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Rethink Hong Kong early childhood education policy

Early childhood education is the governing agenda among governments. According to Starting Strong IV, published by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 2015, most children receive education at the age of 5, and there is a marked increase of children receiving education at the age of 3. For grassroots or problem families, it is as early as 0-2 years old, as they have to ensure their children could receive the appropriate and suitable education

The Hong Kong SAR Government has determined to put more resources into early childhood education. As free quality kindergarten education is to be implemented with effect from 2017/18 school year, there is a suggested allocation of 6.7 billion in the 2017/18 budget, an increase of 67.5% when compared to 4 billion of last year.

Suggestions by OECD

Policy makers should seriously consider that resources are appropriately utilised, and public money is effectively spent to meet the objectives. OECD suggested:

1. Establishing quality objectives and legislations
2. Setting out and implementing curriculum and standards
3. Enhancing qualification of teaching professionals, strengthening of training and improving working conditions
4. Connecting family and community
5. Promoting collection of data, research and monitoring

Situation in Hong Kong

As it stands, Hong Kong is still behind the standard of OECD. For the 1st and 2nd point, curriculum guideline was implemented since 1996 which is subject to review every 10 years and Kindergarten Education Curriculum Guide 2017 was released lately. On quality assurance, it has become regularised since 2007 which is acceptable.

As regards the 3rd point about enhancing qualification of teaching staff, it has been greatly improved since Education Bureau implemented Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme. Over the past 10 years, all new teachers are stipulated to possess certification in Early Children Education Courses. The academic qualifications of Hong Kong nursery teachers are rather high in fact as it is estimated that 50-60% of local teachers are degree holders. While we long for the type of education in Finland, we overlook the fact that Finnish teachers have very high academic qualification and they possess post-graduate qualification in general, and those who enter the profession are very outstanding, this is the reason for their distinguished students.

Worldwide standards on quality evaluation have been raised not only on objective and quantitative measurement of teacher-student ratio and academic qualification of teachers, other qualitative demands have been reinforced as well, such as interaction between teachers and students, effectiveness of teaching, implementation of curriculum, collaboration between teacher and staff, and their relationship with parents, etc. Teachers' self-discipline is very important since quality assurance and its monitoring are very complicated issues which often require external and internal assessment to obtain comprehensive findings. In quality assurance, Hong Kong meets the world standard as we have regular inspection that is based on indicators, of which are supported in the education field. It is suggested using or making reference to world assessment tools to strengthen the assessment of interaction between teachers and students, to ultimately achieving world class early childhood education in Hong Kong.

For point 4 and 5, more effort must be put in these areas. Even though Committee on Home-School Cooperation was formed, family education was still stagnant, in particular the lack of coordination between Education Bureau and Social Welfare Department, neither was there any policy direction formulated. Recent cases of youth suicides reflect the importance of families. According to my experience, children are like seedlings while families are soil to nurture them to grow healthily. In this connection, family support is important in providing quality early childhood education. As regards research, the community initiates to apply for Quality Education Fund, there are also projects and research by SCOLAR, school support projects by universities and other targeted research projects, however, I hope large-scale policy-oriented research could be further enforced.

Conclusion and recommendation

On the whole, Hong Kong achieves 70% of the indicators of OECD, nevertheless, there are ample scopes for improvement as regards community, family and research. It is hoped that various sectors could work together to achieve the well-being of children.

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