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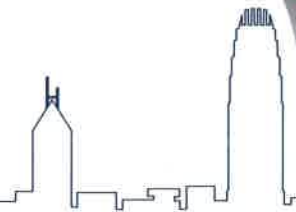
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# “It Takes Two to Tango”

*Dr Jeremy Greenberg, Director of The Children’s Institute of Hong Kong, is the recipient of AmCham Charitable Foundation’s 2013 Ira Dan Kaye Community Service Award. He and his wife Christine Greenberg of The Harbour School are two vocal voices on Special Education Needs (SEN) in Hong Kong. In a recent article entitled “It Takes Two to Tango: Inclusive Schooling in Hong Kong,” Dr and Mrs. Greenberg offer great insights into the local education system, SEN education and what is needed to create a better future for children with special needs. Daniel Kwan sat down with Dr Greenberg to learn more about the issue*



Jeremy Greenberg

**biz.hk:** Why does the problem of SEN seem more prevalent today than it did decades ago?

**Greenberg:** Some people have studied this issue. For example, in the US, there is an advocacy organization called Autism Speaks – and they have been tracking and publishing the number of children who have autism (which is just one type of SEN). In 2012, about one in every 88 children born in the US was found to have diagnosable condition of autism. That is almost a 10-time increase from about 20 years ago when the number was about one in every 10,000 in the 1990s.

Why the increase? The short answer is, we don’t know. Different theories have been proposed. For example, one suggestion is that people are getting better in diagnosing children at a younger age and therefore (the issue of SEN) is popping up in the school system or into people’s radar. That’s probably true but it cannot possibly account for the numbers. And it’s also been theorized that autism or autistic tendency in children was associated with the measles combination vaccine – but that theory has since been disproven.

We really don’t know. I suspect that as population increases, so does the number of children who are going to have special education needs.

**biz.hk:** Is that trend uniform across countries?

**Greenberg:** It’s mostly true that the increase has been observed in all developed nations and many developing nations. Maybe not quite to the [same] extent but I know, for example, that Beijing Health Centre in 2005 identified that about one in every 1,000 children in Mainland China had a diagnosable condition of autism. An



increase across many other countries? Maybe not quite to the extent, but all countries are observing increases just the same.

**biz.hk:** How are countries like the US addressing the issue?

**Greenberg:** The US since 1975 has had an entitlement program, which is a public law, called the Education of All Handicapped Children's Act. It entitles children with any types of special education needs to free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment. What it means is that all efforts should be

made to keep the child in a regular classroom with regular kids. You can give them additional support but only if a child is really not learning or benefiting from that environment, should they be pulled out and put in a separate class. That's a law and every citizen of the US is entitled to that. The US has led the world in special education – no question about that. It doesn't mean it's perfect. No such public law exists in Hong Kong.

**biz.hk:** How would you describe Hong Kong's situation, and how is that issue relevant to businesses here?

**Greenberg:** It's been public knowledge that [international] schools in Hong Kong are competitive and there are waiting lists. There are about 4,200 seats short in the international school system. Because there are far fewer programs that cater to children who need special education, the issue is compounded. The English School Foundation (ESF) has 15 schools that serve about 15,000 kids, plus another 50 or so international schools. However, there are just a handful of these schools that serve children with special needs. And these are small programs with maybe a few dozens of kids each – very small scale. So the problem [of school places] is worse for those families and they have fewer choices. As a result, families and businesses trying to come and work here can't come if these families cannot find schools for their children. All of Hong Kong loses.

I get calls from Dubai, the UK, and the US regularly. And typically the conversation goes like, 'Hi, my company wants me to move to Hong Kong but I have a four-year-old child who has special needs.' And I would say, 'Ok, you can come and have a tour but you are going to have a six to 12 months waiting list.' This becomes a business problem. When a business cannot bring in an individual because of schooling problem, that business is hurt and all of Hong Kong is hurt. It's a very simple connection. We are not talking about an abstract relationship here.

**biz.hk:** How did TCI come about?

**Greenberg:** There is an old saying that 'necessity is the mother of invention.' There was an American expatriate family who lived here and had two children with special needs. There weren't really any options for the family then. They moved back to the US but had to come back to Hong Kong because the company they worked for wanted them here. They moved back in 2003 and that's when TCI started with three kids in Repulse Bay. So it was an organization developed by family and for family.

*"When a business cannot bring in an individual because of schooling problem, that business is hurt and all of Hong Kong is hurt. It's a very simple connection."*

**biz.hk:** What was the mission of TCI then?

**Greenberg:** It was then intended to be a one-to-one educational program for children with special needs, utilizing a particular type of special education called Applied Behavior Analysis. The couple ran the school until a few years later when their children were growing up and needed a different kind of placement. The ownership of the school was transferred to Dr Elizabeth (Jadis) Blurton, an American psychologist who has been working here in Hong Kong for many years. Dr Blurton hired my wife and me to come over as a teaching couple. My wife Christine Greenberg is vice principal of the Harbour School and I am director of The Children's Institute. We went from one organization to two organizations.



**biz.hk:** How was the Harbour School established?

**Greenberg:** It's important to note that TCI and the Harbour School are two separate programs but we work nicely together. We behave like we are a brother-sister program. In around 2006 to 2007, TCI teachers and students were doing so well that they needed a next step or place for TCI students to grow – to learn alongside their general education counterparts. Again, that's like in an interesting reverse-engineering process, and the Harbour School came out of that. The vision and the curriculum have been developed by Dr Blurton. It now has about 180 students from Grade 1 - 8.

There is a real emphasis on differentiation of instruction, and how that's achieved through small-size classes. With two teachers for roughly 13 kids on average per class, that's a 1:6.5 ratio. It affords teachers a class size small enough to understand each one of the students and their particular strengths and weaknesses. In a traditional classroom with 20 to 25 kids and one teacher, that teacher is not really given the opportunity to learn a particular child's strengths – mathematics, literacy or science. That's ok for an average child but not for non-average

kids who need things to be repeated five or six times. And you've also got kids who are at the other end of the spectrum, who get bored and are getting into trouble because they already know all these things and could even be smarter than the teachers. What the Harbour School does is that it provides a different approach to teaching kids. Thomas Jefferson once said that "there is nothing more unequal than the equal treatment of unequal people." That ideology is built into the mission of the Harbour School.

*"It doesn't mean we want to replicate the US system here because the US system isn't perfect. We've got the benefit of hindsight to say there are a lot of good things but there are things that can be better."*

**biz.hk:** Can you explain your differentiation of instruction?

**Greenberg:** The Harbour School does that in a couple of ways. It may provide a high group and a low group, for example, in math. Some of the teachers may need to provide different levels of homework to different kids. Everybody could be assigned different homework every day. You may have a homework assignment of one level and I may have a different math assignment.

One of the things that the school does is that it borrows from the same Applied Behavioral Analysis teaching technology that we used at TCI, and it employs a particular instructional technology called personalized system

of instructions or PSI module. That allows teachers to develop a packet of teaching material for each child while children go through those materials at their own pace. So we have a flexible system that allows the children to get what they need. Quite frankly, that's the definition of fairness. I think the Harbour School really affords the opportunity for teachers to help kids to discover what they are good at and that's probably the key to life.

Some of the grades have a waiting list and some don't. The board has a vision which is to develop a secondary school so as to be "all-through." We have outgrown our facilities here and we would like to grow and expand, for example, to have our own secondary school. It would also be small class size and lots of hands-on projects, etc.

**biz.hk:** If you could wave a magic wand and solve one problem of education in Hong Kong, then what would you do?

**Greenberg:** It would be to aid or assist – with a team of like-minded professionals – the Hong Kong Education Bureau to develop a world-class state-of-the-art SEN program for all the children in Hong Kong – Chinese, English and whatever language that they speak. And I know an army of people who would march behind me to help them do that.

It doesn't mean we want to replicate the US system here because the US system isn't perfect. We've got the benefit of hindsight to say there are a lot of good things but there are things that can be better. That's what we try to build here in The Children Institute and The Harbour School – a progressive and inclusive school community.

As I have talked in my article about the School of Tomorrow, we should have educators who know how to teach kids of any background. You have to know curriculum, scope, sequence and basic behavioral management, etc. Hong Kong needs that. It's expensive. But it's potentially cost-saving to treat people of special needs at a very early stage so that they would no longer need it. We want to avoid being penny-wise and pound-foolish. 