

# Improve children's education now to secure future

The silence that greeted World Children's Day on Nov 20, 2022, was deafening. Despite the theme being "Inclusion, for every child", the empowered adults fell woefully short in celebrating the children, far less including them — even for a single day. The ad nauseam production of slogans like "Children are our future", "Children and young people are our most precious resource", and "No child left behind" has been reduced to being mere clichés. It's not uncommon to come across entities attempting to monetize these, much rather than celebrating and nurturing the children.

That conference participants continue to merely discuss children and their future is truly remarkable. It's hard to fathom the future that they are hypothesizing about. And why focus so much on the future — when it is now that the children are facing their education and development challenges? How can we ever hope for a future generation that is confident, capable and empowered when it is today and now that they are being marginalized — educationally and socially?

Globally, childhood has become a "man-made" nightmare, with the wonder years becoming a landscape replete with virtual abuse, violence, sexploitation, trafficking, starvation, armed conflict, educational poverty, learning deficits and socioeconomic marginalization. The recent COVID-19-infected years have only exacerbated the plight of the vulnerable. It was for us adults to provide a safe, secure and normal environment for the children, and we failed. The single common factor in all these is that the very adults have perpetrated all these that the children rely on for protection and guidance. It is we — the empowered stakeholders — who bear the responsibility for marginalizing and excluding them from becoming key future stakeholders. To then position oneself as a "concerned savior" is hypocrisy.

In Hong Kong, the wonderful place we call home, the general response to the



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special administrative region's Children's Day on April 4 has been virtually nonexistent. Over the past year, when I routinely quizzed children and grown-ups (across various socioeconomic demographics) about when Children's Day was, it was no surprise that hardly anyone was even aware that such a day existed. While the social media influencers and institutions go into overdrive to garner "likes" on every celebratory day, it remains a mystery as to why they are afflicted with lethargy when it comes to respecting and celebrating the children.

That some 180,000 children (18 percent of the child population) under 18 living in poverty in 2015, which increased to 274,900 (27 percent) in 2020, is extremely unnerving. More so for a city like Hong Kong, which enjoys the enviable status of being one of the top-ranked economies in terms of millionaires per capita. Hong Kong human resources professionals have been expressing concern regarding their inability to find local talent competent enough to match industry's needs. This is naturally indicative of the trend that local universities need to empower graduates with skill levels commensurate with the practical demands of the workplace. The World Bank report indicates that Hong Kong's workforce participation rate for the population over 15 years is a tepid 59 percent. The other Asian economies (Singapore, 71 percent; Macao, 69 percent; the Chinese mainland, 67 percent; Thailand, 67 percent) are doing a far better job.

Thus, yet again, for being faultless, the young suffer. And yet again, it's the now that demands action.

It's well-known that education is the most powerful means to eradicate poverty and achieve social equity. No one can question that since December 2019, Hong Kong's children have weathered relentless disruptions to their schooling and social life and yet exhibited incredible resilience in smiling through these times. With the local primary schools resuming full-day sessions just recently, that's over three years of abnormal circumstances. The environment has unquestionably been even more testing for the socioeconomically marginalized children, for whom online learning was not a given but a luxury that they couldn't afford. Of these socioeconomically marginalized children, the daughters and sons of Hong Kong that belong to the non-Chinese speaking (NCS) community had an even taller mountain to climb as they have always struggled with the language barrier. One can only be humbled by their grit and determination and salute the incredible courage of the young ones; the harsh reality of today is a deepening learning deficit and increased educational poverty.

To give due credit, since 2014-15, Hong Kong's Education Bureau has introduced a series of enhanced measures in terms of funding and resources to support NCS students' effective learning of the Chinese language with a specific mandate to support the schools in creating an inclusive learning environment. While this allocation started with an impressive HK\$200 million (\$25.5 million) of extra funding for the 2021-22 school year, it went up to HK\$560 million per annum after that, registering a most-impressive 280 percent increase. Kudos to the HKSAR government for its sustained efforts to support these children. Concurrently, the number of NCS children taking their Diploma of Secondary Education (DSE) exams in public and Direct Subsidy Scheme schools has gone from 1,186 in 2016-17 to 1,403 in

2020-21, a 18.3 percent rise. With these impressive figures as a backdrop, it is disappointing that an abysmally low number of 106 children in 2016-17 and 111 in 2020-21 were empowered and courageous enough to take the DSE Chinese examinations. Thus, extra funding and extra resources being provided are causing a weak 8.9 percent level to fall to an anemic 7.9 percent? Is this not distinct evidence of the persistent educational marginalization of the daughters and sons of Hong Kong? The HKSAR's Audit Commission report of March 2021 and the EDB itself in December 2022 have expressed their extreme dismay at learning that many schools have failed to provide sufficient support to the children for their Chinese-language learning. Despite the HKSAR government's efforts to dismantle any socioeconomic barriers to education by providing 15 years of schooling for free, that its children are still getting marginalized is most disappointing.

With Children's Day coming up on April 4, one hopes that the front-line empowered stakeholders (educators) will respect their moral responsibilities of developing the children into productive citizens and taxpayers, as opposed to poverty-stricken beneficiaries of social welfare. And for that, the time is now. Now is certainly not the time to express concern about just 32,500 babies born in 2022. Now (and not the future) is more the time for ground-level, accountable deliverables that include the young ones who have already graced us with their birth and nurturing them into confident and competent youngsters. Actions always speak louder than mere words.

It would serve the empowered adults well to remember an astute Chinese saying: "If your plan is for one year, plant rice. If your plan is for 10 years, plant trees. If your plan is for 100 years, educate children."

*The views do not necessarily reflect those of China Daily.*