Learning disabilities burden families

by Jimmy Tsang

Schools’ failure to spot students with learning disabilities brings distress to families already struggling to cope with the issue, parents say.

Meanwhile, the government is also under fire in the Ombudsman report released in February for inadequate services to meet the needs of learning-impaired students, whose numbers have increased more than six-fold in the past five years.

Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD) include a whole spectrum of problematic behaviours in learning. These group of children often suffer from difficulties in one or two areas of learning, usually reading, speaking or mathematical calculation, according to Hong Kong Special Learning Difficulties Research Team.

From Education Bureau (EDB) statistics listed in the Ombudsman report, there were 8,870 students in primary and secondary schools identified with SLD in year 2006/07, rising from 1,360 in year 2003/04.

The EDB said a better awareness of the issue and more assessment tools available have contributed to the increase.

Although more cases have been identified, misunderstanding about the disabilities continues to cause family discord.

Jong Lee Pui-ha has two children and one of her sons suffers from dyslexia, a disability in reading and writing. Mrs Jong said her husband did not accept the fact that their son had such a problem.

“My husband treats him as a lazy son and abandons him. I once got so upset that I locked myself in the toilet,” she said. “My son cried and begged me to open the door...but my husband did nothing and just played with my other son who does not suffer from SLD.”

Mrs Jong found it hard to control her temper. She felt remorse for having a learning impaired son. Sometimes she would push her son when she is in deep frustration. She was also disappointed when her son told her he wanted to leave school.

Hong Kong Association for Specific Learning Disabilities (HKASLD), a non-governmental organisation, has interviewed 176 parents with SLD children. About 46 per cent of them had insomnia while 43 per cent of them suffered from anxiety disorder and more than 13 per cent had thought of committing suicide.

Another mother of a learning disabled girl, Szeto Cheung Tak- yee said teachers’ inability to identify learning disabilities could discourage children from learning and eventually upset the parents.

Mrs Szeto was upset after knowing that her daughter was embarrassed in front of the whole class because of bad results in tests. “My daughter did not tell me at first. She honestly believed she’s not smart. That hurts her incentive to learn,” she said.

Wendy Leung Tsui-wan, the programme manager of Uncle James' Child Development Centre, said:

“Older teachers may not know about learning disabilities. Some tough students may argue their problems with them. In that case, the teachers are likely to complain to their parents and that will further stress the parents.”

She added that parents should inform schools if their children are diagnosed with SLD.

“Schools will make adjustment if informed, considerations such as reducing workload or number of assignments for the student,” said Ms Leung, whose centre provides training for SLD students.

Meanwhile, the vice chairperson of HKASLD, Hazel Law Hui-sim, said some schools think the admission of SLD students may affect the school’s ranking and reputation.

“Even if the schools provide help for students, they will ask the parents not to tell others about the arrangements. For example, they may use storerooms as special examination room and send learning-impaired students there,” she said.

“It shows that the monitoring mechanisms of the government are inadequate,” Mrs Law said. “The schools may not follow the EDB guidelines on teaching children with disabilities.”

“She added that there are no clear statements that require them to do so. They can decline the parents’ request for special arrangements.”

The Disability Discrimination Ordinance, specifies the Code of practice on Education, mandates that schools should make special arrangement for students with special needs.

Measures such as extending examination time, enlisting the fonts of exam papers and allowing the students to take exams in a classroom instead of a hall should be considered.

Parents can approach Child Assessment Services of the Department of Health if they think their children suffer from SLD. Education psychologists would then follow the case and assist schools to accommodate the children in accordance with the guidelines issued by the EDB.

Mrs Law said families are prone to disharmony if parents are inconsistent of the problems their children are facing.

She said it was common among the HKASLD members to find fathers reluctant to accept their dyslexic children. This could adversely affect the child’s personal growth.

“For example, the children would be too afraid to show parents their poor dictation scripts and forge their parents’ signature to fool the teachers,” said Mrs Law, who has a dyslexic son and a daughter.

Jackal Ip Chi-yung, a counselling teacher who faces SLD children in his everyday work, witnessed various conflicts aroused from the issue.

“Parents tend to compare their children with others’. This can continuously regard their children as inferior,” said Mr Ip.
He mentioned another example: the parents of an SLD student stopped giving him pocket money because of poor results. The student resorted to stealing money from his classmates so that he could buy his meals.

“We could see that a learning disorder originally concerning one student could escalate to a conflict that affects two parties. This type of problem is more difficult to solve,” he said.

“The key is to get the students interested in learning. Just like playing video games, if the children get to know the ways to win, they will find satisfaction and keep playing it.” Mr Ip said.

Mr Ip works at Buddhist Tai Kwong Middle School, which has developed a tailor-made syllabus for first formers which suffer from learning difficulties.

Principal Lee Wai-shing said parents should not push their children too much in areas where the students have no confidence.

“If the children like tae kwon do, a Korean martial art, or dancing, for example, the parents should let them have a go, as this will build up their confidence,” Mr Lee said.

The principal added that their campus welcomes students to perform publicly as this will in turn make students believe in their talents and enjoy school life.

Concerning government policies, Mr Lee said the SLD assessment procedure of the Department of Health needs to be sped up; some students have to wait for several years until the treatment is in place. The Department of Health declined to disclose the waiting period for treatment.

Mr Lee also suggested that the government should put more resources in non-governmental organisations, like Society of Boys’ Centres or HKASLD, which are effective in stimulating the awareness of SLD through workshops for parents.

Karen Kwok Kwan Wai-ching, a member of the EDB’s educational psychology division said the bureau has implemented an early identification programme for primary-one pupils. The scheme helps teachers spot possible SLD cases.

“If students are identified to have SLD, the EDB will invite school teachers and parents to free training courses that will help nurture the children,” said the senior school development officer.

The courses teach word recognition skills, multi-sensory learning and paired reading skills.

Last year, the EDB joined with the Hong Kong Jockey Club and local universities for a five-year project, Read and Write.

The Hong Kong Jockey Club, has donated HK$153.7 million for the comprehensive programme that targets at local Chinese students. Highlights include the development of Chinese language kits and teachers’ training.

She said the EDB also raises public awareness on the issue through different channels, such as pamphlets and Roadshow, a multi-dimensional advertising on public transports.

In the Ombudsman report released in February this year, the government watchdog criticised the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority (HKEAA) as the application for special arrangements in public exams take too long and the transparency of the process is low.

As a response to the report, from 2008, HKEAA announced that the application results for special arrangements will be released in two batches in January. The appeal period has also been extended to four weeks, from one week previously.

A parent representative will also be added in the examination authority’s Task Group in charge of the arrangement application.

Yet, details on membership requirements and how resource would be allocated in carrying out the measures are being discussed.