

**Submission by Labour Party on Services Provided to Students with
Autism Spectrum Disorders, Speech and Language Impairment and
Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties**

**Legislative Council Panel on Education
Subcommittee on Integrated Education
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To achieve the basic goals of integrated education, our education system and services for students with Special Education Needs (SEN) requires fundamental changes. Current services are problem-oriented and fail to help children and their families understand the children's strengths, characteristics, and their needs as a whole person.

The problems with existing services has been raised numerous times by different parents and professional groups: professions are not working together, services are not matching the needs of children, training and research is lacking, and parents are desperately seeking the right resources for their children.

This paper highlights some of the issues related to the services provided to students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), Speech and Language Impairment (SLI) and Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (EBD), which the Labour Party would like to address here.

1. Family friendly services

The services in Hong Kong focus mostly on the academic performance and behavioural issues of students. However, it is a well-known fact that parents of children with special needs face lots of pressure and difficulties, even before diagnosis. The understanding of the parents on their children's characteristics, as well as helping them to manage the challenges faced by the family, is often as important as the training and services provided for the children.

Research and experiences of parents consistently reveal the difficulties of taking care of a child with SEN long before the diagnoses. Mothers often face very high levels of stress and emotional challenges since infancy of children with ASD. Adequate knowledge and family counselling services are often needed for parents to maintain a positive sense of well-being and self-efficacy. Schools and services that focus on only their children's academic challenges and social difficulties at school are simply inadequate.

EBD of children often is an indication of enormous emotional challenges parents are facing. These families are very likely to need professional support to ensure improvement of the children.

2. Improvement of professional services

At the moment, early identification is most likely for children with more obvious symptoms of ASD. Teachers and school social workers are often the key people to help identify children with Asperger Syndrome, SLI and EBD. They are also the first source of help families can get. However, the inadequate training and the culture of over-emphasis on academic performance, teachers often focus on correcting children's behaviour and pushing for better school results, missing the needs of the children to develop as unique individuals. This not only makes it hard for them to identify the challenges faced by the children, but often the under-trained teachers become one of the factors that can contribute to the worsening of problems of the children.

Many parents know very little about their children's characteristics and challenges even years after diagnosis, not to mention the skills that are needed to help their children. This reflects the lack of quality of services provided, including medical, psychiatric and psychological services. Even for parents that are knowledgeable and proactive, they often still complain that it is very difficult for them to seek help.

Families of children with ASD and EBD often need professional support from different fields. Services are fragmented at the moment, and families often feel desperate and helpless finding the right resources.

3. Teaching and assessment methods in school

Children with ASD and SLI are known to perform better with visual means of learning and creative activities. Some children with ASD have exceptional abilities which could become great value to society. With the change of culture and technology, it is also important for children to have their creativity and non-verbal skills nurtured. However, our education system still relies heavily on auditory means of teaching, with knowledge being "spoon-fed" to students rather than cultivating children's curiosity and self-motivated learning, and the school curriculum not being flexible enough to accommodate the specific needs of different children. Until this is changed, children with ASD, SLI and other SEN students will continue to be disadvantaged, and their potential wasted.

4. Bullying

Bullying of children with ASD and other students with social and emotional challenges is an important topic in research and education. Teenagers or even adults with ASD often become socially withdrawn, phobic or even violent because of traumatic events during school years. Their weakness in social skills and self-awareness also mean they are rarely aware of their needs to seek help.

Inadequately trained teachers and social workers may not be able to identify bullying problems, or may even worsen the trauma of the children with ASD.

5. Empowerment, not problem solving

We need to help children understand that they are not ill or flawed, but they are just as unique as everyone else. The labelling effect is discouraging, and children with ASD, SLI or EBD not only feel helpless, but often even believe they are less worthy than others. Services provided are mostly problem-focused: teachers often see them as problematic, medical professionals talk about their “illnesses” rather than helping them understand their characteristics and realise potentials, and social workers focus on their behavioural problems rather than their personal and familial needs. Children should be given learning experiences that encourage them to further develop themselves, rather than face endless defeats and disappointments.

Our society should be aiming to help children to realise their potentials, help families adjust to the difficulties they are facing, and help them to achieve a better life they deserve. These are their basic rights. With the current system and the limited support, the students and their families will continue to suffer and feel rejected. To improve the situation, we must not only improve the services, but the mentality behind the services provided.

Inclusion is about acceptance and fairness. According to the *Operation Guide on The Whole School Approach to Integrated Education* of EDB, one of the aims of integrated education is to “help all students/teachers/parents recognize, accept and respect individual differences“. Currently, the services and schooling these students receive are defeating, and reinforcing the negative labels on them. Parents are struggling. They are in pain. But very often, their pain is not due to the disabilities of the children, but the lack of support provided by the government and corresponding organisations.

We are still a long way from realising the spirit of inclusion for our next generation. The government has the responsibility to take a more active role to achieve this goal.

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