools in Hong Kong as students with multiple exceptionalities are usually placed in special schools. You can see from his works he is very talented!
Franky

April 9, 2010
Yes, Franky, I think you're right, and it takes a long time to change the public (the general public, including policy makers)' views and to change their prejudices so that they will start to respect students with diverse needs and diverse learning routes. But it will never happen (i.e., social change, and people's attitude change) if we do not start doing something, no matter how small-scale it is… Just as the works that you show me, if more people (the general public, the society at large, the govt. officials, the politicians, etc.) can be exposed to more of these talented works of our students with diverse needs, perhaps their minds can change about them, and the policies can change about them? Remember just 100 years ago, no women could ever go to school but see what social change has happened today. But of course, we hope that it won't take 100 years for us (or our next generations) to see change in the society's thinking and in our education system… what do you think? What can we do to facilitate this social and educational change, no matter how small our impact in the short run will be? This is also what's meant by working for social justice, and it seems that we can all be doing this, although only in very small ways perhaps, but nonetheless important ways…
Angel

April 10, 2010
Dear Angel,
You can never achieve anything big if you don't do small things right. I guess we can start by gathering, organizing and presenting small successful cases to the public. We have to redefine the narrowly-defined "success" in our society by presenting alternative cases. Only by competently showing real cases can we persuade others to believe the otherwise. Discussion that often stays on the theoretical and philosophical level can never effectively change our practice and the existing system. I often tell stories in my presentations to teachers, parents and government officials. My experience tells me that real stories are powerful in changing people's deep-seated biases. What do you think? Do you think as a researcher, you can contribute to this story-telling thing at another level?
Franky

April 16, 2010
Dear Franky,
You're right about the need for real-life examples and stories.
The govt believes in statistics and data, while the public can be persuaded by real-life cases. Thus, I think we need to do both and use a range of different strategies to gather evidence and to present them in multiple ways/formats, both with real-life examples/stories and with solid research test data to show the students' improvement in their skills and knowledge if provided with the kind of instruction appropriate to their diverse learning needs and styles. We need to adopt a wide range of methods and formats to gather and present the evidence, and to give them the kind of professional, legitimate status, just like medical research data does, so that advocacy work can be done on multiple fronts; pure theory, or pure stories alone are much less effective than if we can combine both of them, and for different audiences using different proportions of them ☺? What do you think?
Angel

Angel's Summary Section:

April 29, 2010
Dear Franky,
Reading your reflection on the dilemma and questions that you and your colleagues encountered reminds me of the always 'situated' nature of educational practices: i.e., the principles we learn and teach are abstract, but the problems and students and

parents we face are always situated in concrete contexts, which are much more complex than the textbook cases of teaching principles. However, I hope this does not make you feel pessimistic, because just as the problems are situated, the potential methods of tackling the problems (i.e., solutions) are also situated: i.e., they are in the situation for you to discover. That means no general principles/educational concepts alone can help us anticipate and find solutions to our situated problems and dilemmas. However, when we're situated in our contexts, we'll develop situated competencies to extend and apply these educational principles in a situated way that is appropriate to our context. In this situation, you just need to believe in your intuition (which is actually based on your observations of all the complex features of your situation) and your creative adaptation of the principles to find ways to tackle the dilemmas. And interacting with both academic researchers and other experienced colleagues who have gone through similar situations (which, however, in your case, might include mainly you yourself ☺!) might help. Does the above make sense?

Please write your responses and feelings and views to the above. Feel free to say: no, what you said is too idealistic! Or, no, I don't think what you said make sense in my situation, because… I look forward to reading your responses and views!
Angel

May 1, 2010
Dear Angel,
Your suggestion of the situated nature of educational practices really strikes a chord with me. My teachers and I always look for practical solutions to problems confronting us outside our contexts. However, we often feel frustrated as no matter how clearly articulated the practices are, when it comes to transferring them to our own setting, we are faced with so many problems during implementation. Your idea of creatively adapting the principles we learn from research or previous experience is both inspiring and encouraging. We should believe in our judgment and even intuition when solving problems which are deeply embedded in our unique context. Only by appreciating the complexities of contexts can we be able to come up with the most practical and relevant solutions.
Franky

May 8, 2010
Dear Franky,
Yes, I think we can strike a balance between reading from the books, learning from other experienced educators and exploring solutions in our own situated practice. I

guess if we keep our minds open, the multiple ways of getting help and getting insights are helpful… the education theories, the practitioners, and our own situated observations and explorations—they all offer different perspectives to look at our issues and problems… I guess the ability to look at things from different perspectives, and to gain insights from different perspectives will also do us good; what do you think? Truth does not reside in the theorist, nor in the practitioner, but seems to be in the creative and innovative interactions and inter-illuminations of them, when we can succeed in bringing together different perspectives, and different kinds of expertise to bear on our problems?
Angel

May 9, 2010
Dear Angel
Totally agreed. In fact, many of our current problems come from our inability to bring in different perspectives and viable alternatives. Our rigidity in defining problems, identifying solutions and executing measures sometimes does more harm than good. Do you think that is a fair comment?
Franky

May 10, 2010
Dear Franky,
Definitely ☺!
Angel

Franky's Summary Section

May 15, 2010
Dear Angel,
To make our voice heard and message understood has long been a pressing issue for teachers in my school. I honestly know our school is doing the right things for our students. Instead of lacking a tool to help our students, we are lacking a tool to explain to others (the government, the public, parents and teachers) why our students need to be helped the way they are. We are not short of strategies to deal with the problems of our students but we are seriously short of the right words to convince others.

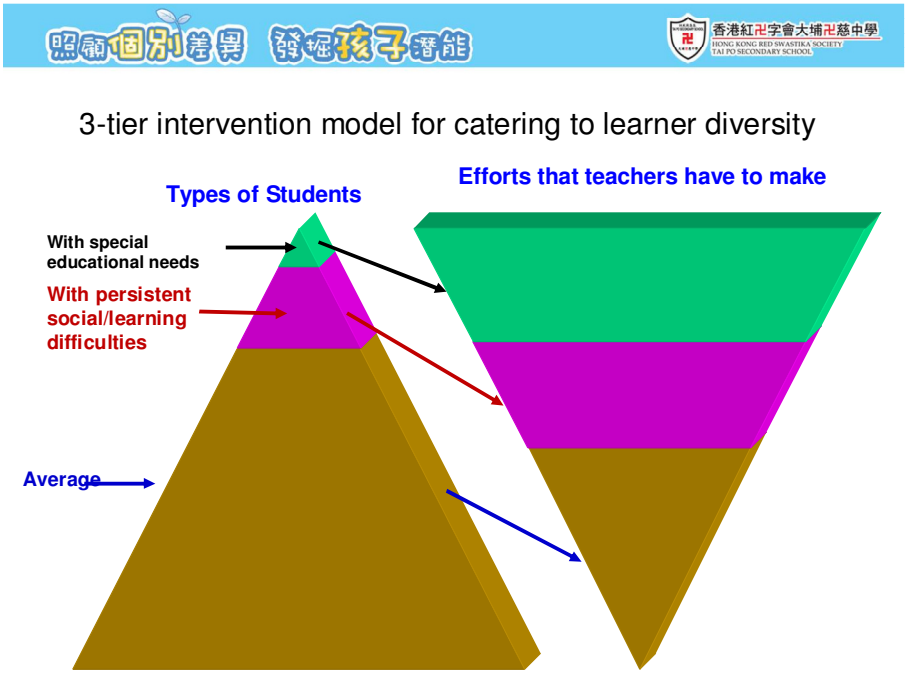
Angel, the conversation that has been taking place between us has forced me to face this issue head-on. Perhaps even without your knowing, you have provided me with

the necessary theoretical resources which help me to conceptualize my thinking and practice. The terms that you occasionally use, such as advocacy, help put my work into perspective and link it to a wider community of research and practice.

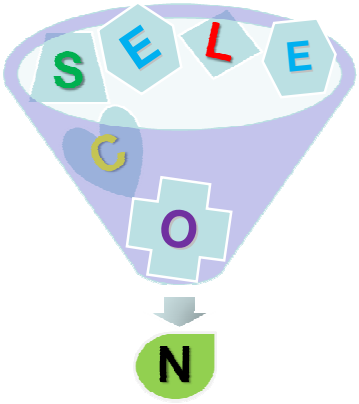
If you look at the words or phrases that you used in your previous responses, you can discover the following concepts: “theorizing”, “summarizing”, “systematic”, “professional evidence”, “sharing”, “getting the message across” and “promote”, etc. Through our dialogues, I am given the opportunities to reflect on, to conceptualize and re-conceptualize my everyday practices and encounters.

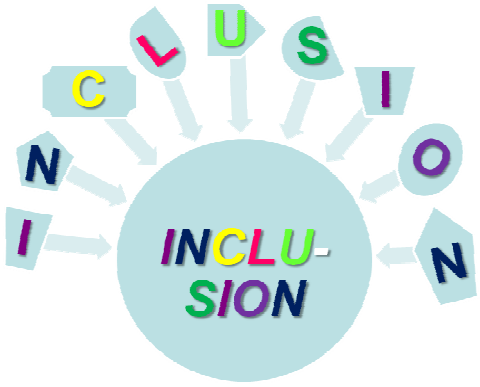
Your questions also force me to re-consider my role as an educator in relation to other parties: the government, parents, other teachers and the public. I am honestly not sure how I could influence others but I guess I myself should be the first one to be inspired by my own work before anyone else could be inspired.

Below are some of the slides taken from presentations I have given, see if they can serve the purpose of theorizing and summarizing.



Catering for diversity is a shift from selection to inclusion

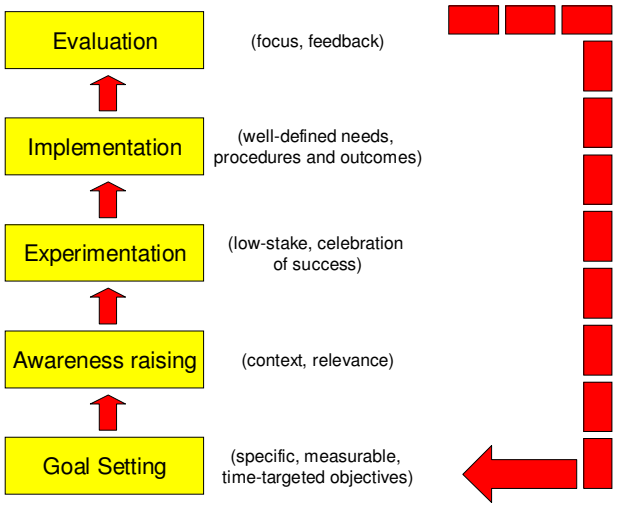


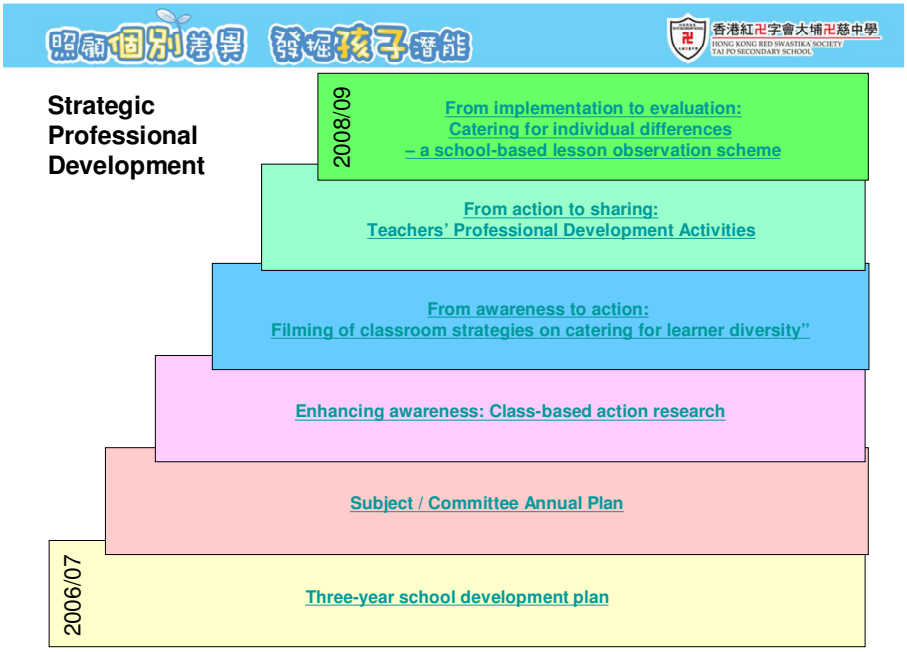


照顧個別差異 發掘孩子潛能
香港紅卍字會大埔卍慈中學 HONG KONG RED SWASTIKA SOCIETY TAI PO SECONDARY SCHOOL

Enhancing teaching effectiveness

Conceptual framework of the development of differentiated curriculum and teaching strategies





Appealing to international audience

After dialoguing for a while, Angel thought it would be good for Franky to write something to address to the international audience of this paper. Below are her prompts:

These could be your personal impressions; it might have something to do with the specificity of Hong Kong or the Chinese culture; or also, e.g., what do you think of this: how your resources for doing your work can further be enhanced if you can have an opportunity to meet with or exchange ideas and experiences with school practitioners or researchers overseas or in other cultural contexts interested in work and issues similar to yours?

May 20, 2010
Dear Angel,
Now that I have more opportunities to share our experience with administrators and teachers from other schools, I find a very interesting phenomenon: most schools here in Hong Kong look for quick-fix solutions to their problems! They always ask very context-specific questions, expecting you to give them useful and practical suggestions. However, you can't pick a flower on foreign soil and expect it to grow in your own backyard. Instead of expecting inspiration, most teachers ask for information. I really don't know whether it is a particularly Chinese way of learning. Also, speakers here tend to tell people their experience in great detail without relating it to a bigger concept or a wider perspective. They don't seem to have a habit of generalizing their experience to make it more applicable to other contexts.

I think it may be due to our examination-oriented learning culture as we believe that there is ONE model answer to a question. Also, in our culture, we seem to believe more in authority. Teachers generally don't believe that they can give excellent answers to their own questions without the help of an expert.

Through interacting with researchers or academics, I am under more pressure to subject my experience to greater scrutiny and to generalize principles that could be applied to other contexts. I become more aware of the process of looking for the answer instead of the answer itself. Maybe, a more constructivist approach is needed in teacher professional development.

I am more interested in knowing how school practitioners or researchers overseas perceive, define, face, understand and attempt to solve their "educational problems". It is always fascinating to see that some of our biggest problems are not at all their education problems, for example, excessive amount of homework / pressure for primary school students and their parents. However, things that baffle them a lot, such

as equity in education, may not be given any attention here in Hong Kong. So, why some issues are considered to be problems in one place but not the other is a very interesting thing for me. Through reading overseas research / literature, not only can I acquire concrete suggestions on good practices, I can also gain an insight into the kind of social contract a society is upholding and defending. Deeper reflection can be done through this kind of comparison, I guess.
Franky

Coda:
Angel's Reflection
When the editor of this volume invited me to work on this writing project with my former M.A.student, Franky, I thought I could use this opportunity to make the voice and journey of a local school administrator and educator devoted to work for the social justice of children heard and known in the international arena. In the process, I have learnt a lot from the resilient creative agency of Franky and his school teachers in overcoming the difficulties in creating a learning space for children with special needs. Reversing the traditional thinking that university professors are the ones who interpret the research literature for students, I enthusiastically echo with what Zeichner (this volume) writes:

> Basically, ceding college and university academics the preferential right of interpretation about what counts as social justice in teacher education (SJTE) is inconsistent with the basic tenets of social justice education where teachers and community members whose children attend the public schools would participate in significant ways in the process of shaping and then educating teachers. Some, including myself, have argued that teacher education needs to be situated not in colleges or universities or schools but in a hybrid culture where the preferential right of interpretation is more democratically shared.

Having been engaged in this dialogue with Franky, I think that SJTE has to move to a third space: an intersection between the academic's space and the practitioner's front-line experiential space. This intersecting space, which I take to be in the form of a dialogue, has provided me with fresh insights into how academics, researchers, teachers, teacher-researchers can work together, crossing boundaries in SJTE projects. When we cross our boundaries, each bringing our own unique perspectives, then the result is much more fruitful than we can ever imagine.

Franky's Reflection

Up until writing this line, I have been baffled by a big question: Is this article of publishable quality? It does not at all look scholarly to me. I expected that Angel, my teacher, would do a lot of editing to my work in terms of concepts, grammar, syntax and choice of words. To my huge surprise, she didn't. I was left to decide what I wanted to say, how I wanted to say it and why the things I said were important to me. I did not at all feel the pressure to say something that was in line with a certain theoretical perspective. What is amazing about this dialogue is that I can set foot on the academic world and be myself --- bringing in the reality that I, as a frontline educator, experience in my everyday life.

Reference

Lin, A. M. Y. (2005). Doing verbal play: Creative work of Cantonese working class schoolboys in Hong Kong. In, A. Abbas, & J. Erni (Eds), Internationalizing cultural studies: An anthology (pp. 317-329). Oxford: Blackwell.