

The government should take better measures to help newly arrived children from Mainland China adapt to the learning environment in Hong Kong

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Introduction

Hong Kong, being an affluent society, attracts large number of immigrants to come and settle in the city every day. Many of them are mainland children. Children coming from China mainland who have been living in Hong Kong for 3 years or less are referred to as “newly arrived children”. According to statistics of the Education Bureau, about 8700 newly arrived children enrolled in local primary and secondary schools in 2008. On arriving in this strange city, they often encounter difficulties in studies due to adaptation problems and the unfamiliar learning environment. Yet, their parents are busy making ends meet, and simply don’t have the time to attend to their problems. Furthermore, newly arrived children find making new friends difficult as they have different backgrounds to their peers. All these make them feel helpless.

According to Article 27 of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children* (UNCRC), every child has the right to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development. Therefore, we believe the government should address the problems faced by newly arrived children in their studies and in families, and help them integrate into the society. For this, our group moves the present motion to urge the government to take better measures to help newly arrived children adapt to the learning environment in Hong Kong.

Questionnaire survey and interviews

During January to February 2010 we conducted a questionnaire survey on 203 Primary 4 to Secondary 3 students. About 60% of them are newly arrived children. The rest are local students from the same schools. We will refer to the specific figures below. In addition, between December 2009 and February 2010, we interviewed a number of government officials, LegCo councillors, academics, school teachers and social workers who are well versed in the subject.

Present situation

1. Programmes for newly arrived children

According to the *Service handbook for new arrivals from the mainland* published by the Home Affairs Department, the government is providing services for newly arrived children largely through three main programmes – the Initiation Programme, the 60-hour Induction Programme, and a school-based support scheme. In our opinion, both the Induction Programme and the school-based support scheme are inadequate to meet the needs.

The 60-hour Induction Programme aims at helping newly arrived children adapt to the local environment and the education system. However, limited by the resources allocated, organisations running the programme are unable to offer comprehensive care and appropriate support for some of the children.

The School-based Support Scheme Grant of the government enables schools taking in newly arrived children to provide support for these students according to their needs. Unfortunately, the amount of subsidy is insufficient for the schools to provide long-term care for the students. Moreover, the quality of services provided by the schools and the instructors undertaking the job are not always as good as one desire. As a result, they are not really helping the students effectively.

2. Services for the new arrivals

Problems faced by the new arrivals are not limited to adapting to the new environment, but include also finding jobs and enrolling their children to a suitable school. Differences in

social culture and system between the mainland and Hong Kong have intensified their problems. At present, the Social Welfare Department, in conjunction with 400-strong voluntary organizations, are providing various kinds of services for the new arrivals. However, parents of some of the newly arrived children have no ideas about these services, and do not know where to seek help when their children experience difficulties. This reflects only the government's inadequate publicity of the services to the target users.

3. Parent education

When children encounter problems and feel helpless, parents are their major source of support. It is very difficult for newly arrived children to integrate into the society in a short time after their arrival in this city at a young age. It is important for parents of the newly arrived children, as the guiding light of their children, to take proper care of their children, without which their children are bound to experience adaptation problems. The lack of understanding of the local education system may also add pressure on their studies. Furthermore, parents of newly arrived children may find it difficult to adjust to the parenting norms in Hong Kong due to the value gap between the two places, and thus not knowing how to educate their children.

At present, education programmes for parents are undertaken by three government departments which are rather fragmented and lack coordinated planning. These programmes do not take into consideration the needs of parents of newly arrived children. Some of these parents, due to differences in cultural backgrounds, have difficulty in helping their children adapt to the new environment, including learning environment. Some of them even have communication problem with their children, and this, is affecting the proper growth and development of their children. These parents are in great need of parent education.

4. Multi-culture education

The essence of multi-culture education is to promote "acceptance followed by education". It aims to educate Hong Kong students to accept people with different cultural backgrounds, and respect their cultures, customs, languages and values. Existing curricula of civic education include the theme of "integration", but the emphasis is more on theories. The "hard-sell" approach is unpopular among youngsters. Students of senior years even express contempt of the civic education they receive.

Many teachers admitted that they knew very little about multi-culture education, and thus found it difficult to create a multicultural environment in the classroom. In view of this, we consider it necessary to provide training to enhance the teaching techniques as well as widening the personal perspective of teachers.

Suggestions

1. Better services for newly arrived children

A. The 60-hour Induction Programme

In designing the Induction Programme, organizations running it could collect opinions from the stakeholders, the newly arrived children who take part in these courses because they know very well their own needs and where the programme has fallen short. Article 12 of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* stipulated that children's views should be respected. These organizations could modify the programme content based on the views collected at the end of the courses. In doing so, they could improve the quality of the services provided to satisfy the needs of the children.

Some primary school teachers and LegCo councillors pointed out that 60 hours aren't enough, and as learning progress of children varies, it would normally take more than 60 hours to

meet the need. Our group suggests that the organizations providing the service could flexibly increase the number of programme hours so as to allow children who lag behind in their progress, upon assessment by social workers or teachers, to attend additional hours of academic or non-academic courses. This would enable them to adapt to the local environment more comprehensively.

B. The School-based Support Scheme

At present, the government gives a one-off subsidy of \$2805 to each newly arrived primary school student and \$4160 to each newly arrived secondary school student. We propose that the amount of subsidy can be increased by \$1000 to enable the schools to provide better support to the children in need and to allow these students to participate in more extra-curricular activities.

Currently, the School-based Support Scheme provides support only for the first year. In view of this, we suggest that school social workers should visit the students on a regular basis to evaluate their learning progress, and where no improvement is found in the situation, they should provide extra support for these students. We also suggest that schools could share experiences and have exchanges with one another on how to improve the quality of the support services.

In addition, the government can recruit retired teachers to be tutors of the programmes run in schools. These experienced teachers could ensure that the children are receiving professional care that is helpful to their study.

2. Services for the new arrivals

The *Service handbook for new arrivals from the Mainland* available for any new arrival to Hong Kong aims primarily to introduce the general situation of Hong Kong to help them understand the local environment for early integration into the community. Unfortunately, most parents of newly arrived children are not well educated and are unable to make effective use of the handbook. In view of this, our group suggests that the government could produce animated stories in the form of a CD as a means to introduce the social services in Hong Kong. The CD may include such information as support services in the education system for newly arrived children, the New Senior Secondary Curriculum, choices of schools and education programmes for parents. Taking the advantage of a multimedia publicity tool can assist newly arrived children and their parents to locate appropriate community resources promptly for early adaptation to the society.

Moreover, the CD can be played in 61 Integrated Family Service Centers and community organizations across the territory, where the new arrivals can also obtain free copies of the CD. We believe the CD will be a most effective means to help the new arrivals understand our society in a short span of time.

3. Parent Education

We suggest re-aligning existing parent education programmes by the Committee on Home-School Cooperation, and introducing a new programme specifically for parents of newly arrived children. Such programme should aim to help parents of newly arrived children to adapt to the local education system, and to improve their communications and relationships with their children. For the provision of a comprehensive and effective programme, we suggest that counselling and parenting skills may also be included. Considering that families newly arrived in Hong Kong are unfamiliar with the local environment, the programme may include activities, such as visiting local attractions and museums, with the aim to help these families gain a better understanding of the local culture.

In his 2000 Policy Address, former Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa stated that parents are the first teachers of their children, and in order to nurture talents, we must strengthen the cooperation of parents and schools. Schools are the best place to reach out to students and their parents. We propose that schools and social welfare organizations could jointly organise parent education programmes such as talks, seminars and workshops for parents of the new arrived children. We believe through home-school cooperation, a win-win situation can be achieved.

4. Multi-culture Education

A. To set up mutual-support groups in schools

The government can help schools with larger enrolment of newly arrived children to set up mutual support groups in the schools where local and mainland students could be encouraged to help one another. According to our survey, over 80% of the local students find their mainland peers speak better Putonghua while nearly 60% of the newly arrived children find their local peers speak better English. Schools could therefore create mutual learning opportunities for the two groups of students to learn from one another as well as to learn to appreciate one another. By doing so, integration can truly be achieved. We believe that this soft way of handling the issue will not only educate the children to respect one another but provide the newly arrived children with the opportunity to overcome their difficulties in learning English.

B. To enhance training for teachers

The government could run regular courses for teachers to help them understand the cultural backgrounds, living habits and learning styles of students from different regions of China. This would in turn enhance their teaching skill, and based on their knowledge about the cultural background of their students, these teachers could initiate classroom activities suitable to the students, and create a harmonious learning environment in the classroom to better the relationships between the newly arrived and local students. Furthermore, the government could promote exchanges between local teachers and their mainland counterparts by organising video conferences and field visits to enable Hong Kong teachers to understand more thoroughly their mainland students.

Conclusion

As the Hong Kong society develops, the population of newly arrived children from the mainland will continue to rise. Our group believe that it is of great urgency to improve the current measures in order to help newly arrived children adapt to the learning environment. In tackling the issue arising from newly arrived children, education is where it should start. We therefore urge the government to improve its existing education policies for newly arrived children. Secondly we propose that more resources should be allocated for parents of newly arrived children to equip them with proper parenting knowledge and skills and be the role models for their children. Thirdly, we propose enhancing the integration of local and newly arrived children to enable them to help and respect one another for the creation of a better learning environment in schools. We strongly believe that the above recommendations will help to provide newly arrived children with a standard of living adequate for their physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development, and thus their right to development in Hong Kong will be protected.

At last, on behalf of the 18 Child Councillors in my group, I move that the motion ‘The government should take better measures to help newly arrived children adapt to the learning environment in Hong Kong’ be passed.

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