

Ethnic minority kids shortchanged in school

With the passing of yet another year, the oft-repeated concern that the Chinese-language support to Hong Kong's educationally marginalized non-Chinese-speaking (NCS) children is anemic has yet again been highlighted, most recently by the Audit Commission in its report dated March 31. The Audit Commission must be commended for its clinical forthrightness in publishing this damning indictment of the callous and casual attitude of the concerned educational institutions and educators toward educating Hong Kong's NCS children.

First — the good news. The total number of NCS students attending kindergartens under the Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme (aka the kindergarten education scheme), public sector primary schools, secondary schools and special schools, and Direct Subsidy Scheme schools, increased 12.6 percent to 25,929. The number of NCS students as a percentage of all students increased to 3.4 percent from 3.0 percent. In the period from 2015-16 to 2019-20, the Education Bureau handsomely increased its investment in education support measures for NCS students by a whopping 87 percent to HK\$456.3 million (\$58.8 million) from HK\$244.5 million.

And then for the inconvenient truths and the harsh ground realities of the report, which make for some very heart-breaking reading.

Of the 152 kindergartens receiving the NCS grant, 39 percent submitted their school plans late (with delays of more than one month) and 48 percent submitted their school reports late (with delays of more than one month); and of the 266 primary, secondary and special schools receiving the grant ranging from HK\$650,000 to HK\$1.5 million, 63 percent submitted their school plans late (including 26 schools with delays of more than one month) and 66 percent submitted their school reports late (including 40 schools with delays of more than one month). One finds it hard to comprehend the justification (if any) of such a lackadaisical attitude by these errant schools who benefit so immensely from the largesse of the EDB.

There has been a decrease in the number of schools nominating NCS students and the number of NCS students nominated for the Student Support Programme for NCS Students. In the period from 2015-16 to 2019-20, the number of schools nominating NCS students to enroll in the program decreased by 38 percent to 80 and the number of NCS students nominated decreased by 22 percent to 757. This is a clear aberration and mismatch to the fact that the overall mass of NCS students, and the NCS population as a whole, too, is growing exponentially. How and why is this happening and being allowed to happen? And while the EDB's funding has continued to increase handsomely, why is the footprint impacting a lesser number of students?

Regarding the Summer Bridging Programme, the report states that from 2013 to 2019, although the number of NCS students eligible to participate in the program increased by 1,226 (22 percent) from 5,602 to 6,828, conversely, the number of NCS students participating in the program decreased by 590 (34 percent) from 1,730 to 1,140; and the participation rate (i.e., the number of NCS students participating in the program as a percentage of the number of eligible students) was low and decreased continuously from 31 percent to 17 percent. Again, in light of the steadily increasing population of this children community and the EDB funding, this makes no mathematical sense at all!

In 2019-20, there were 988 primary, secondary and special schools (with or without NCS students), and 13,794 teachers teaching Chinese language at these schools. The Audit Commission analyzed the hours of training provided by the EDB to these teachers in the period from 2014-15 to 2019-20 on teaching NCS students Chinese as a second language. The commission found that of the 988 schools, 252 (26 percent) did not have teachers who had attended the EDB's training during the period. Of the 252 schools, 157 (62 percent) had NCS students. The total number of NCS students in the 157 schools each year during the period ranged from 231 to 277. Of the 13,794 teachers teaching Chinese language in the 988 schools, 9,986 (72 percent) did not attend the EDB's training during the period. Among the remaining



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3,808 teachers who attended the training, the number of training hours attended by many of them was on the low side. For instance, 1,744 (46 percent) of the 3,808 teachers attended training for five hours or less. Not only were the schools availing of handsome funding from the EDB, but their teachers were also being provided with training opportunities to better educate NCS children, and yet they wilfully chose to not avail of these opportunities.

That all of this leads to a certain segment of Hong Kong residents continuing to be uneducated or undereducated and thus unemployed or underemployed, and that it severely cripples their efforts to break away from the vicious cycle of intergenerational poverty, is a well-documented fact.

The report has constructively recommended that the EDB should encourage schools to make good use of the NCS grant, conduct timely supervision of such beneficiary schools, encourage schools to critically review their development needs and make good use of school-based support services. All extremely fair points, but these throw up more questions than provide answers.

Why do the schools and their well-paid professionals require such micromanagement by the EDB? Do they not feel self-motivated and morally obliged to hold themselves to the highest level of professional ethics and accountability? Do they not feel bound by their duties to be conscientious educators who must be absolutely committed to the academic well-being of Hong Kong's children and to helping nurture them into maturing productive citizens with the potential to be leaders in their chosen fields, even becoming apart of the civil service? Do the responsible stakeholders still not believe that it is high time that the narrative of blaming the victim be changed?

The years of the carefully scripted myths as to how NCS children are unable to cope with Chinese-language learning and as to why the EDB must continue to keep increasing special funding to schools to teach Chinese as a second language, via an easier curriculum and so on and so forth, be it due to the irresponsible musings of various commentators and/or reluctant educators, must come to an end. In all of this unfortunate misleading rhetoric, generation after generation of the socioeconomically challenged NCS children have continued to be educationally marginalized.

Such an unfair narrative merely serves to undermine Hong Kong's children and restricts them from blossoming and achieving their full potential. This also indirectly impacts Hong Kong as a whole due to their reduced economic contributions. Overzealous and less-informed commentators and influencers must behave more responsibly and desist from shortchanging the young ones by harping on how they cannot cope and why they require a dumbed-down alternate curriculum which will guarantee their failure to achieve full Chinese literacy. This merely exacerbates their marginalization by bringing unwarranted disrepute to their educational prowess and untapped potential. To make the children feel equal and included, it would augur well for the empowered stakeholders to avoid the needless, divisive, "special" treatment tag of creating a different, easier, second-language curriculum. A child does not know or identify with being an NCS student. It is us adults who feed such narratives into their psyche and persona. Such an approach leads to anything but genuine integration in our society. It is hoped that the educators take full accountability of the responsibility bestowed upon them, make the best use of the ample resources now available, and ensure equal education for all. The entire community stands to gain from it.

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