

Education will effectively address HK's social inequity

Earlier this month, the United Nations Development Program's 2021-22 Human Development Report, "Uncertain Times, Unsettled Lives: Shaping Our Future in a Transforming World", highlighted that for the first time in the 32 years that the program has been tracking it, the Human Development Index (which measures a nation's health, education, and standard of living) had declined globally for two consecutive years. On a global scale, life expectancy decreased from 73 years in 2019 to 71.4 years in 2021. Human development has fallen back to its 2016 levels, reversing much of the progress toward the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of 2030. The reversal is universal, with over 90 percent of countries registering a decline in their HDI score in either 2020 or 2021, and more than 40 percent declining in both years, signaling that the catastrophic regression crisis is continuing.

The June 2022 report "The State of Global Learning Poverty: 2022 Update" had already raised the alarm regarding the exacerbating learning poverty besetting school-going children. The specter of the underserved children losing \$21 trillion in future earnings, amounting to 17 percent of today's global GDP, is dreadfully real.

With that global-scale backdrop, closer to home, Hong Kong's economy and social fabric continue to move through the relentless challenges dating back to mid-2019 — owing to the social unrest and then the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, while Hong Kong has been, and still is, weathering the storm better and longer than most other places, impressively, it has also retained its Human Development Index rank of No 4 of 2019, in the latest 2021-22 rankings as well.

From a human perspective, what is immensely praiseworthy is the tremendous resilience and mental fortitude that Hong Kong's children have exhibited during these testing times, especially those attending local schools and thus being challenged with seemingly never-ending half-day schooling. Among these, it is the underserved and especially the non-Chinese-speaking (NCS) ones who not only continue to face language-based educational marginalization routinely but also struggle to gain access to stable "online learning" infrastructure, who deserve our absolute respect — for their awe-inspiring courage, grit and discipline.

That said, Hong Kong's education crisis that marginalizes its less-fortunate NCS children deserves the utmost priority and expeditious redress. The long-overdue educational correction should not only facilitate the inclusion and integration of these children but also provide them with fair opportunities to upskill themselves, break through the vicious circle of intergenerational poverty, and become part of Hong Kong's best socioeconomic framework. To quote Barack Obama, "The best anti-poverty program is a world-class education."

The numbers make an overwhelmingly compelling case. According to the 2021 Population Census results, in 2021, there were 619,568 people of non-Chinese ethnicities, constituting 8.4 percent of the whole population of Hong Kong. The average annual growth rates over the past five years (i.e., 2016-21) of the populations of ethnic Chinese and non-Chinese are 0.1 percent and 1.2 percent respectively.

Prior to that, over the preceding five years, the non-Chinese ethnicities clocked up an average annual growth rate of 5.8 percent, compared with 0.5 percent for the rest of the population. This has naturally translated into some very encouraging numbers as regards Hong Kong's NCS children, with their enrollment numbers having increased from 30,477 in 2016-17 to 33,036 in 2021-22 across kindergartens, and primary and secondary schools. The number of children who appeared for their Diploma of Secondary Education (DSE) exams in public and Direct Subsidy Scheme schools has increased from 1,186 in 2016-17 to 1,403 in 2020-21.

In contrast, an abysmally low number of merely 106 in 2016-17 and 111 in 2020-21 were empowered enough to appear for the DSE Chinese examinations. The Audit Commission's report of March 2021 has already identified the cause of this chronic pitfall and clearly highlighted the facts that despite the Education Bureau's continued largesse (in terms of funding, resources and teacher training opportunities), the educators and empowered institutions have continued to underdeliver and underperform with respect to providing inclusive and equal language-learning



Manoj Dhar

The author is the co-founder and CEO of Integrated Brilliant Education, a frontline NGO providing equity based, inclusive and equal language learning opportunities to Hong Kong's underserved and educationally marginalized non-Chinese-speaking children.

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opportunities for these children. This has naturally undermined the abilities of the young ones to integrate into Hong Kong's social fabric seamlessly, maximize their abilities, and contribute to its growth to the very best of their potential.

The constructive way forward would be to pay heed to the Audit Commission's findings, and enhance the accountability of and strictly enforce reporting by the local institutions that are schooling NCS children. There must be clear key performance indicators to strictly evaluate and grade the service efficiency and efficacy of the schools, especially those demanding extra funding to nurture Chinese-language proficiency (reading, writing, speaking, thinking) among non-Chinese-speaking children. The EDB must consider enforcing certain "minimally acceptable" and "gold standards" among such schools and teachers. Inability to deliver or deliver subpar performances must incur penalties, such as funding cuts, and downgrades to ranking for such underperformers. The corporate culture of annualized performance mandates and output-based appraisals must be transitioned into the schools. For years, the continued nonperformance of the stakeholders has not only led to the enthusiastic children being educationally marginalized on the basis of language, but it has also allowed the empowered lot to blame the victimized children irresponsibly. This disrespectful attitude toward the children must be discouraged.

The way forward is via the "in's," of *inclusion*, by providing equal language learning opportunities; of *innovation*, in the teaching pedagogy such that the teachers take on the responsibility that the Chinese children no longer fear the DSE Chinese exam as "the paper of death" and they no longer continue to lament how hard it is to teach Chinese to Hong Kong's NCS children; of *insuring* the children's educational and professional well-being, and thus Hong Kong's future, by nurturing the children as proficient bi- and trilinguals; of *investing* regularly — something that the EDB has thus far already been extremely generous about by providing funding for various initiatives like the Language Fund and spending in excess of HK\$200 million (\$25.5 million) annually since 2014 so schools could better teach Chinese to NCS pupils.

Teachers and schools would do well to heed the admonition of prominent politician and thinker Guan Zhong: "It takes 10 years to grow a tree, but 100 years to cultivate people." Education and nurturing talent are long-term commitments. Like trees, cultivating Hong Kong's children is a sustained commitment, but when done responsibly and conscientiously, it will secure Hong Kong's future socioeconomic success and bolster its ability to contribute to China's ongoing progressive development. That these daughters and sons of Hong Kong will be entrusted with China's future socioeconomic success is an unquestionable fact. Thus, nurturing them, including them, and educating them in an equity-based and equal learning opportunities environment is to Hong Kong's benefit.

The views do not necessarily reflect those of China Daily.