

Motion 3

The government should care for and raise the overall quality of pre-primary education

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19 November 2005

(A translated version provided by the Centre for Translation in association with the Translation Programme, Hong Kong Baptist University)

1. Introduction

According to Article 6, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child: “States Parties shall ensure to the maximum extent possible the survival and development of the child.” and Article 29: “States Parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to the development of the child’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential.”, education is of utmost importance to children.

Pre-primary education is the starting point of lifelong learning. The role it plays in the course of life is crucial – it is the education that children undergo before they enter primary one. It focuses on both caring and educating.

Dr. Frank Newman, former President of the Education Commission of the States (ECS), have pointed out, “There is a time scale to brain development, and the most important year is the first.” An infant’s brain cells grow most rapidly in the three years after birth, making this a crucial development stage of an individual’s lifelong intelligence. At the same time, as the Chinese proverb has it, “a person’s character is defined at the age of three”. The fundamentals of an individual’s core personality and character is established in these few years. The habits and attitude an infant acquires during this period shape its development in the latter days.

Pre-primary education impacts positively on the development of an infant’s physique, intelligence, psyche and social development through the learning of body coordination, thinking, problem solving, cognition, expressing and controlling emotions, and interpersonal skills. Therefore, quality pre-primary education helps build an all-round personality, develop multiple intelligence, and cultivate their interest and a positive attitude in learning. Education psychologist Mr. Fritz Pang pointed out that proper emotional education at the pre-primary stage is an effective precaution against the emergence of juvenile problems. Therefore, quality pre-primary education can lay a solid foundation for a child’s future development and ensure healthy growth of both body and mind.

It is regrettable that such factors including negligence from the government, lack of public understanding of pre-primary education, tendency among parents to pursue “branded” schools and insufficient training for kindergarten teachers have combined to hamper the development of pre-primary education. This incredulous disregard for the important education segment is a terrible loss for children. As such, through this motion, we hope to contribute in some measures to the future of our children.

2. The Status Quo

2.1 Teaching talents

Child workers are among a child’s first enlighteners. Their importance cannot be understated. Yet the funds allocated by the government to pre-primary only took up a mere 1.8% of total education funding. Funds allocated to training kindergarten teachers are particularly insufficient. This has created numerous problems.

First of all, the insufficiency of funds have resulted in a deficiency in associate degree

programmes and certificate courses dedicated to early childhood education. Ms. Mary Tong, Chairman of the Hong Kong Kindergarten Association, pointed out that currently only 14.6% of applicants succeed in enrolling in an associate degree programme on early childhood education, whereas as many as 7,000 kindergarten teachers have yet to take up a certificate course on the discipline. In 2008, however, only 3,660 places will be available meaning that the remaining 4,000 will have to complete their certificate studies in the three years that follow. The deficiency of such places is indeed severe.

Secondly, entry grades for kindergarten teachers are too low – only grade 7 (\$12,000). Compared to an entry grade of 12 (\$16,000) for primary and secondary teachers, it is natural that few individuals with the potential would be motivated to become a kindergarten teacher.

On the other hand, the current minimum qualification for kindergarten teachers in Hong Kong is only graduation from secondary five, much lower than that in other countries. Kindergarten teachers in places like the US, Canada, Australia and Taiwan have attained tertiary level. We have conducted a questionnaire survey on 922 parents whose children are currently studying in pre-primary institutions, and results indicate that 83% of parents consider graduation from secondary seven or even university the minimum qualification for kindergarten teachers. Only 17% believe that kindergarten teachers should score a minimum 12 points in the HKCEE examinations. This clearly reflects that most parents do not believe the current qualifications of kindergarten teachers are adequate.

In addition, the curricula of present early childhood education programmes are disproportionately arranged. Mr. Fritz Pang pointed out that the curricula were geared more towards fostering knowledge and intelligence than cultivating emotional intelligence in a child. Ms. Chow Wai-chun, President of the Hong Kong Early Childhood Educators Association, said that only around a dozen lessons were dedicated to music, physical activities and art, making it hard for kindergarten teachers to effectively master the skills.

Lastly, Ms. Chow and Ms. Yung Hau-heung, Spokesperson on Early Childhood Education, Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union, pointed out that the lack of continuing education among kindergarten teachers have led to their falling out of touch with the times, which inadvertently resulted in a drop in kindergarten teacher standards.

2.2 Parents' Tendencies

Children of zero to five years have yet to reach maturity in psyche and intelligence. All decisions regarding their learning are made by their parents. Precisely because each of their decisions is critical, their misunderstanding of pre-primary education can deprive children of the right to normal development.

In the course of our questionnaire survey, some parents openly admitted that they knew naught about educating their young; some even expect the school to give more examinations and dictations and accordingly reduce games and physical activities. Ms. Yung points out that most parents believe a difficult curriculum is of great help to young children. Some also mistakenly believe that mechanical replication will help memorization, while in fact that this only contributes to draining a child's interests in learning. Among those parents who considered pre-

primary education unimportant, over 50% disagreed to games as a major component of pre-primary education. Actually, pre-primary education should allow children to learn in a happy and relaxed atmosphere, free from either pressure or tears. Thus the parents' views are at odds with the goals of pre-primary education.

According to Ms. Chow, in choosing schools, parents tend to ignore whether a school can facilitate the overall development of a child, which, however, is a particularly important concern. Presently, the public generally believes that a good kindergarten is one that helps a child enroll in a prestigious primary school. This misconception must change.

While it is good that the government is reforming pre-primary education, parents remain largely uninformed about current proposals due to the lack of publicity. Returned questionnaires indicated that some parents were totally unaware that the government provides subsidies for pre-primary education including fee concessions, while others do not even know of the existence of full-time kindergartens.

On other hand, parent-school cooperation is lacking. Ms. Chow said that currently communication between school and parent was seriously deficient, and only a few kindergartens have set up parent-teacher associations. She believed that parent-school cooperation could foster in the parent a sense of belonging to the school, allowing them to better understand the importance of pre-primary education and gain an awareness of the importance of their own role.

2.3 Assessment of Kindergartens

While the government has installed a quality assurance inspection (QAI) mechanism to assess the services of pre-primary institutions, little promotion has been conducted. Our survey indicated that 72% of families were unaware of this mechanism. 65% of the parents have never read the Profile of Kindergartens published by the government. 61% found the content of the QAI report not helpful. Parents commonly source their information from other parents and from the "guidebooks" bought from commercial outlets. Making the most appropriate choices for their children are thus, for many parents, a difficult matter.

3. Our Suggestions

We propose to remedy the current shortfalls in teacher quality in two major ways.

First of all, the government should allocate more resources to the training of high quality teachers. First, more associate degree programmes and certificate courses on early childhood education should be established with fully or partially subsidized places, to admit more individuals aspiring to develop a career in the sector. Secondly, the entry grades for kindergarten teachers should gradually be raised to grade 12 to attract highly qualified individuals to join the sector. This can also retain experienced teachers by providing them additional funds with which to pursue further education, in turn ensuring quality education for children.

Next, the qualifications of kindergarten teachers should be gradually raised to an international level. First, the curricula should be made more comprehensive through for instance a greater focus on language courses. From 3 to 7, a child is at a golden age of language acquisition, thus a

teacher with good grasp of languages would impact positively on a child's growth. More classes on child psychology, music, physical education and art should be introduced; practical classes should be conducted more frequently to allow students to put theory to practice. Secondly, legislation should be passed making assessment for kindergarten teachers on a 2 to 3 year basis compulsory, to raise their competitiveness. Thirdly, childhood education courses should be gradually turned into degree programmes.

On the parent side, efforts should be dedicated to rectifying the wrong concepts of the parents. We propose that frequent lectures should be held to educate the parents, aided by the use of TV programmes and pamphlets to promote "education without tears". Before policy formulation, the government should also consult parents and teachers. In addition, we believe that kindergartens should be required by law to set up parent-teacher associations to promote parent-teacher co-operation. Kindergartens should also reform their enrollment criteria. Apart from testing a child's intelligence, group interviews could also be arranged to test a child's social abilities and emotional status so as to raise parents' concern in this area.

On the assessment of kindergartens, we believe that the government should not only dedicate more effort on promotion – for instance distributing QAI reports in maternal and child health centers, and other government departments and institutions – but also revise the content of such reports to include more assessment criteria for instance psychological development, civic education, class flow and etc, to produce a more comprehensive report.

After the assessment criteria are publicized, market mechanism and competition with peers will give kindergartens greater impetus to raise their quality. At the same time, we know that kindergartens that score high results are popular among parents and those that perform averagely are unheeded. Therefore the government must not stand aside but should take account of the enrollment conditions of a kindergarten to proactively provide diverse support in areas including emotion, psyche, and health. Such a system does not only suit the market economy but also upholds the ethical goals of education.

4. Conclusion

We are very disappointed in the serious neglect to which pre-primary education has long been subjected. The Chinese proverb has it: "A tower of many levels rises from bare ground; a journey of a thousand miles starts with one step." If a solid foundation is missing in our education system, how can we cultivate social citizens with well-developed minds?

I, on behalf of the 15 Child Councillors in my group, move the motion "The government should care for and raise the overall quality of pre-primary education" be passed.

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Acknowledgements

Ms Chow Wai-chun, Chairman, Hong Kong Early Childhood Educators Association
Ms Mary Tong, Chairperson, Hong Kong Kindergarten Association
Ms Yung Hau-heng, Spokesperson on Early Childhood Education, Hong Kong Professional Teachers’ Union

Mr. Fritz Pang, Educational Psychologist
Ms Sansan Ching, Director, Hong Kong Council of Early Childhood Education & Services
Five Districts Business Welfare Association Cheung Chuk Shan Nursery School/Kindergarten
Immaculate Heart of Mary Kindergarten
Peniel School and Kindergarten
Po Leung Kuk Kwun Tong Kindergarten-cum-Nursery
St Paul's Kindergarten
Small World Christian Kindergarten
All parents who filled in the questionnaires