

For Discussion on 22 December 2006

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

**Latest Developments in Education for
Students with Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLD)**

Purpose

This paper provides updated information on education for students with Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLD).

Background

2. In October 2005, an Information Note (Reference no. CB(2)2670/04-05(01)) outlining the assessment and support services available to students with Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLD) was circulated to Members of the Sub-Committee. The Administration also provided a supplementary note on the same subject for the Sub-Committee's meeting on 16 December 2005. This paper updates Members with the latest information on assessment, identification and support services for students with SpLD. It should be read in conjunction with the two papers mentioned above.

Development of Assessment Tools

3. To recapitulate, SpLD covers severe and persistent learning difficulties in the areas of reading and spelling/dictation (i.e. dyslexia), developmental coordination problems or mathematics. Dyslexia accounts for the largest category of SpLD. Researches 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. At present, the following assessment tools developed jointly by the Education and Manpower Bureau (EMB) and tertiary institutions have been widely used by teachers and educational/clinical psychologists in identifying and assessing students with SpLD:

- a) The norm-referenced Observation Checklist for Teachers (OCT) for the screening of learning difficulties for Primary One pupils;
- b) The Hong Kong SpLD Behaviour Checklist for primary school pupils (a screening tool for teachers); and
- c) The Hong Kong Test of SpLD in Reading and Writing for primary school pupils (an assessment tool for psychologists only).

5. A research team comprising educational psychologists of the EMB and academics from the University of Hong Kong (HKU) and the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) has been developing a norm-referenced test for junior secondary school students with SpLD for use by psychologists. It is expected to be published by May 2007. Its availability will greatly facilitate the assessment of students in secondary schools.

6. We have also commissioned the CUHK to develop a norm-referenced Assessment Battery on Chinese Reading and Writing for teachers to assess secondary school students' reading and writing ability in Chinese. Piloting of the test contents was successfully conducted in July 2006 and standardization will take place from December 2006 to February 2007. This assessment tool is expected to be available to secondary schools in mid 2007. It will be a useful resource for teachers to:

- a) screen students suspected to have SpLD; and
- b) assess the relative strengths and weaknesses of students in different domains of Chinese literacy for planning appropriate intervention strategies.

Identification and Intervention

7. The identification of SpLD is not an esoteric exercise carried out solely by psychologists. It should be carried out at many levels. In principle, frontline language teachers should constantly be engaged in noticing and identifying students' general learning difficulties and in trying out various

teaching strategies to facilitate students' learning. If a student's response to the adjusted teaching is not satisfactory, the teacher may initiate a more detailed examination of the student's difficulties through analysing his/her response to the instruction, still within the regular classroom. This is "assessment through teaching". If the difficulties continue despite the extra help from the teacher, referral should then be made to the educational psychologist for a psycho-educational assessment. In other words, frontline language teachers should be able to "notice individual differences" and "adjust teaching" accordingly and timely, in order to prevent mild difficulties from turning into severe SpLD.

8. Specifically, our annual territory-wide programme on Early Identification and Intervention of Learning Difficulties is recapitulated below:

- a) Teachers administer the OCT on Primary One pupils for the screening of learning difficulties in December (three months after the start of the school year). In the 2005/06 school year, nearly all public sector primary schools used the OCT for the screening;
- b) The Student Support Team of primary schools is supported by our Psychologist Assistants (PA) to analyse the learning profiles and remedial needs of those Primary One pupils identified to have learning difficulties. For those pupils suspected to have SpLD, the PA may advise teachers to further use the Hong Kong SpLD Behaviour Checklist for identification purpose. If the result indicates that the pupils are likely to have SpLD, they would be referred to our educational psychologists for detailed assessment. In the meantime, schools are advised to adapt the teaching, provide early remedial intervention and closely monitor the students' progress of learning; and
- c) Pupils not making the expected progress after a period of intervention are referred to the educational psychologists for specialist assessment and recommended for more intensive support if necessary.

9. The number of students assessed by the EMB to have SpLD in the 2005/06 school year and recommended for follow-up support is 1035, as compared to 1065 in the 2004/05 school year.

Support for Students with SpLD

10. At present, students with special educational needs (SEN), including SpLD, are supported by a 3-tier intervention model at schools. Those with transient/mild problems receive tier-1 support under the basic provision (including Capacity Enhancement Grant, provision of curriculum leader, increased manpower for student guidance and teachers for specialised teaching, etc.) in schools for quality education to all learners. Those with persistent learning difficulties receive tier-2 support which includes the add-on provision of Intensive Remedial Support Programme or an Intensive Learning Support Grant of \$10,000 per pupil under the current New Funding Model in primary schools. In secondary schools, most of these students are supported by the Band-3 Initiative which provides additional teachers for target students at junior secondary level. For the more severe SpLD, tier-3 support comes in the form of an Intensive Learning Support Grant of \$20,000 per primary school pupil, and on-site professional support from specialists and special education trained officers of the EMB.

11. Schools should adopt a whole-school approach in providing support for students with SEN. To promote the whole-school approach in schools, we have assigned to each primary school a contact officer from the EMB. The contact officers advise schools on the support mechanism, use of funding/resources and differentiated instruction. While details of various support measures were already set out in the above-mentioned papers presented to this Sub-Committee last year, we would like to update Members with the following new developments.

The Jockey Club Learning Support Network Project

12. The Jockey Club Charities Trust has approved \$153.7 million for this five-year project with the aim of enhancing the capacity of schools in the early identification and intervention for students with SpLD. The project was officially launched in September 2006. Upon completion, the learning kits and good practices will be disseminated to all schools. The project team is led by the HKU and comprises specialists from the EMB, the CUHK, the Society of Boys Centres and Heep Hong Society. Its major tasks include:

- a) development and production of screening and assessment tools, including the second edition of the Hong Kong SpLD Behaviour Checklist for primary school pupils, the development of a computerised teacher assessment tool for primary school pupils and a screening checklist for use by secondary school teachers;

- b) development of a district-based support model and learning kits for pre-school children at risk of SpLD;
- c) development of a school-based support model for primary schools. Good practices of the 3-tier intervention model will be tried out in a number of primary schools over a period of five years;
- d) professional development for Chinese Language teachers in primary schools. It is planned that over a period of five years, Chinese language teachers of all primary schools would be trained in the recognition of SpLD and basic principles and strategies in teaching children with literacy difficulties; and
- e) development of a secondary school Chinese Language Learning Kit with information technology support system for teachers and parents.

QEF Networking Scheme - Serving Children with SpLD

13. The Quality Education Fund (QEF) has commissioned the Hong Kong Institute of Education to co-ordinate a two-year (2006-08) Teacher Networking Scheme to facilitate primary schools with good practices in supporting pupils with SpLD to share their skills and experiences with other schools. Six primary schools (seed schools) have been invited to share their experience and further develop their skills in this first year of operation, and will start supporting other schools in the second year.

14. The collaboration activities in this Scheme will include regular meetings among seed schools, professional development seminars, video recording of class activities, attachment, retreat, monitoring of a website and seed schools serving as core schools in the school-cluster system. In the second year of the Scheme, six school-clusters will be formed. On average, each school-cluster consists of three to four schools.

A Mathematics Resource Package

15. The Package is being developed by the EMB to support primary school pupils with SpLD who encounter difficulties in Mathematics. The Package addresses their difficulties in sequencing, working memory and reading

comprehension which affect their learning of the subject. Areas such as number facts, mathematical operations, the multiplication table and word problems are covered. The draft Package has been successfully tried out in a number of schools and will be made available for use by schools in the second half of this school year.

Teacher Training

16. In the 2005/06 school year, apart from the 14 regular seminars, workshops and courses on SpLD for about 2750 teachers, we also organised 49 district-based workshops between May and July 2006 to enhance school personnel's knowledge and skills in supporting students with SEN and to facilitate sharing of experience amongst heads/teachers. Special emphasis was given to education for students with SpLD, Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder and Autistic Spectrum Disorders. The workshops were attended by around 1,540 school heads and teachers from 563 primary schools and well received by the participants.

17. We have also commissioned the Hong Kong Polytechnic University to run a series of a 42-hour course on SpLD for Chinese and English Language teachers in primary and secondary schools in the 2005/06 and 2006/07 school years. So far, 164 teachers from 106 schools have attended the courses.

18. We have also drawn up a teacher training framework to tie in with the 3-tier intervention model for students with SEN, including SpLD. For in-service teachers, the framework consists of a 30-hour basic course, a 90-hour advanced course and thematic courses on particular types of SEN. Both the advanced and thematic courses include SpLD as an elective. Subject to the capacity of teacher education providers and practicability, we hope that in the five years from the 2007/08 school year, more than 10% of teachers in each school will have completed the basic course which enables them to provide tier-1 and to some extent tier-2 support. Among them, half or at least 3 teachers per school will have completed the advanced course which enables them to provide tier-2 support and collaborate with other professionals in providing the tier-3 support for the more severe cases. For the thematic courses, we propose that at least one English teacher and one Chinese teacher per school attend the course on SpLD.

19. Furthermore, we are planning to run a two-day course on SEN for school heads, and another one for teaching assistants who play a key role to support teachers. Basic knowledge and skills in supporting students with SpLD will be covered. We are also exploring with the teacher training provider to modify the content of the current five-week refresher course for teachers of

the three core subjects to include the principles and basic skills in tackling SpLD.

Special Examination Arrangements (SEA) in Public Examinations

20. In addition to the briefing sessions for principals and teachers held in October 2005, the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority (HKEAA) held two briefing sessions for parents of students with SpLD in January and October 2006 to clarify the rationale and procedure of application for SEA in public examinations. With effect from the 2005/06 school year, early applications have been accepted at the beginning of Secondary Four/Six academic year with the outcome to be available in February of the same academic year. The extra time-allowance for candidates with SpLD in need of special arrangement in written papers has also been extended from 20% to 25%. The Task Group on SpLD under the HKEAA continues to review the effectiveness of the existing SEA arrangements and the use of computers in public examinations.

An Operation Guide for Schools & A Guide for Parents

21. Success of the 3-tier intervention model hinges on the whole-school approach in supporting SEN at school. This requires home-school collaboration in implementing the intervention strategies for optimal effects. Apart from the regular briefings and workshops for parents, we are compiling two separate guides on policy and practices of whole school approach for integrated education, with one for schools and the other for parents. Basic skills in catering for SEN, including SpLD, will also be covered. The guides would enable teachers and parents to better understand their roles and the resources available for SEN support at school.

Advice Sought

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

Education and Manpower Bureau
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