

**Subcommittee to study issues relating to the provision of  
boarding places, senior secondary education and employment  
opportunities for children with special educational needs**

**Information Note on  
Assessment and Support for Students with Specific Learning Difficulties**

**Purpose**

The purpose of this paper is to outline the assessment and support for students with Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLD) with due reference to the views expressed at the meeting held on 27 June 2005.

**Basic information about SpLD**

2. SpLD covers severe and persistent learning difficulties in the area of reading and spelling (i.e. dyslexia), developmental coordination problems (i.e. dyspraxia) or mathematics (dyscalculia). Dyslexia accounts for the largest category of SpLD.

3. Although researches on the causes of SpLD are still ongoing, some studies have suggested that SpLD has a neurological origin. Students with SpLD typically show a number of cognitive deficits. These include slow speed in word retrieval and weakness in orthographic awareness, phonological awareness or memory, and visual-perceptual skills. Many of these students also have other concurrent problems such as poor handwriting, attention or organization skills.

4. The definition and prevalence rates of SpLD in different countries vary. Depending on the criteria adopted, the estimated prevalence rates for school-aged children in different countries vary from 1% to 11%. Some findings support the theory that different languages (such as Chinese and

English) demand different cognitive abilities for reading and spelling. The different nature of the orthography of different languages (e.g. Chinese versus English) also accounts for differences in the prevalence rate.

5. There is hardly any published paper on SpLD in orthographic scripts (e.g. Chinese) to establish and validate the prevalence rate in Hong Kong. The prevalence rates quoted by various local sources may refer to SpLD in learning the alphabetic scripts i.e. English.

### **Assessment service for students with SpLD**

6. In Hong Kong, the Child Assessment Service (CAS), the Student Health Service of the Department of Health (DH), and the Education & Manpower Bureau (EMB) provide various diagnostic assessment services to identify children with SpLD. CAS receives referrals from medical practitioners and serves children up to twelve years of age. The Student Health Service (SHS) covers all school-aged students and its Special Assessment Centres provide assessment service to students identified to have SpLD. The EMB and school-employed educational psychologists conduct psycho-educational assessment for students not assessed by DH, and offer advice to schools in formulating appropriate educational plans for students assessed to have SpLD.

7. Over the past five years, the total number of students with SpLD assessed and followed up by the EMB is 4376. Most of the students were identified in the junior primary years. In 2004/05, out of 1065 students, 653 were identified in P1 and P2. The yearly breakdown of these cases is as follows:

School Year	2000/01	2001/02	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	Total
No. of Students	461	948	980	922	1065	4376

### **Stages of identification and assessment through teaching at school**

8. CAS is responsible for assessing pre-school children, and follow-up assessment at age 5 years 6 months for recommendation on school placement.

When these children enter primary schools, the assessment reports of CAS are sent to the primary schools via EMB, so that the school personnel can understand their educational needs and provide timely support.

9. Teachers play an important role in identifying students with learning difficulties, and adjusting their teaching strategies accordingly to help the students. With the screening tools provided by EMB, identification and intervention at primary schools are conducted systematically in stages:

- (a) In Stage 1, three months after the start of Primary One, teachers carry out the ‘Early Identification of Primary One Pupils with Learning Difficulties’ using the norm-referenced Observation Checklists for Teachers (i.e. OCT) developed by EMB.
- (b) In Stage 2, the Student Support Team (SST) of each school analyses the results of OCT. With reference to the norm, the students identified are placed into groups of marked difficulty and mild difficulty respectively.
  - For students with marked difficulty, they are referred to specialists for consultation and individual assessment, if necessary. The Psychologist Assistants (PA) of EMB support schools in the identification and intervention process through consultation visits and staff development. The PAs advise teachers to use the “Hong Kong Specific Learning Difficulties Behaviour Checklist” (i.e. HKSpLDBC) to further identify students suspected to have SpLD; and administer other psycho-educational tests for these students. If the results of these tests indicate that the students are likely to have SpLD, referrals are made to the educational psychologists for detailed assessment.
  - For students with mild difficulties, the SST determines the appropriate support for the students so as to ensure timely intervention. This may include adaptation of teaching strategies and curriculum, remedial support and regular review of progress. These students benefit from structured, sequential and explicit teaching. Research has indicated that teaching strategies effective in helping

SpLD students are also beneficial to other students with reading and writing difficulties. As such, teachers are strongly encouraged to deploy these strategies to assist students to learn effectively in regular classrooms even when specialist assessment has not been conducted. After a period of time, students still not making progress may have to be referred to the specialists for individual assessment.

10. By adopting this staged process of “assessment through teaching”, the support for students of junior primary levels commences at the first instance of identification. By analysing the OCT and HKSpLDBC, teachers can identify the students’ relative strengths and weaknesses. During the consultation meetings with the SST, EMB officers discuss the learning needs of each student with teachers and parents, and advise on assessment accommodation and differential instruction in the regular classroom. With reference to the relevant remedial teaching strategies and resources, teachers can provide early intervention to address the special needs of these students.

### **Support for students with learning difficulties (including SpLD)**

11. Students may have learning difficulties, ranging from mild to severe. To address the special educational needs (SEN) of students (including SpLD), EMB provides support through the following means:

- (a) Advising schools to adopt a whole-school approach;
- (b) Providing learning and teaching support in schools;
- (c) Providing teacher support and professional development;
- (d) Setting up local networks to facilitate peer support among schools;
- (e) Advising on special arrangements in public examinations;
- (f) Developing assessment tools, remediation programmes and resource packages; and
- (g) Providing parental support and public education.

***(a) The whole-school approach***

12. Since the 1997/98 school year, EMB has been promoting the Whole-school Approach (WSA) for supporting students with SEN. This is a systems approach to SEN prevention and remediation through concerted efforts of all stakeholders. Under the WSA, mainstream schools should integrate the SEN policies and practices into the overall school policies and school development plans, so that schools and classrooms can be developed into a supportive setting in response to student diversity. Schools are required to formulate a policy for early identification and intervention of learning difficulties, assessment adaptation, curriculum differentiation, staff development and parent involvement. Students in senior classes are encouraged to assist and support junior students in learning.

13. Schools have to keep a register of the students with SEN and set up a SST to monitor their progress. Parents are invited to attend the meetings and informed of the progress of their child. Educational psychologists play a significant role in ongoing assessment and assisting teachers to formulate the educational programmes for students with SpLD. They participate in review meetings when necessary.

***(b) Learning and teaching support in schools***

*Primary schools*

14. EMB provides a range of intensive remedial services for primary students with low academic achievement, including the provision of Intensive Remedial Teaching Programme (IRTP) and Intensive Learning Support Grant (ILSG). In the 2005/06 school year, there are 385 aided/government primary schools operating 639 IRTP and 240 schools receiving the ILSG.

15. Support strategies vary according to the nature of learning difficulty. For those students with relatively weak orthographic skills, retrieval speed, phonological awareness and memory, teachers use explicit teaching, small-steps teaching, and a multi-sensory approach. Resource packages developed by the EMB, such as “Fun with Reading and Writing”, and CD packages on “Training in Chinese-Word Reading Skills” are introduced to

mainstream school teachers for supporting the students. With early intervention, students with SpLD may compensate for their difficulties as they move up the grade levels.

### *Secondary Schools*

16. Upon the promotion of the students with SpLD to secondary schools, primary schools have to, with parental consent, pass relevant student records to the secondary school concerned for continuous support.

17. Under the School-based Remedial Support Programme (SBRSP), 153 secondary schools with high intake of students at the bottom 10% of junior secondary students are provided with 227 additional teachers in the 2005/06 school year. The SBRSP aims at helping the students build up study skills in mastering the basic subjects, so as to catch up on academic attainment.

18. Under the School-based Curriculum Tailoring Scheme (SBCTS), 95 secondary schools with an intake of two classes or more of territory-wide bottom 20% students at S1 are provided with an additional teacher in the 2005/2006 school year. The scheme aims at creating space for teachers to develop their school-based curriculum that suits the needs of their students and to strengthen guidance for students in need.

19. EMB is reviewing the support for secondary schools with a view to formulating a new funding model to provide full coverage to students with SEN. Additional resources have been earmarked under the Diversity Learning Grant to strengthen the support for SEN at senior secondary levels under the New Academic Structure. With appropriate teaching pedagogies and peer support, students with SpLD will benefit as much as other students in secondary schools.

### ***(c) Teacher support and professional development***

20. Each year, EMB organizes seminars and workshops on SpLD for teachers. In the 2004/05 school year, over 2000 teachers, including language and mathematics teachers, participated in these training. To empower teachers in catering for SEN, EMB commissioned two tertiary institutions to

conduct three training courses of 10, 30 and 120 hours each in the 2004/05 school year. A total of 1891 teachers attended the courses.

21. In the 2004/05 school year, the Hong Kong Institute of Education began to offer a two-level Professional Development Course for Teachers on “Catering for Diverse Needs“. Level 1 consists of 30 hours of training in the basic understanding and skills of catering for students with SEN, while Level 2 is a 90-hour advanced course on in-depth thematic studies (such as on SpLD) and action research. These courses will continue in the 2005/06 school year. On top of this, EMB has also commissioned Hong Kong Polytechnic University to provide a course on “Understanding, assessment and teaching of pupils with SpLD” effective from the 2005/06 school year in order to train a total of 240 teachers in the coming two years. Schools having students with SpLD will be requested to nominate at least one teacher to attend the course. EMB will monitor the quality and extend the course if required.

22. School-based professional support for teachers will be strengthened by introducing more support in the classroom. EMB provides on-site advisory support for primary and secondary schools on school-based curriculum development and language learning. Teachers are guided to try out the differentiation of teaching strategies and assessment accommodation for students with SEN, including those with SpLD. EMB is studying the feasibility of seconding professional officers to aided and government schools to assist in curriculum adaptation and differential teaching for students with SEN, particularly for students with SpLD and autism.

***(d) Setting up local networks to facilitate peer support among schools***

23. EMB has implemented various measures to enhance experience sharing and dissemination of good practices among schools and teachers with the aim of upgrading teachers’ skills and knowledge in teaching, and supporting students with a continuum of learning difficulties. More focus group meetings for sharing of good practices among schools will be organized.

24. Since the 2003/04 school year, EMB has been piloting the project of special schools cum resource centres. This is an integral part of the systems support for students with SEN in mainstream schools. The results have been positive and mainstream schools admitting students with SEN have benefited

from the services provided. In order to empower more mainstream schools in catering for student diversity, EMB has decided to extend the project by launching the School Partnership Scheme which will initially be implemented for two school years from 2005/06 to 2006/07. Under this Scheme, 16 selected special schools will serve as special schools cum resource centres, and 7 mainstream schools with proficient experience in adopting the WSA will serve as resource schools on WSA, to share their knowledge and practices with other mainstream schools.

***(e) Special arrangements in public examinations***

25. The Hong Kong Examination and Assessment Authority (HKEAA) has been making special arrangements for students with SpLD in the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE) and Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination (HKALE). These arrangements include extra time, enlarged question and answer sheets, supervised rest periods, exemptions and other physical accommodations such as special centres or seating arrangements. Schools are advised to make similar arrangements in the internal examinations.

***(f) Developing assessment tools, remediation programmes and resource packages***

26. In the past years, EMB produced many resource packages to assist teachers in supporting students with SpLD. A “List of Teaching Resources Developed by EMB” is attached at the Appendix for reference. A set of guidelines and resources packages including a CD-ROM would be distributed to secondary schools in the 2005/06 school year to enhance teachers’ understanding of the needs for early intervention and remedial support for students with SpLD.

27. Since 1998, educational psychologists of EMB have collaborated with the University of Hong Kong and the Chinese University of Hong Kong to form the Hong Kong Specific Learning Difficulties Research Team (HKSpLD Research Team). This research team has made considerable contribution to the education of children with SpLD through the development of identification and assessment tools, computer-based remedial programmes as well as

conducting scientific studies on the learning characteristics of this group of students. The Research Team developed the first norm-referenced "Hong Kong Test for Specific Learning Difficulties in Reading and Writing" (2000) for use by psychologists for the assessment of primary school-aged children. This tool is now commonly used by all psychologists working in government and non-government settings.

28. A norm-referenced test for secondary school students with SpLD for use by psychologists is now being developed by the HKSpLD Research Team. It will be ready for use by September 2006.

29. More teacher-administered tools and learning materials for students with SEN will be developed. EMB has invited the Chinese University of Hong Kong to develop a set of teacher-administered reading tests for secondary school students. The tests are expected to be made available to teachers in the 2006/07 school year.

30. The Quality Education Fund has also supported a number of projects on helping students with SpLD over the years. EMB plans to organise a joint exhibition of these recent projects and products in November 2005.

***(g) Providing parental support and public education***

31. EMB has strengthened the student guidance service since the 2002/03 school year, so that most primary schools have a full-time student guidance teacher/personnel (SGT/P). These SGT/P support students and their parents individually or through group programmes. Resource materials were produced for SGT/P to enhance parents' understanding and skills in supporting children with SpLD.

32. EMB conducts workshops on a regular basis for parents of students with SpLD. Information leaflets have also been produced to help parents understand their children's learning difficulties and methods of remediation. To enhance school-based support for parents of students with SpLD, the EMB is preparing a training manual for SGT/P to conduct parent training programmes. In November this year, a seminar for primary schools will be conducted to introduce this Manual and some pilot schools will share their experience of supporting parents.

33. EMB meets with representatives of parents associations on a regular basis so as to understand their needs and to offer timely assistance. The Social Welfare Department has also funded a parent group on SpLD in 2003-2005 under its funding support programme for self-help organizations for people with disabilities.

34. The publicity on parent-school co-operation and inclusive education practices will be enhanced through various media such as leaflets and television/radio API (i.e. Announcement in Public Interest).

## **The Way Forward**

### ***Review of the existing identification, assessment and support mechanism in schools***

35. In view of the concern of parents regarding the effectiveness of the identification procedure, the waiting time required for assessment and the need for timely school-based support for students with SpLD, EMB is planning to conduct a review of the mechanism.

### ***The new academic structure and exit paths***

36. Different pathways and exit points to further studies or training leading to recognized qualifications for employment will be further explored for students who will not pursue an academic curriculum leading to the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education. Access to diverse post-secondary courses will be explored with service providers such as Vocational Training Council and other non-government organisations serving these students.

37. In the second stage consultation on the new academic structure, EMB will consult stakeholders on two important areas for further development, viz., accommodating the needs of students with SEN in the new system so that all students will have 6 years of worthwhile secondary education; and the delivery of career-oriented studies in the new senior secondary programme.

## **Advice Sought**

38. Members are invited to note the contents of this paper.

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### A List of Teaching Resources Developed by EMB

#### **Teaching Guide and Checklist**

The Observation Checklist for Teachers ( new version with norm) (2004)

The Hong Kong Specific Learning Difficulties Behaviour Checklist (for Primary School Students) (2002)

Teaching Guide on “Understanding and Helping Children with Special Educational Needs” (2001)

Training Manual for Student Guidance Personnel to conduct school-based training for parents (To be published in November 2005)

Guide for Teachers on how to support secondary school students with SpLD (To be published in November 2005)

#### **Resource Packages and CD-ROM**

Booklet on Teaching Suggestions for Teachers (2000)

A multi-media CD ROM and a booklet for student guidance personnel in primary schools to enhance teachers’ understanding of SpLD (2001)

A multi-media CD ROM and a booklet for student guidance personnel in primary schools to enhance support for parents (2002)

“Fun With Reading and Writing” - a resource package containing one multi-media CD-ROM, one CD and one set of four booklets on teaching materials, including teaching demonstrations, suggested activities and worksheet (2002)

A set of three multi-media CD ROMs with games, jointly developed by HKU, CUHK and EMB, to train Chinese word-reading skills of students with SpLD

(2003)

“Rebuilding our Word Planet”, a set of multi-media CD ROMs with games, developed for parents and teachers to train the phonics skills of students with SpLD, so as to improve the learning of English reading and spelling (2005)

### **Leaflet**

A leaflet for parents on supporting children with SpLD (2004)

### **Others**

Special Education Resources Centre (<http://serc.emb.gov.hk>) provides a virtual platform for sharing of information and resources on special education

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