

# Delivering an In-service Teacher Training Course for Inclusion in Hong Kong: Evaluation and Reflection

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## *Abstract*

The number of students with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream education in Hong Kong has increased, but the lack of professional training for in-service teachers appears to impede the successful implementation of an inclusive education policy. This study aims to evaluate and reflect on the delivery of an in-service inclusive education teacher training course provided by a local teacher training institution. A total of 3,274 teachers took this course between 2007 and 2010. Students' responses to an exit questionnaire were used to assess the course. The attitudes of the respondents towards the aim, content, resources, effect and value of the course and the level of satisfaction were generally positive, and increased as it evolved over time. The practical aspects (e.g., case analysis, classroom level strategies, guest lecturers' sharing and group discussion) were appreciated most by respondents. The implications of the findings and suggestions for further improvement are presented and discussed.

*Keywords: Inclusive Education; Teacher Education; Professional Development; Course Development and Evaluation*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO 1994) has encouraged the development of inclusive education worldwide. The Hong Kong government enacted the 'White Paper on Rehabilitation – Equal Opportunities and Full Participation: a Better Tomorrow for All' in 1995, which sets out the policy of including students with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream schools. The Disability Discrimination Ordinance (DDO) issued by the Equal Opportunities Commission (1997) requires mainstream schools to accept students with SEN whenever possible, unless there are compelling reasons not to do so. The number of students with SEN studying in mainstream schools has increased since the introduction of this legislative framework, and after the Hong Kong Education Department launched a pilot project to promote inclusion in 1997 (Education and Manpower Bureau 2005). Approximately 60% of Hong Kong mainstream schools have received extra funding to implement the policy of inclusive education (Sin 2010).

The principles and core values of inclusive education have been widely accepted, but the feasibility of practical implementation and the potential resulting negative effects have prompted much debate. This gap between the principle and the practice has been pointed out by researchers within (Sin 2010; Yan and Sin 2014, 2015) and outside of Hong Kong (Chhabra, Strivasta and Strivasta 2010; Florian 2005; Johnstone and Chapman 2009). In a survey of Hong Kong educational policies (Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union 2007), 1,020 teachers were asked to rate 30 educational policies carried out over the past 10 years for their effectiveness in improving education, appropriateness in execution and necessity. Inclusive education was rated as the second most ineffective policy in improving education, the third most inappropriate in execution, and fourth in the list of the most unnecessary policies. This indicates the level of resistance to inclusive education among teachers, and suggests that further efforts are needed to address the problem.

Bradshaw and Mundia (2006) argued that appropriate professional training and adequate resources are crucial

determinants of the successful implementation of an inclusive policy. Previous studies (e.g., Chhabra, Strivasta and Strivasta 2010; Sharma et al. 2013) suggested a lack of professional training led to teachers' being unwilling to carry out inclusive education. In general, professional training in special or inclusive education has positive effects on teachers. Training has been found to promote positive attitudes towards people with disabilities and inclusion (Campbell, Gilmore and Cuskelly 2003; de Boer, Pijl and Minnaert 2011; Leatherman 2007; Sharma, Forlin and Loreman 2008), enhance self-efficacy and confidence in teaching in inclusive education (Anderson, Klassen and Georgiou 2007; Pijl 2010; Richards 2010; Woo 2007) and ease teachers' concerns about their knowledge and the stress levels associated with dealing with students with SEN (Chong, Forlin and Au 2007). Only recently has a course related to inclusive education become a compulsory element of teacher education for pre-service teachers in Hong Kong. Most in-service teachers are not equipped with the knowledge or skills to teach students with SEN, and without specific training in special/inclusive education, they often feel unprepared and are unable to accommodate SEN students in the classroom (Minke et al. 1996; Mosia 2014). The need for professional training in inclusive education in Hong Kong is therefore particularly urgent, and teachers who have little personal experience of inclusion and instruction tend to be didactic and examination-oriented (Forlin and Sin 2010). It is evident that the in-service training currently available cannot adequately prepare teachers for dealing with SEN students, and may be a hurdle in the successful implementation of the Hong Kong government's inclusive-education policy (Sin 2004, 2010).

## **2 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

As a response, the Hong Kong government launched a five-year teacher professional development framework in 2007. A local teacher training institute was commissioned to provide Basic (30 hours), Advanced (90 hours) and Thematic (60 hours) courses on 'Catering for Diverse Learning Needs' for primary, secondary and special school teachers. The Basic course aims to develop teacher competency in addressing classroom diversity. Participants develop a positive and appropriate attitude toward inclusive education, learn the principles and policies specific to Hong Kong and acquire related supporting strategies and skills. The Advanced course aims to enable teachers to develop an inclusive policy, practice and culture. Participants examine the whole-school approach framework, review their schools' special needs programmes and understand the requirements of two categories of special needs and related supporting activities. The Thematic courses aim to increase competency in teaching students with various types of special needs. Participants further review the supporting strategies, curriculum accommodation, teaching resources, behaviour management, teamwork and community support for a particular category of students with special needs, such as autism spectrum disorders or attention deficit/hyperactivity disorders (ADHD). Between 2007 and 2011, 10% of teachers were expected to attend the Basic course, 3% to attend the Advanced course and a significant number expected to attend the Thematic courses. The target for this in-service training is more than 10,000 teachers over the five-year period (Sin 2010).

This study reviews the development and delivery of the Basic course to the first three cohorts of the programme. Course participants provided feedback, evaluation and reflection of their experiences over the past three years, which will serve to further improve the course and aid in the development of other in-service teacher training courses in inclusive education.

### ***2.1 Design of the Course***

The Basic Course on Catering for Diverse Learning Needs aims to enhance teacher competency in developing classroom diversity, with the following specific objectives:

- understand the policy and principles of inclusive education in Hong Kong and the current methods of supporting students with different types of SENs in an inclusive environment;
- develop a positive attitude and a comfortable environment to meet the needs of different learners;
- apply appropriate curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, accommodation and supporting strategies and skills to cater for the diverse learning needs of students with different types of SEN, which will also benefit other students.

As suggested by Woo (2007), a critical and dense level of content on inclusion topics helps to enhance competency in inclusive classroom teaching. The course was delivered in a five-day full-time block release mode, with supply teachers supported by the government. Intensive training was given to teachers over a relatively short period. To equip participants with knowledge, a positive attitude and practical skills when teaching an inclusive class, a wide range of topics were covered.

- Hong Kong’s inclusive education policy, principles and practices including the 3-tier intervention model that caters for students with SEN in ordinary schools, and the provisions and resources for inclusive education in Hong Kong.

- The Disability Discrimination Ordinance and the relevant Code of Practice in Education and their implications for educational practices.

- An overview of the characteristics, identification and educational needs of students with autism, intellectual disabilities, physical disabilities and specific learning difficulties, visual impairment, hearing impairment, speech and language impairment and ADHD/emotional and behavioural difficulties.

- Understanding the resources and support in the community.
- Strategic use of pedagogical methods and motivational techniques in teaching students with diverse learning styles, such as peer support, cooperative learning, collaborative teaching, project learning and assistive technology.
- Assessment and accommodation of students with mixed abilities.
- Curriculum differentiation and processes that ensure all students can access essential knowledge and skills.
- Successful experiences and sharing.

A traditional face-to-face approach was used to deliver the course, but it was recognised that an environment in which the learner interacts can greatly enhance the learning experience (Boettcher 2007). Emphasis was therefore placed on alternative forms of learning experiences such as discussion, case analysis, sharing, visits and group presentation, through which participants can interact and learn from each other.

The assessment tasks consisted of a group project on case analysis (30%) and an action plan on supporting classroom diversity (70%). A certificate of completion was issued to participants who successfully fulfilled the attendance requirements and obtained satisfactory results in all of the required assessment tasks.

## 2.2 Course Evaluation

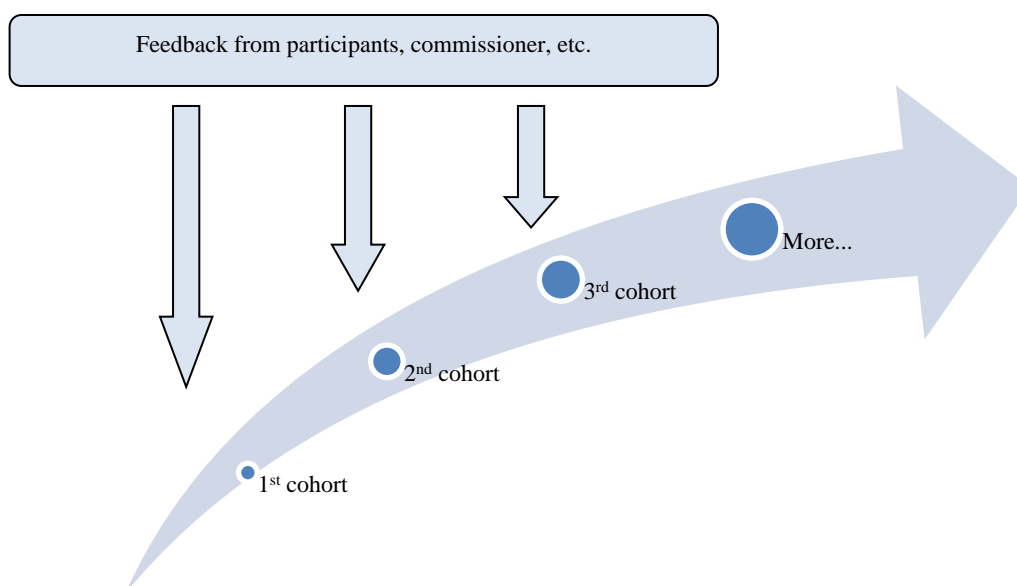


FIG. 1 EVALUATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE COURSE

The courses were designed through a top-down approach, as they were initiated by the government in response to

needs identified in schools. A programme team was established by the commissioned institute to oversee the development, administration and teaching of the courses. A bottom-up approach was then implemented to improve the course, whereby participants' feedback provided significant insights regarding their requirements and improvements to course delivery. Reviews from the commissioner and the course committee also contributed to the process. Figure 1 presents the mode of course evaluation and development. With the aid of the feedback to the course collected, this study aims to evaluate and reflect on the delivery of this in-service inclusive education teacher training course.

### 3 METHODS

#### 3.1 The Exit Survey

Exit surveys are commonly used to collect students' feedback on courses in higher education (e.g., Foster et al. 2008; Novell, Bohigas and Jaén 2009). On completion of the training course, the participants completed a questionnaire made up of Likert-scale items and open questions to obtain their perceptions and opinions of the course aims, contents, resources and support, effect and value. Macdonald (2006) stated that when evaluating programmes, emphasis should be placed on learning from mistakes and success, and the outcomes of the evaluation should inform any further improvements. The survey was intended to evaluate the course's appropriateness and effectiveness in supporting in-service teachers develop classroom diversity. It was also expected to provide information to help further improve the course and increase the possibility of promoting it to a wider audience. Students were made aware of this purpose and were assured that the data would be analysed as a whole, with no individual respondents identified.

#### 3.2 Instrument

The exit survey was conducted using a Chinese questionnaire made up of six sections (A to F) plus demographic information. The questions were based on qualitative findings on inclusive education derived from focus group discussions with teachers and experts. A pilot test was conducted on a small group of teachers to ensure readability and face validity. Section A consisted of seven items exploring students' understanding of the course aims. Section B was made up of eight items to evaluate the appropriateness and usefulness of the course contents. Section C included eight items to measure students' satisfaction with the course's resources and support. In Section D, six items examined the effect of the course on students after completing their training. Section E used four items to collect students' opinions on the value of the course. In Section F, students were asked question to elicit their personal opinions of the course, such as what aspect of the course they appreciated and what kind of improvements were needed. The sections of the questionnaire are presented in Table 1.

For items in Sections A to E, a 5-point Likert scale coded as Strongly Disagree (1), Disagree (2), Neutral (3), Agree (4) and Strongly Agree (5) was used as the response scale. All items were positively worded and coded so higher scores represent higher levels of agreement with the statement.

TABLE 1 SECTIONS OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Section	Aspect under investigation	Number of Item
Demographic information		15
Section A	Students' perception of the course aims	7
Section B	Students' opinions of the course content	8
Section C	Students' opinions of resource and support for the course	8
Section D	Students' opinions of the effect of the course	6
Section E	Students' opinions of the value of the course	4
Section F	Open questions	2

#### 3.3 Participants

From September 2007 to July 2010 a total of 3274 teachers, which represents about 5% of the total Hong Kong

teacher population, completed the course. Of these, 3,032, 92.6% of the trainees, completed and returned the exit questionnaire. The participants' details are listed in Table 2.

TABLE 2 SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

Academic year	Number of teachers completing the course	Number of teachers returning the survey	Return rate
2007-08	1201	1105	92.0%
2008-09	978	907	92.7%
2009-10	1095	1020	93.2%
Total	3274	3032	92.6%

The demographic data show that of the 3,032 respondents, 1,507 (49.7%) were from primary schools, 1,375 (45.3%) from secondary schools, 131 (4.3%) from special schools and 19 (0.6%) did not provide their school information. There were 2,212 (73.0%) female and 802 male (26.5%) respondents and 18 (0.6%) did not indicate their gender. Only 229 (7.6%) of the respondents reported any previous special education training, 523 (17.2%) reported that training was in progress while the majority (72.4%) received no special education training at all. The majority (1,898, 62.6%) of respondents reported that their schools were carrying out inclusive education, 782 (25.8%) reported 'No' and 284 (9.4%) responded 'don't know'. Regarding the reasons for registering for the training course, 1,186 (39.1%) respondents cited 'needs of working', 639 (21.1%) responded 'recommendation from the principal', 646 (21.3%) responded 'personal interest', 446 (14.7%) reported more than one reason and 115 (3.8%) provided no information.

## 4 RESULTS

The mean ratings of students' responses from three cohorts were calculated for each item. A series of ANOVAs was conducted to ascertain whether there was any significant difference between the responses of the three cohorts, which would reflect the evolution of the course from the service-user perspective, and provide further insights for development.

Table 3 presents the responses to the items in Section A (students' perceptions of the course aims). The mean ratings of all items for the three cohorts were found to be higher than 4.0. Students therefore endorsed the course aims, particularly for item A1 (understand the special educational needs of students) and A4 (share experiences with others). The students' feedback enables ongoing improvement to the course, so the degree of endorsement for each item increased from 2007/08 to 2009/10. The ANOVA analysis showed that the differences between cohorts were statistically significant ( $p < .01$ ).

TABLE 3 STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE COURSE AIMS (MEAN)

		2007/08 (N=1105)	2008/09 (N=907)	2009/10 (N=1020)	<i>p</i> for ANOVA
A1	Understand the special educational needs of students	4.21	4.30	4.41	.000
A2	Apply appropriate curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, accommodation and supporting strategies and skills to cater for the diverse learning needs of students with different types of SEN	4.02	4.15	4.29	.000
A3	Enhance my professional skills in catering for diversity	3.98	4.10	4.25	.000
A4	Share experiences with others	4.22	4.32	4.37	.000
A5	Widen my horizon in catering for diversity	4.11	4.21	4.32	.000
A6	Facilitate my reflection in school work	4.13	4.21	4.31	.000
A7	Encourage me to formulate action plans for teaching improvement	3.96	4.05	4.18	.000

Note: the response scale comprises a 5-point Likert scale with the categories 'Strongly Disagree', 'Disagree', 'Neutral', 'Agree' and 'Strongly Agree', coded as 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5.

Table 4 presents students' opinions of the course contents. The results demonstrate that the course contents were well-received by the students and that they particularly appreciated the instruction of tutors (item B7) and the

benefits to their professional development (item B8). The degree of acceptance for all aspects related to the course content increased significantly ( $p < .01$ ) from the first to the third cohorts.

TABLE 4 STUDENTS' OPINIONS OF THE COURSE CONTENT (MEAN)

		2007/08 (N=1105)	2008/09 (N=907)	2009/10 (N=1020)	<i>p</i> for ANOVA
B1	The content meets the needs of my classroom teaching.	3.92	4.06	4.19	.000
B2	The content meets the needs of my school development.	3.89	4.05	4.16	.000
B3	Both theory and practice are focused on.	3.76	3.92	4.11	.000
B4	Classroom activities enhance learning.	3.92	4.04	4.17	.000
B5	The collaboration activities help my understanding of different school-based work in catering for diversity.	3.94	4.06	4.15	.000
B6	The content provides me with updates on the development and insights.	3.98	4.09	4.18	.000
B7	The instruction of tutors improves my classroom practices.	4.03	4.14	4.29	.000
B8	The content was useful to my professional development as a teacher for diversity.	4.05	4.17	4.29	.000

Note: the response scale comprises a 5-point Likert scale with the categories 'Strongly Disagree', 'Disagree', 'Neutral', 'Agree' and 'Strongly Agree', coded as 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5.

Students positively evaluated the resources and support for the course (see Table 5). They particularly appreciated the counselling services provided by tutors (item C3) and the learning materials (item C5). The mean ratings for the item on the convenience of transportation (item C7) were relatively neutral for 2007/08 and 2008/09 but increased significantly ( $p < .01$ ) for 2009/10. The significant increase in the degree of satisfaction was also found for the other resources and support for the course.

TABLE 5 STUDENTS' OPINIONS OF RESOURCES AND SUPPORT FOR THE COURSE (MEAN)

		2007/08 (N=1105)	2008/09 (N=907)	2009/10 (N=1020)	<i>p</i> for ANOVA
C1	Information in the course/module handbook and website is adequate.	3.83	3.94	4.02	.000
C2	Staff of CSNSIE are helpful.	3.74	3.80	3.90	.000
C3	The tutors are able to offer advice.	4.07	4.16	4.29	.000
C4	There are channels for expressing views.	3.94	4.06	4.14	.000
C5	The learning materials are adequate and of practical use.	3.89	4.07	4.21	.000
C6	The campus environment and facilities are desirable.	3.52	3.50	3.89	.000
C7	The public transport nearby is convenient.	3.32	3.32	3.53	.000
C8	The AV resources in classroom are adequate.	3.91	3.93	4.10	.000

Note: the response scale comprises a 5-point Likert scale with the categories 'Strongly Disagree', 'Disagree', 'Neutral', 'Agree' and 'Strongly Agree', coded as 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5.

Students were encouraged to apply what they learned from this training course to their daily work and share their learning and experiences with other teachers in their schools. This was confirmed by their responses to items in Section E, which explores their opinions of the course's effect. Table 6 shows that after training, the students were willing to share what they had learnt with others (item D4), were willing to practically apply the theories (item D3) and were confident about their understanding about and reflection on inclusive education (item D2). Similar to other sections, their evaluation of the effect of the course became increasingly positive from 2007/08 to 2009/10 ( $p < .01$ ).

Table 7 shows that students placed much value on the course. They tended to agree that their colleagues should take the course (item E1). They were willing to recommend it to their peers (item E2), and they also thought that the course should be an accredited academic requirement (item E3) and confirmed as a regular training course on special education (item E4). Again, the mean ratings for each item increased from 2007/08 to 2009/10 and the differences

reached statistical significance ( $p < .01$ ).

TABLE 6 STUDENTS' OPINIONS OF THE EFFECT OF THE COURSE (MEAN)

		2007/08 (N=1105)	2008/09 (N=907)	2009/10 (N=1020)	<i>p</i> for ANOVA
D1	I have confidence to manage the classroom diversity.	3.51	3.78	3.92	.000
D2	I have begun to know and reflect more about inclusion.	3.91	4.00	4.15	.000
D3	I will integrate the theory into my classroom practices.	3.96	4.06	4.15	.000
D4	I will share my learning with others.	4.03	4.11	4.21	.000
D5	I will take part actively in the learning support for diversity after my study.	3.89	3.99	4.09	.000
D6	I hope to study the Advanced Course for Diverse Learning Needs.	3.87	3.93	3.99	.001

Note: the response scale comprises a 5-point Likert scale with the categories 'Strongly Disagree', 'Disagree', 'Neutral', 'Agree' and 'Strongly Agree', coded as 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5.

TABLE 7 STUDENTS' OPINIONS OF THE VALUE OF THE COURSE (MEAN)

		2007/08 (N=1105)	2008/09 (N=907)	2009/10 (N=1020)	<i>p</i> for ANOVA
E1	My colleagues should study the basic course as well.	4.10	4.22	4.31	.000
E2	I will recommend this course to my colleagues.	4.07	4.19	4.33	.000
E3	This course should be academically recognised.	3.87	3.91	4.03	.000
E4	This course should be recognised as a special education course.	4.09	4.12	4.24	.000

Note: the response scale comprises a 5-point Likert scale with the categories 'Strongly Disagree', 'Disagree', 'Neutral', 'Agree' and 'Strongly Agree', coded as 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5.

The open questions in the final section of the questionnaire asked the course participants to comment on the aspects they appreciated most and any improvement needed. Through qualitative content analysis, the comments were categorised into main and sub-themes, with commonalities identified – principally with regard to the aspects that were most appreciated and the improvements needed – and frequencies tallied. The five most popular responses for these two themes are presented below, with the percentages of the total responses in parentheses.

#### 4.1 Aspects Most Appreciated

- The professionalism of lecturers is evident. They provided high quality instruction with patience and enthusiasm. (44%)
- The course content is comprehensive and helpful in understanding students' diversity. (30%)
- The practical parts (e.g., case analysis and classroom level strategies) are helpful in dealing with students with SEN. (29%)
- Guest lecturers' sharing. (15%)
- Classmates' sharing during discussion. (12%)

#### 4.2 Improvement Needed

- The length of this course could be extended. (35%)
- This course should be provided to more or even all teachers and principals, to meet the requirements of the whole-school approach for inclusive education. (35%)
- An alternative delivery mode (e.g., holiday course, part-time or on-line course) could be used. (24%)
- More case analysis, group discussion and practical strategies could be provided. (23%)

- Assignment workload could be reduced. (10%)

## 5 DISCUSSION

Undoubtedly, the vision of inclusive education cannot be achieved without the involvement of teachers who are equipped with the necessary knowledge and pedagogic skills to cater for students' special needs. The course described in this study served as a response to the pressing need for teacher training to enable the Hong Kong government's inclusive-education policy to be successfully implemented.

In addition to the opinions of the course providers, the feedback of the participants suggested further improvements from the perspective of service users. Oliver (2000) and Macdonald (2006) posit that identifying ways for improvement rather than the evaluation itself is important. The programme team used the participants' opinions constructively, as depicted in Figure 1. Their feedback from the exit survey was summarised and reported to all of the teaching team members. Thorough discussions were conducted regarding what adjustments could help to address students' needs. Based on the discussion results and available resources, appropriate action was taken in the following year.

Participants' responses to the structured items revealed that in general, they had relatively positive attitudes towards the course in terms of the aims, contents, resources and support, and to the value associated with the course. Their favourable views demonstrated that the following expected learning outcomes, identified by the course providers to up-skill mainstream teachers (Sin, Tsang, Poon and Lai 2010), have been achieved.

- Learning the concepts of inclusion
- Examining knowledge in special needs
- Mastering the instructional techniques for diversity
- Sharing the successful experience
- Reflecting on the belief in teaching
- Participating in the professional dialogue
- Using the community resources
- Disseminating the research outcome
- Advocating the whole-school approach

The participants' levels of satisfaction with all aspects of this course were shown to significantly increase from 2007/08 to 2009/10, which justifies the effectiveness of follow-up improvement based on participants' feedback, and gives credence to this evolutionary mode of course development.

In their responses to open questions, the course participants showed the greatest appreciation for the professionalism of lecturers and the comprehensive course content. They also valued the sharing of real experiences by guest lecturers and classmates. As for further improvement of the programmes, the participants recommended that the course length be extended, and that the course should be promoted to all teachers and principals to meet the requirements of the whole-school approach to inclusive education. This also reflects the high demand for in-service teacher training in inclusive education, and is evidence of the success of the course. Teachers have been found to become significantly more positive about including students with SEN and less concerned about inclusion after completing this course (Forlin and Sin 2010). Their perceptions of self-efficacy in using inclusive instructions, managing behaviour and working collaboratively also increased significantly.

Two specific implications can be drawn from the feedback of the participants, which can inform the design of future in-service teacher training courses. First and most important, relevant and concrete skills should be provided so that goals in specific situations can be met. The theory is important, but teachers are more eager to acquire 'practical solutions' from the training course. As revealed in their feedback, the practical aspects of the course (e.g., case analysis, classroom level strategies, guest lecturers' sharing and group discussion) were most appreciated by the

participants. Second, participants' specific preferences or requirements should be noted and addressed, which may differ from those of pre-service student teachers. They may, for example, prefer to take the course during the holidays, in a part-time way or online, to accommodate it into their working schedule. This could be achieved by negotiation between the course commissioner and the provider, to optimise the effectiveness of the course. Reduced assignment workload is also preferred, due to the busy schedules of Hong Kong teachers. Innovative assessment methods and serious consideration are required to achieve a balance: the reasonable requests of teachers should be satisfied, but the quality of the course must be maintained. Transportation is a non-academic but very important factor taken into account by this in-service teacher training course. The level of satisfaction regarding transportation was relatively neutral for 2007/08 and 2008/09, but increased significantly for 2009/10. This change was due to the relocation of the teaching venues, based on feedback from the first and second cohorts. In 2007/08 and 2008/09, most of the classes were held in the main campus of the institute, located uptown. In 2009/10, more classes were scheduled at another campus closer to the town centre, with more convenient access to public transport.

## 6 CONCLUSION

Providing in-service teacher training courses on inclusion is a tough and challenging task, due to the high levels of demand for tailor-made content, useful front-line experience, up-to-date knowledge, feasible instructional strategies, practical skills in classrooms and accessible community resources (Sin, Tsang, Poon and Lai 2010). However, continuous provision of this training to in-service teachers is necessary for the successful implementation of inclusive education in Hong Kong. The Basic course is only an initial step towards such an endeavour. Further professional training, such as the Advanced and Thematic courses, are needed to equip teachers with the competency to create inclusive schools and to teach students with various types of special needs. These courses should be promoted to disseminate the information to all teachers, if possible, enabling them to progressively support inclusion.

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