

Learned helplessness in inclusive music classrooms

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Learned Helplessness in the Inclusive Music Classroom:

Voices of Hong Kong Primary Schools Music Teachers

Abstract

In Hong Kong, inclusive education is concerned with educating all students, including those who are categorized as having special educational needs [SEN]. This qualitative study reports three challenges faced by primary schools music teachers required to implement inclusive education. The first two challenges echo those reported internationally - the lack of subject-specific pre- and in-service SEN training and insufficient school-based SEN support for music teachers. The third challenge is the key role of a societal mindset that, by valuing SEN interventions against other educational values, justifies discriminatory training and resourcing. It is against this mindset that these teachers argue and that explains why inclusive education in Hong Kong's primary music classrooms becomes a pathway for both SEN students and their teachers to learned helplessness.

KEY WORDS: SEN music classroom; inclusive education; music teachers, Hong Kong.

Learned Helplessness in the Inclusive Music Classroom:

Voices of Hong Kong Primary Schools Music Teachers

BACKGROUND

Hong Kong teachers experienced pedagogical challenges following the wide ranging 2001 education reforms collectively named as “Learning to Learn” (CDC 2000). These reforms reflect an international trend towards ‘life-long learning and ‘all-round development’ (Kennedy 2005). The first challenge resulted from the reform of the Primary One Admission System (EC 2000). The former school admission system used “children’s ability as the admission criteria (which created an) incentive for drilling children in early childhood education” (EC 2000, 71). Replacing this former system, now 30 percent of primary one places are allocated to children with siblings studying or parents working in the school, while the remaining 70 percent of primary one places are centrally allocated to children by computer that aims to match parental choices with their nearest, neighbourhood school (EDB 2013a). This admission reform changed the primary classroom ability-spread from one of a predictably narrow, homogenous grouping based on academic exam results to the current broader ability, less homogenous grouping. Accordingly, primary teaching changed from the pedagogy of largely teacher-centered teaching to student-centered learning. Easing this pedagogic transition was the gradual introduction, following a decline in birth rates, of

smaller class sizes from a 1990's average of +42 pupils reducing now to <32 pupils per class.

A second challenge was the introduction of inclusive education in 2001. Following an international trend to make education inclusive (UNESCO 2009), Hong Kong students with special education needs [SEN] are now encouraged to study in mainstream schools (EDB 2013b). From the perspective of Hong Kong classroom teachers, the pedagogies of student-centered learning and SEN support skills now become conflated.

RELATED LITERATURE

International research into inclusive education highlights teachers' lack of sufficient training and support with which to implement inclusion in their teaching (Fuchs 2009; Hammond & Ingalls 2003). Additionally, some teachers are shown to hold negative attitudes toward inclusion (Hammond & Ingalls 2003), while even those teachers who held positive attitudes about the idea of inclusion, disliked having students with SEN in their classrooms (Campbell et al., 2003). Fueling this disquiet with the realities of inclusive education are the findings that teachers' concern about inclusion exposes an apparent professional weakness. Teachers doubt their own professional competency in supporting SEN students (Forlin et al., 2008). In contrast, teachers who had SEN training are reported to be more confident in supporting SEN students within their inclusive classrooms (Avramidis & Kalyva, 2007; Ross-Hill 2009).

What little research there is into inclusive education in the field of music education echoes the above research. Some music teachers held positive views about inclusion, alongside low expectations of students' individual achievement in music (Scott et al. 2007).

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Darrow (1999) reports music teachers' concerns with insufficient time for curriculum planning, insufficient support from school administrators and difficulties in classroom management. Subsequently, by adapting activities, and utilising peer-tutoring strategies she created a better environment for students with SEN to learn music (Darrow 2003). More recently, Darrow (2009) identified some possible barriers, such as organizational, attitudinal and lack of appropriate knowledge that hinder music teachers from implementing inclusive music education effectively. The organizational barriers include "lack of time to gather information and plan for students with disabilities, lack of support from administrators and difficulty with classroom management. ... some music educators are given teaching assignments for which they may not be trained" (29). The attitudinal barriers refer to the negative attitudes about teaching SEN students that rooted from "lack of information, misinformation, previous experiences or difficult situations that remain unresolved or unsuccessful" (30). The lack of appropriate knowledge refers to the "knowledge and skills that teachers need in order to provide effective services to students" (31). She advocated that music teachers should recognize and overcome these barriers within their schools and music

classrooms - cautiously seeking to broaden this responsibility by claiming that “eliminating the barriers related to organisation, attitudes and knowledge could set the stage for more effective inclusion practices. It takes continuous efforts by all professionals to make sure that integration and acceptance is infused in all aspects of the educational system, starting at the classroom level.” (31). To what extent Darrow’s (2009) broadened responsibility informs the context of inclusive education in Hong Kong will be considered in this study.

PURPOSE OF STUDY

The purpose of this study is to investigate (1) the challenges of inclusive education expressed by primary schools music teachers, and (2) what factors have contributed to these challenges.

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN HONG KONG

The international definition of inclusive education differs significantly from that in Hong Kong. For United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO 2009), “inclusive education is a process of strengthening the capacity of the education system to reach out to all learners” (8). Fleshing-out this ideal, the UNESCO suggests that this ‘strengthening’ can involve “flexible teaching methods”, “responsive, child-friendly environments” and a “professional environment working deliberately and actively to promote inclusion for all” (15). In Hong Kong, the introduction of inclusive education is a relatively recent event. In 1995, an *Equal Opportunity Rehabilitation and Service White Paper* was

published as a precursor to the 1996 *Disability Discrimination Ordinance*. Implementation followed in 2001 where SEN inclusion formed part of the broad ranging Hong Kong education reform (CDC 2000). Specifically, the then Education Department [ED] (now known as the Education Bureau [EDB]) mandated that all mainstream schools should accept SEN students unless there are insurmountable difficulties (ED 2001). Before this policy was mandated, children diagnosed as having SEN were recommended to study in special schools where they studied special curriculum, for example, there was a special curriculum for children with physical disabilities and a different curriculum for children with intellectual disabilities. After the 2001 reforms, parents of children diagnosed with SEN now can choose to allocate their children to study in mainstream schooling. This allocation is normally to their neighbourhood school and normally through the Primary One Admission System when the child is age 6.

Two caveats are significant here. First, it is a parental choice whether or not their child is 'screened' as having SEN. For a Chinese parent to give this permission has strong, persistent negative cultural and social repercussions (Scior et al, 2010; Lau and Cheung, 1999). A second caveat is that the currently available SEN 'screening' system remains focused on diagnosis rather than prognosis (EOC 2012).

The introduction of inclusive education within the broader reforms of Hong Kong's education system has created a novel definition: "inclusion is concerned with the learning and

participation of all students, not only those with impairments or those who are categorized as having special educational needs” (EDB 2008, 1). Here the phrasing ‘of all students’ indicates not only the inclusion of SEN students within mainstream education, but also an emphasis that education is no longer selective, elitist or knowledge-based, but instead is student-centered, embraces ‘whole person development’ and fosters ‘life-long learners’ capable of success. ‘Inclusive’ education here mandates teachers no longer to ‘deliver knowledge’ but instead to ‘facilitate every student’s learning’.

Subsumed within education reform in Hong Kong, gone is the role of education to stream and select pupils, gone is the pedagogy of teacher-centered subject-based learning; replacing these is the pedagogy that conflates student-centered learning with SEN support.

Problems with the implementation of inclusive education have been voiced. Crawford (2002), in his pilot study of 9 project schools where language teachers and mathematics teachers undertook in-service SEN training, reports that the teachers found the course content was not transferrable to their classrooms and surmised that as ‘a powerful reminder of the failure of policy makers to communicate policy and failure by senior school management personnel to manage change’ (32). Lo (2007) similarly voiced his concerns that the success of inclusion in Hong Kong depends on teachers’ comprehension of the requisite education strategies.

In contrast, the Education Bureau only made available one in-service SEN professional

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development programme for teachers commencing in 2007 – six years after the introduction of support for student-centered learning. This SEN programme aimed at equipping Hong Kong primary and secondary teachers with a basic understanding of SEN support -- but only in the two areas of SEN literacy and mathematics learning (EDB 2012a). Notably, there was no SEN training for music teachers.

VISIBILITY OF STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATION NEEDS

Due to the school place allocation system of Hong Kong, inclusive education is more visible in primary than secondary schools. Previously, children diagnosed with disabilities were streamed into special schools and followed tailored curriculums that supported children with physical or intellectual disabilities. Now, parents of children entering primary education with SEN may choose for their children to study in their neighbourhood, mainstream government-funded primary school where these SEN students not only receive education alongside their age-peers but also follow one, common curriculum. However, lacking any clear policy of support, the future examination results of such exposed SEN students are sadly predictable. Without effective intervention, the classroom social-experience of these SEN pupils is equally all too predictable. From this perspective, SEN pupils within Hong Kong's inclusive primary education are highly visible, exposed and vulnerable.

In contrast, SEN students at secondary school level may apparently seem to fair better. Pupils entering Hong Kong's secondary education are allocated to one of three school bands

reflecting their academic achievement, i.e. Band 1 schools for students with high academic achievement, Band 2 schools for students with average academic achievement, while Band 3 schools for students with below-average academic achievement. Where standard academic examination results are the measure, SEN students are most commonly allocated to Band 3 schools (Forlin 2007), where they fail both academic subjects and peer relationships (Wong 2002). Hence, the challenges surrounding inclusion in secondary schools seem to appear mostly in Band 3 schools – but given that these same schools only admit students with low achievement in academic subjects, the learning challenges of SEN students become merged with those of their classmates, their visibility less apparent.

This predictable non-achieving pathway of SEN students from primary to secondary education is predicated on their teachers' transition failure from the former teacher-centred to the current student centred learning. A transition, complicated by the random inclusion of SEN pupils within mixed-ability classes and compounded by limited access to professional SEN teacher teaching.

HONG KONG MUSIC CURRICULUM

Although the Curriculum Development Council has a committee which formulates policy on curriculum development for SEN students and provides an adapted curriculum for teachers, this adapted curriculum remains restricted mainly for use in special, not mainstream schools. For those children aged 6 to 14 (Basic Education Level) attending special schools, the

adapted curriculum is only available for core subjects, i.e. Chinese Language, Mathematics and General Studies -- there is no adapted curriculum for any other subjects (EDB 2013c).

Within mainstream education the guiding principle is “one curriculum framework for all” (EDB, 2013b), which in practice mandates all students, including SEN students, to follow one common mainstream school curriculum. Within this mandated mainstream school curriculum, the music curriculum embraces two age groups - pupils aged 6 to 14 (primary level and junior secondary level), and pupils aged 15 to 17 (senior secondary level). The former follow the *Music Curriculum Guide (Primary 1 – Secondary 3)*, (hereafter: *Guide*), (CDC 2003) while the latter follow the *Music Curriculum and Assessment Guide (Secondary 4 – 6)*, (hereafter: *C & A Guide*) (CDC & HKEAA 2007).

The *Guide* acknowledges the challenges facing primary and junior secondary teachers catering for student diversity, and encourages teachers to “tailor the textbook contents in accordance with the different needs in learning” (CDC 2003, 42); adopt “diversified modes of assessment flexibly to cater for student diversity” (CDC 2003, 7); and provide students with “diversified learning activities and materials ... so as to help students to fulfill their potential” (CDC 2003, 68). The *Guide* also mentions the broader benefits that music learning may expect to engender -- “music education has contributed significantly to student’s academic achievement” (CDC 2003, 5).

Similarly the *C & A Guide* addresses “catering for learner diversity” (CDC and HKEAA,

19 and 44) by encouraging secondary teachers to “set appropriate learning objectives based on students’ needs” (44). However at this upper secondary level, the emphasis is on music as an elective academic subject – an emphasis reflecting the established parental expectation of Hong Kong education that attaining high academic achievement is the goal (Shek & Chan 1999).

Notably, in both the *Guide the C & A Guide*, there is no explicit guidance for music teachers mandated to cope with SEN students in either their primary or secondary music classrooms.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research methodology incorporating purposeful sampling selection of this study’s informants (Merriam 1998). To explore challenges in the Hong Kong inclusive music classroom, all informants of this study were music teachers in Hong Kong primary schools with experience of teaching inclusive music classrooms. From a population of 500+ primary schools in Hong Kong (EDB 2012b), altogether 10 music teachers from 10 different primary schools were interviewed. A semi-structured interview guide was developed from research literature on inclusion (Foddy 1993). All interviews were audio-taped, transcribed and confirmed as accurate by each informant before data analysis, to ensure that the study would yield credible outcomes (Guba and Lincoln 1989). Content analysis was employed to review the teachers’ ideas relating to the purpose of this study

(Neuendorf 2002; Patton 2002). To maintain informants' anonymity, pseudonyms according to alphabetical order (A to J) are used throughout this article. Demographic information of the 10 teachers is listed in Table 1. Interview data reported here presents teachers' reported challenges when implementing inclusion in their music classroom.

Table 1. Demographic information of teachers

Cases	Gender/ Age	Education	Musical training	Experience of teaching primary school (years)
1: Amy	F/30	B. A. in Religion PGDE in Music*	Piano Singing	6
2: Betty	F/40	Cert. Ed. in Music** B. Ed. in Chinese	Piano	18
3: Candy	F/27	B. A. in Music PGDE in Music	Piano Organ	4
4: Diana	F/32	B. A. in Music PGDE in Music	Piano	8
5: Eva	F/45	Cert. Ed. in Music B. A. in Chinese	Piano	23
6: Fanny	F/38	B. A. in Music PGDE in Music	Piano	14
7: Germaine	F/32	B. Ed. in Music	Piano Singing	8
8: Harry	M/36	B. A. in Music PGDE in Music	Piano Singing	6
9: Ivy	F/30	B. A. in Music PGDE in Music	Violin Piano	6
10: Jess	F/28	B. Ed. in Music	Piano Singing	3

*PGDE: Postgraduate Diploma in Education, major in Music

**Cert. Ed. in Music: A non-graduate Certificate of Education offered by the Colleges of Education in Hong Kong before 1995.

FINDINGS

Only three among the ten interviewed music teachers were positive about inclusive education: for these three music teachers, inclusion offered SEN students both opportunities to enjoy music as well as improving their social skills.

Amy: SEN students have the right to enjoy music and learn something in music class. They can build up their confidence through music learning.

Ivy: The idea of inclusion is good. It may be good for students with mild special needs, such as dyslexia and Asperger, because inclusion may help them to improve their social skills.

Jess: The concept of inclusion is good, but not all SEN students are suitable to be included in mainstream music classrooms.

Even though these three teachers held positive attitudes towards inclusive education, they had reservations about its implementation. These voiced reservations were similar to the opinions of the seven other music teachers of this study. Collectively, these practical reservations are here summarized into three, inter-related categories: (1) preparedness of music teachers, (2) class size and classroom management and (3) administrative support, including resources and workload.

Preparedness of music teachers

Interviewees expressed being unprepared to teach SEN students – reflecting both its absence from their pre-service teacher-training and subsequent absence of any in-service professional development courses on inclusion specifically for music teachers.

Betty: If I had the choice, I won't choose to teach SEN students. I'm not prepared to teach SEN students. It's really difficult to handle the diversity of their special needs.

Germaine: The policy is problematic. They should not implement the policy before we have proper training in special education. I'm not prepared to teach SEN students.

Harry: I'm not prepared to teach SEN students. I'm too busy to take any course on inclusion and there is no specific inclusion course for music teachers.

Ivy: I don't know how to handle SEN students properly and I'm sure that there are many music teachers like me.

Class Size and classroom management

Since the 1990s Hong Kong teachers have welcomed and adjusted their practice to accommodate a fall in student numbers and its concomitant reduction in class size from more than 40 pupils to the current average of 25-32 pupils per class. However with the subsequent introduction of inclusive education and the movement of SEN pupils into mainstream schooling, the challenges of mixed-ability learning more than negates the potential benefits of numerically smaller classes.

Amy: Usually SEN students are weaker in music learning and need more assistance. However, I can't help them much because I also have to teach other students. I can't handle them in such a big class size.

Eva: My school is accepting too many SEN students. I have a big class of students (i.e. 32 students), some are gifted, some are average and some are SEN, I can't teach them well. If I teach them well, more SEN students will be allocated to my music class.

Interviewees also voiced negative experiences with SEN students associated with classroom management which impacted negatively on both their teaching and then the learning of

mainstream students.

Fanny: I don't like inclusive education. I don't like teaching SEN students; they usually have some kind of behavior problems that disturb my teaching in music class.

Germaine: Some SEN students cause a lot of classroom management problems in my music class that I have to settle at once. I don't think it's appropriate to include SEN students in mainstream schools.

Ivy: Some SEN students may cause severe classroom management problems in music class and have negative effect on the learning of other mainstream students.

Administrative support

Resources

To support the implementation of inclusive education, the government has allocated additional teaching assistants and resources to support SEN students. However, these allocations are usually prioritized to help SEN students in learning core subjects, such as English Language and Chinese Language, but not non-core subjects such as music.

Amy: SEN students are allocated randomly into my music class. There's no additional support to help these students in my class. There are teaching assistants for helping SEN students in core subjects, but not in music class.

Ivy: My school does not provide any manpower to support SEN students in music class.

Jess: Even though I'm willing to teach SEN students, the school doesn't have any resource to provide an assistant to help SEN students in music class.

Workload

Lacking support, interviewees then complain about the extra time needed for curriculum planning and then for providing help to individual SEN students.

Amy: It's really difficult to implement inclusion in music classroom because I have no extra time to adjust the curriculum or to give individual help to SEN students.

Betty: I need to spend more time after school to help SEN students. They wasted me a lot of class time because I have to spend more time on classroom management due to their misbehaviors.

Candy: SEN needs individual teaching, but I don't have the time to provide individual teaching to SEN students in music class.

Cumulatively, the five issues of preparedness, class size and classroom management as well as administrative support, these respondents commented negatively about a perceived additional workload.

Betty: I dislike most about the policy of inclusion is – my workload is increased by because of inclusive education.

Diana: My workload is increased because of inclusive education. SEN students could not follow my instructions in music class. I have to provide individual help for SEN students after class.

DISCUSSION

Discussion of the three, inter-related categories of teachers' opinions reported above, serves here to highlight three major challenges to the inclusive music classroom: (1) teachers' professional knowledge and skills - which embrace "preparedness of music teachers" and "classroom management"; (2) administrative support which embraces "resources", "time",

and (3) societal values which tolerate “class size” and “workload”.

The first two of these challenges are supportive of findings reported internationally of challenges to the inclusive music classroom (Fuchs 2009; Hammond & Ingalls 2003). The third challenge however, is here argued as being the most significant – the determining role of societal values.

Addressing each major area in turn, this discussion section seeks to turn challenges into solutions.

(1) Teachers’ professional knowledge and skills

The lack of teachers’ SEN professional knowledge and skills highlights two challenges, each suggesting their own, differing solution. Given that in Hong Kong the educational policy of inclusion is mandatory, it should also be mandatory that pre-service teacher training should instill SEN professional knowledge within their pre-service courses. The current absence of pre-service SEN training highlights a lack of relevantly experienced SEN training staff, an absence that in turn, reflects Hong Kong’s historically low prioritizing of SEN professional training. To break this impoverishing cycle, the current education policy mandating inclusive classrooms certainly is one step in the right direction by creating awareness of a pre-service professional-knowledge gap. However more steps are required to ensure that professional SEN training becomes a core pre-service teaching skill.

To support those already within the teaching profession, there is provision of in-service

‘best SEN classroom practice’ programmes. However, currently these programmes are available only to core-subject teachers. Non-core subject teachers, such as teachers of music, find themselves not only excluded from receiving any in-service SEN training, but also required to teach numerically larger inclusive class-sizes - although core-subject teachers may teach ‘split’ classes and may have assistant teacher-help, non-core subject teachers are denied any such support. This discrimination creates within schools a growth in ‘SEN best-practice’ amongst core-subject teachers, a withering of SEN confidence amongst non-core subject teachers.

(2) Administrative support

Where school-based SEN support and training are distributed with discriminatory outcomes – core-subject teachers receive, non-core-subject teachers do not – this practice breeds discontent. In primary schools, whereas core-subjects are frequently taught in parallel by a number of teachers, non-core-subjects – such as music - are most commonly taught by one single music teacher. Professionally isolated, each individual school’s music teacher is left to find their own inclusive-classroom solution. Such solutions inevitably reflect the individual teacher’s personality with some rising professionally to the challenge of engaging SEN in learning, but many tend to report inclusive-classrooms in the reductive terms of classroom management. Where SEN learning is constrained by concerns with classroom management, both the SEN students and their teachers seem destined to tread the path of

learned-helplessness.

(3) Societal values

In Hong Kong, the introduction of inclusive education represents a change in educators' mindset regarding how to best to support SEN pupils. It is however doubtful if societal values have also been changed. (EOC, 2012). This dichotomy between societal and educators' values, manifests itself in two ways: first, its impact on those pupils identified as being SEN; second, on how societal values are fostered by pupils who remain SEN-invisible.

First, the Hong Kong SEN 'screening' system, which remains focused on diagnosis rather than prognosis (EDB, 2013), fails to provide classroom teachers with little more than a 'labelled' pupil. Within primary and then secondary schools, such 'labelled' pupils are visibly treated as being different – either by being taught in sub-groups, or where SEN provision is absent, having their classroom behavior ignored. Such discriminatory practices inevitably breed perceptions of 'otherness' that challenge both the intention and spirit of inclusive-education.

Where the 'screening' for SEN remains a parental choice, clearly not all SEN pupils are formally 'screened'. The option remains for parents to have their child(ren) enrolled within the mainstream school system until eventually leaving secondary school without ever passing an academic examination, yet still capable of securing some form of employment within Hong Kong's relatively stable economy. For many local Hong Kong parents, this 'invisible'

pathway is preferable to the public SEN-supported learning pathway. Local pragmatic logic argues that where the end-of-school result is probably the same, it is advantageous to avoid one's child being socially 'SEN labelled'. To change this societal mind-set is both a generational issue and requires tangible evidence that SEN-supported education does enhance a pupil's future.

In summary, of these three major challenges to the inclusive music classroom and (3) - the first two - (1) teachers' professional knowledge and skills; (2) administrative support - are supportive of findings reported internationally of challenges to the inclusive music classroom (Forlin et al., 2008). The third challenge - societal values - however, is here argued as being the most significant determining as it does both resource priorities and the mind-set of parents whose child(ren) with SEN may grow into adulthood, under-supported.

In the Hong Kong context, Darrow's (2009) optimism that 'eliminating the barriers related to organisation, attitudes and knowledge could set the stage for more effective inclusion practices' does echo the spirit of the current education 'inclusive' reforms. However these findings would contest as misplaced the view that 'it takes continuous efforts by all professionals to make sure that integration and acceptance is infused in all aspects of the educational system, starting at the classroom level' (Darrow, 2009 31). From the evidence discussed here in Hong Kong, the provision of both pre and in-service subject specific SEN training for music teachers remains lacking; the allocation of school-based SEN support

resources does not reach non-core subject classrooms, while societal mind-sets continue to hold views counter to those that seek ‘inclusive education’.

CONCLUSION

In Hong Kong, the aim of providing inclusive education “is concerned with the learning and participation of all students, not only those with impairments or those who are categorized as having special educational needs” (EDB 2008, 1). This aim redefines inclusion to address the needs of all students -- not only those designated with SEN. This broader perspective places the provision of SEN professional training and SEN school-based resourcing within direct competition with the needs of all students, a competition that leads to priorities exemplified by favouring goal of core over non-core subject teaching. Given these broader priorities, implementing inclusive education presents teachers in Hong Kong with a specific professional challenge – one that challenges Darrow (2009). By mandating that ‘all’ students feel supported and are respectful and accepting of each other makes for a novel and insightful definition of inclusive education. However, failing to professionally support the implementation of inclusive education leaves these reporting music teachers unsurprisingly bereft. There is still a long way to go before the climate for successful inclusion in Hong Kong music classrooms can be formed. At present, according to the findings of this study, inclusive education in Hong Kong is a pathway for both SEN students and their music teachers to ‘learned helplessness’.

To avoid Hong Kong's inclusive education resulting in this pessimistic 'learned helplessness', the research findings here indicate a clear need for extending the current professional development programs to go beyond the current core subjects – Chinese Language and mathematics – specifically to include music teachers. Additionally, school administrators require appropriate resources – such as flexible time-tabling; curriculum planning time; team-teaching – to administratively support the full implementation of inclusive education specifically within Hong Kong primary school music classrooms.

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