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TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

Support for the continuation of the *Sign Bilingualism and Co-enrolment in Deaf Education Programme*

It is with great pleasure that I write this letter in support of the **Sign Bilingualism and Co-enrolment in Deaf Education Programme** (SLCO) developed by the Centre for Sign Linguistics and Deaf Studies, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, directed by Professor Gladys Tang and her team, and supported by the Hong Kong Jockey Club.

I first learned about this programme through my Post-Graduate Diploma in Education English Major student, Ms Fion Wong, who is a teaching staff member of the SCLO project. As her tutor, I was her supervisor for the Practical Teaching component of the PGDE programme. I had the great fortune to observe Ms Wong's Co-enrolment English lessons at Kowloon Bay St. John the Baptist Catholic Primary School, and what I observed and learned made a deep impression on me. The lessons I observed were conducted in both English and Hong Kong Sign Language, and involved students in learning, practicing and using English for meaningful expression. During the lessons there was lively interaction between hearing and deaf teachers and students. Deaf and hearing children collaborated in sign language and spoken and written language to work out a language puzzle. Hearing and deaf children talked and joked with each other in sign language. Hearing children called over a deaf teacher to ask questions or seek advice, deaf children asked for assistance from hearing teachers. Deaf children spoke aloud along with hearing children when playing a vocabulary game. True bilingualism was strongly evident, as I couldn't always tell who was 'hearing' or who was 'deaf'.

Last October, the student-teachers in Year 3 of the BEd Primary English programme were about to study a module entitled, *Catering for Diverse Learning Needs*, taught by inclusive education specialist, Dr. Feliz Polat. As Programme Convenor at the time, I took the opportunity to enrich this module by arranging a visit to KBSJB Primary School so our student-teachers could learn more about the about the SLCO programme and to experience a powerful example of 'inclusive education' in Hong Kong. The visit was eye-opening and inspiring for all of us, and many of the student-teachers have since taken up training in sign language, and are currently assisting in the school's summer English programme for deaf students. In addition, several students will have the opportunity to carry out their

teaching practicum in this school in the coming academic year and gain further experience and understanding of the Co-enrolment programme. This is an extremely valuable opportunity, much welcomed by our students. It is my personal and professional wish that many of my students will go on to teach in sign bilingual, co-enrolment classrooms when they graduate.

As an educator, I fully support inclusive education and am challenged by its far reaching social and educational aims and complex understandings of language and learning which interconnect different fields, such as speech and hearing sciences, language acquisition and cognition, child development, multiliteracies and linguistics, curriculum, pedagogy and policy. Professor Roger Slee, a leading scholar on inclusive education, reminds us that the core principle of inclusive education is, of course, *inclusion*. This does not mean that a student with special educational needs is simply given a special desk to sit at, special learning materials, and a special tutor to work with, while the other “regular” children carry on with “regular” classroom learning. While such practices are well intentioned, may be theoretically informed, and may offer certain learning opportunities to children with special needs, these practices may fundamentally serve to *exclude* students through labeling, isolation, and separation. Such practices seem to miss the core ethos of inclusive education: that *everyone* – students, teachers, parents and wider community - benefits, learns and grows from inclusive educational practice. Inclusive education is thus transformative as it is built on social democratic educational principles of community, equity and social justice.

The SLCO programme at KBSJB Primary School is an exemplar of inclusive education. There is no doubt that deaf children are learning English, Maths and other subjects more effectively in the programme, but the impact is much deeper and wider: deaf children in this school - who in other contexts may be profoundly isolated and lonely - experience human connection, friendship and acceptance, all vital for personal, emotional growth and well being. In this inclusive context, the children and teachers - both deaf and hearing – expand their linguistic and communicative capacities; they learn that communication is complex and social, and not simply about vocabulary, spelling and correct grammar. Most importantly, they learn to understand, respect, and form friendships with others who are different from themselves. ‘Difference’ in a truly inclusive environment such as the SLCO programme is commonplace, taken-for-granted, even mundane. These are extremely meaningful and far reaching learning outcomes, not easy to achieve in today’s globalised world of increased competition, inequality, materialism, and environmental degradation. The continuation and expansion of this project is therefore not only important, but a social and educational imperative.

When the BEd Year 3 students returned to campus, they wrote an article about their visit and published it in the Faculty of Education’s newsletter, *Education Matters*. In the article they wrote about what they learned and observed about co-enrolment teaching, but they also reflected on the nature of communication, the power of community, and learning and teaching as human and social processes. They said they became better teachers. This is the transformative impact of true, inclusive education.

The SLCO project manager, teachers and staff, together with Principal Margaret So are amongst the most dedicated educators I have ever met. The programme is deeply deserving of further and continuous support from the Hong Kong Government and other funding bodies. I sincerely hope that the SLCO Programme will continue to thrive to help deaf and hearing children learn, to bring communities together, and to inspire young student-teachers to make the world a better place.

Please do not hesitate to contact me for any further information.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Margaret So". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Margaret M. Lo

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