

The research report on the non-Chinese speaking kindergarteners learning Chinese in Hong Kong: Situation and Support Measures

Executive Summary



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Background

Oxfam Hong Kong has always been focusing on the rights of the ethnic minority group in Hong Kong particularly their opportunity to receive education because their other rights (e.g. employment and social independence) would be deprived if they are not given the equal education opportunities.

According to the figures recently reported on “Hong Kong Poverty Situation Report on Ethnic Minorities 2016”, the current child poverty rate amongst the South Asian ethnic group is as high as 33.6%. One in every three South Asian children (under 18 years old) is now living in poverty, which is significantly higher than the overall child poverty rate in Hong Kong (17.2%). The significant higher poverty rate of the South Asian ethnic group is closely linked to their Chinese language proficiency. Most ethnic minority children have been observed lagging behind their peers at every stage of learning. Subsequently, the language barrier would have limited their choices of work. They could only choose jobs demanding more physical labor, and jobs that are lower salary rate and more dangerous. They lack upward mobility chances.

Enhancing their Chinese language proficiency, in essence, would be the key to alleviate poverty for these ethnic minority people. Unfortunately, we have seen an insufficiency in the government’s support to the non-Chinese speaking students’ early childhood education. Numerous studies indicated that the period from birth through to 6 years old is a crucial period for learning a language. However, the government has not provided any direct, and regular Chinese learning supports to these students, which might have missed the Chinese language learning opportunity. Despite the fact that the Education Bureau has provided an additional fund to kindergarten admitted 8 or more non-Chinese speaking kindergarteners (5-tier support mode since from the year 2018), the supports in other aspects such as professional training, development of teaching materials, and supports to the kindergarten-primary school transition, have only a plodding progress.

Concerning the insufficiency in the related measures to support the non-Chinese speaking students, Oxfam Hong Kong, the University of Hong Kong, and the Education University of Hong Kong started a series of project “Start from the beginning - Supporting non-Chinese speaking K1 to K3 kindergartners to learn Chinese as a second language: Research and practice” (hereafter known as “Start from the beginning”) since 2015 in order to develop a comprehensive set of lesson plan and teaching material for “learning Chinese as a second language”. The project also involves teacher professional training and enrichment program to the non-Chinese speaking kindergarten students. To further understand the issues related to non-Chinese speaking kindergarten students learning difficulties of Chinese language in Hong Kong, Oxfam Hong Kong, the University of Hong Kong and the Education University of Hong Kong collaborated and implemented a survey to all kindergarten teachers in Hong Kong.

1. Research objectives

The survey was conducted during the period between March and August of 2018. The views of kindergarten teachers were collected to understand the following:

1. Examine the difficulties and needs for non-Chinese speaking kindergarteners to learn Chinese.
2. Reveal the views of kindergarten teachers towards the efficiency of Chinese learning enrichment class (the enrichment class refers to a support model that the non-Chinese speaking students would have part of the school time receiving enrichment of Chinese language, and joining the big class in learning at the rest of school time).
3. Review the current education policy in non-Chinese speaking students' learning supports and the recommendations
4. Suggest possible solutions to enhance the supports providing to the non-Chinese speaking kindergarteners in learning Chinese as a second language.

2. Research method and sampling

The teachers were invited and interviewed with a set of questionnaires. The printed questionnaires were sent to 994 registered kindergartens in Hong Kong as well as electronic questionnaires via QR code. 557 questionnaires were collected from the teachers. Among the 557 questionnaires, 408 of the teachers indicated that have non-Chinese speaking student enrolling in their school; thus these 408 questionnaires were used for data analysis.

Among the participants, 72% of the teachers indicated that they are teaching at a kindergarten enrolled with 8 or more non-Chinese speaking students. In another word, 28% of their schools enrolled with less than 8 non-Chinese speaking students (see Figure 1). 55% of the teachers have 6 or more years of teaching experience (see Figure 2), over 43% of the teachers obtained a bachelor's degree in education (see Figure 3).

Figure 1 Number of NCS Kindergartners where Teacher Works

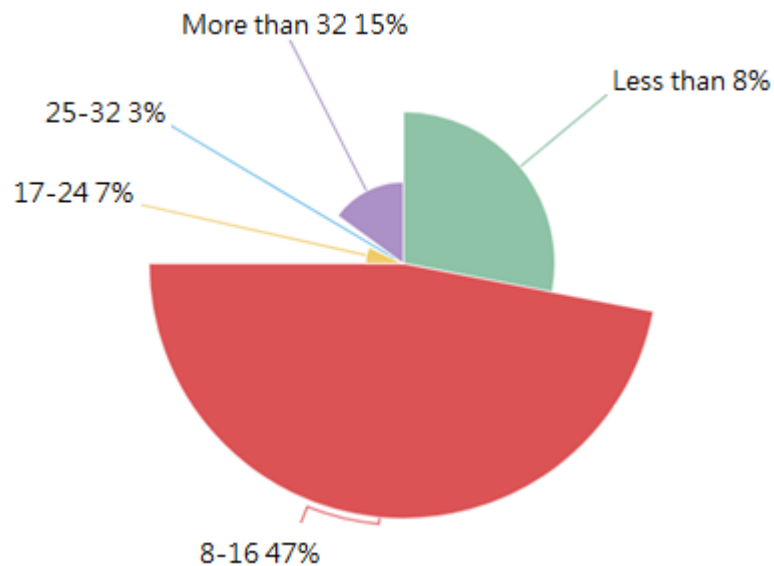


Figure 2 Years of Teaching Experience

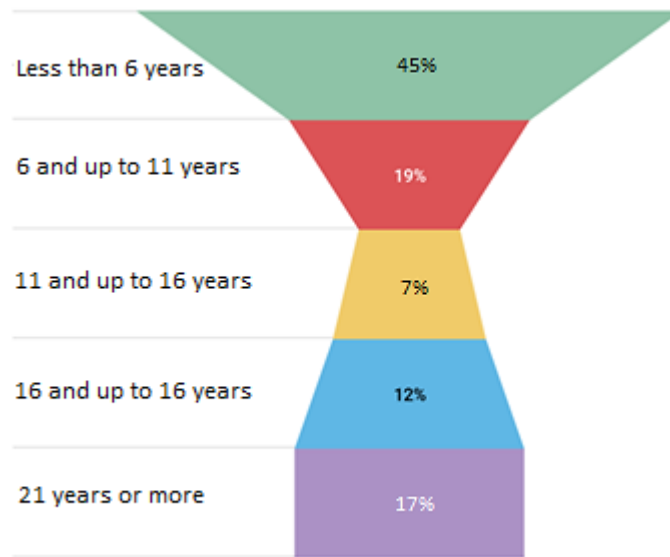
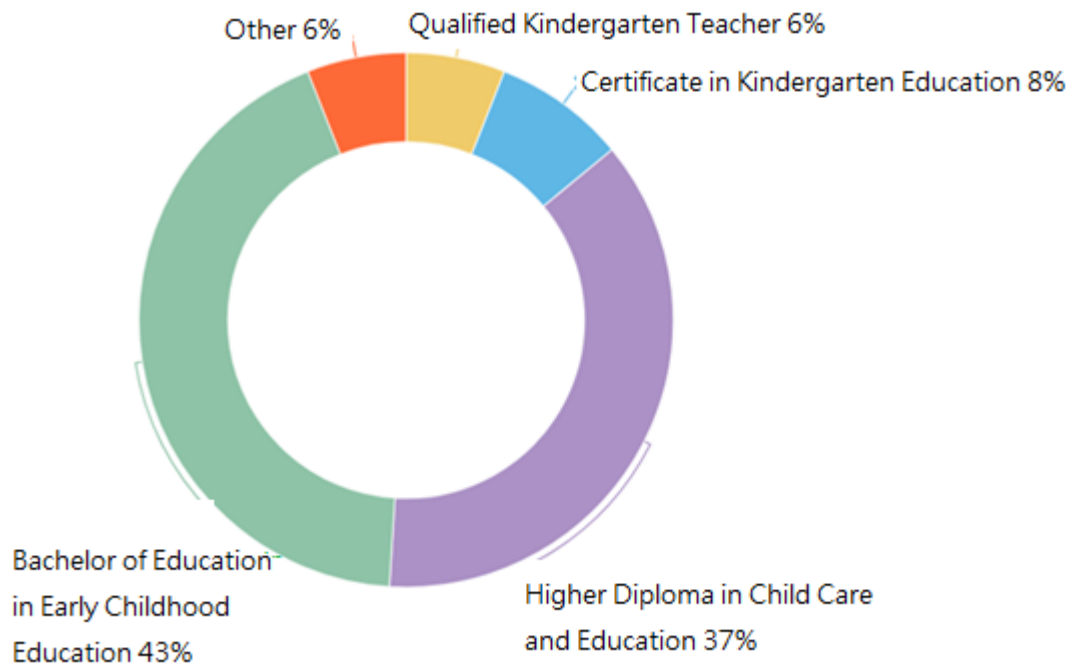


Figure 3 Highest Education Attainment



Before designing the items in the questionnaire, we reviewed the literature and conducted face-to-face interviews with kindergarten and primary school teachers, who are currently teaching non-Chinese students, to understand the actual situation about non-Chinese speaking students' learning. We summarized their views and developed the items in this questionnaire.

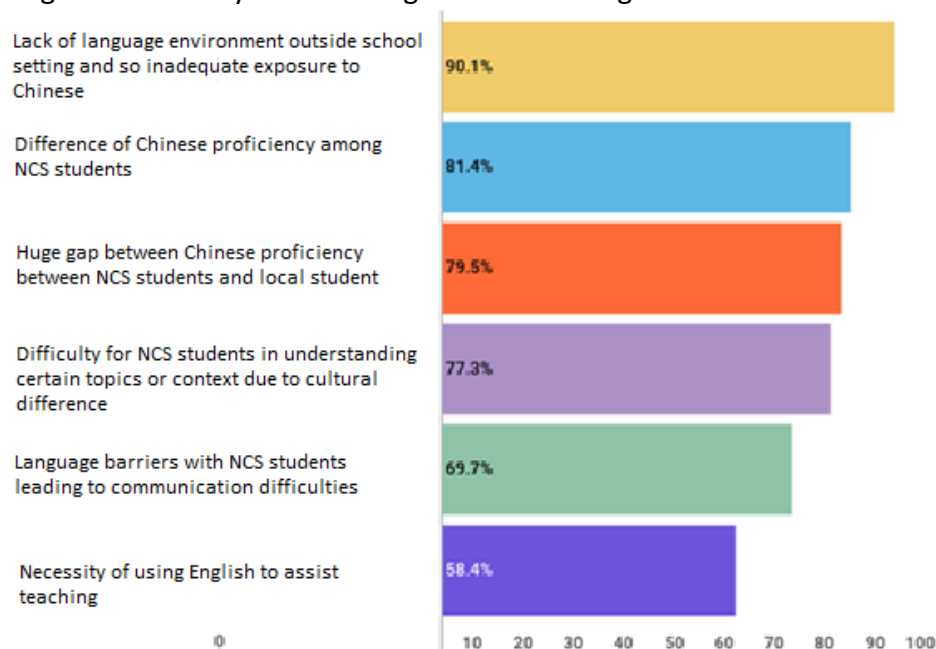
The questionnaire included 7 parts: 1) demographic information of the teachers and the kindergarten they are teaching, 2) the situation and performance of non-Chinese speaking kindergarteners, 3) Chinese language teaching and strategies, 4) support to non-Chinese speaking students' learning and teaching, 5) education policy related to the early years non-Chinese speaking students, 6) home-school communication, 7) the difficulties encountered in helping non-Chinese speaking students to learn Chinese.

3. The major findings

3.1 Ninety per cent of interviewed teachers pointed out a lack of Chinese language environment for the non-Chinese speaking kindergarteners, which has posed the most significant challenge for these students to learn the language

Based on the study findings, about 90% of the teachers pointed out that non-Chinese speaking students do not have sufficient exposure to the Chinese language in their living, which has made the teaching more challenging. About 80% of the teachers believed that “the big discrepancy between Chinese and non-Chinese speaking students” and “the Chinese language proficiency amongst the non-Chinese speaking students” are another two biggest challenges they have encountered (Figure 4).

Figure 4 Difficulty and challenge when teaching NCS Students Chinese



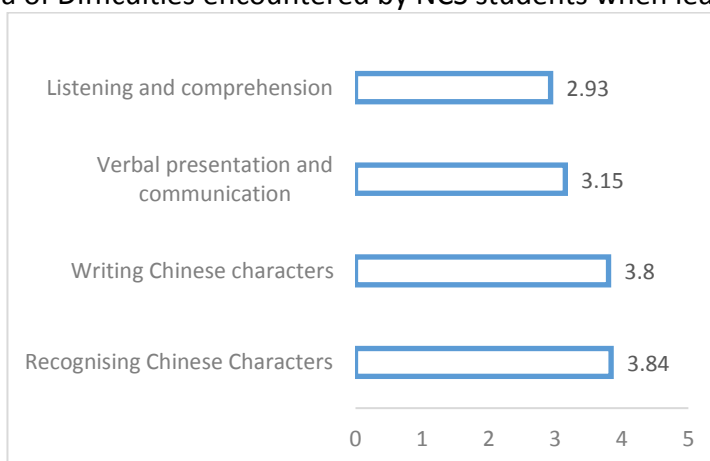
For most of the non-Chinese speaking kindergarteners, the three-hour school time at the kindergartens is the only opportunity to learn Chinese. At home, the non-Chinese speaking parents cannot help their children to learn about the Chinese language. Although these children might have learnt something from the kindergarten, without the practicing opportunity, these non-Chinese speaking students would still be lagging from their peers. Even some parents wish to assist them, but with a low level of Chinese knowledge, they are incapable of correcting their children.

Moreover, although the medium of instruction in most kindergartens of Hong Kong is Cantonese, most non-Chinese speaking parents choose kindergartens with English as the medium of instruction for their children that there would not be many chances for them to speak and listen to Chinese. Also, these students would use English or heritage language to communicate with their family. It further limits the children's opportunity to contact with the Chinese language. In some kindergartens, especially those enrolled with a large proportion of non-Chinese speaking students, the non-Chinese speaking students would use English or heritage language to communicate with the other non-Chinese speaking students and the chance to interact with Chinese-speaking would also be relatively smaller.

According to "Hong Kong Poverty Situation Report on Ethnic Minorities 2016", less than 20% of the poverty population from Indonesia and Nepal can read or write Chinese, and it is less than 40% for the Pakistani. Half of the South Asian population in Hong Kong cannot communicate in Chinese. Thus, most non-Chinese speaking children learn and use mainly their heritage language (e.g. Urdu) to communicate with the parents. They start learning Chinese only from 3 years old when they entered pre-school. Comparing to the Chinese-speaking students, who are speaking Chinese as mother tongue language, the non-Chinese speaking students lagged behind others for three years.

Besides speaking and listening, the kindergarten teachers have observed that non-Chinese speaking kindergarteners have the most considerable difficulty in recognizing Chinese characters, followed by writing Chinese characters.

Figure 5 Area of Difficulties encountered by NCS students when learning Chinese

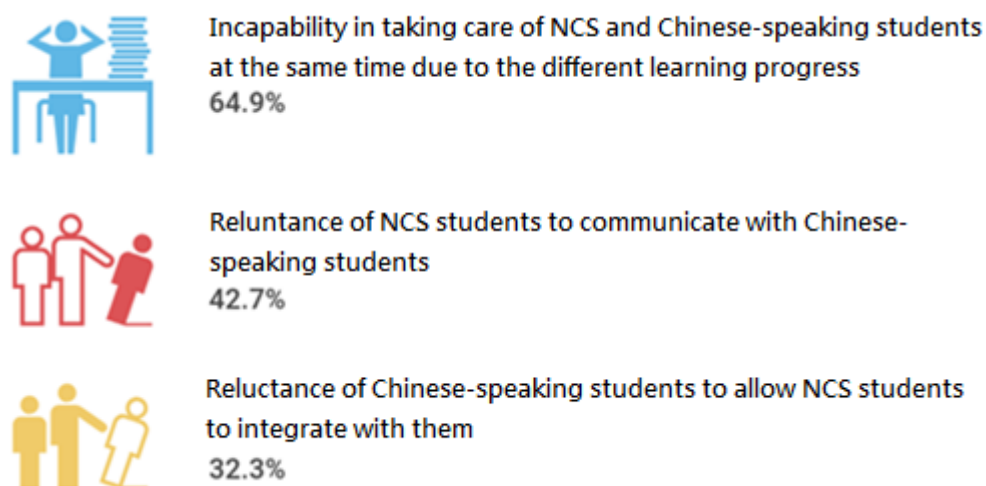


3.2 Nearly 65% of the kindergarten teachers faced difficulty in catering the learning needs of both Chinese and non-Chinese speaking students at the same time

Over 60% of the teachers expressed that “catering the learning progress of both Chinese and non-Chinese speaking students” added difficulty in teaching. The non-Chinese speaking students came from different family ethnicity background. The cultural differences amongst them are substantial that the students have a different starting point in learning Chinese. Kindergarten teachers often need to take care of the whole class that it is hard for them to take care of individual differences as well.

Furthermore, there are teachers indicated that some Chinese speaking students are not willing to let the non-Chinese speaking students integrate with them (32.3%), and some non-Chinese speaking students are not willing to socialize with the Chinese-speaking students (42.7%) (Figure 6).

Figure 6 Difficulty and Challenge when teaching Chinese-speaking and NCS students together



3.3 75% of teachers have never attended any professional teacher training in teaching non-Chinese speaking students.

Although teaching non-Chinese speaking students is somehow challenging, the survey revealed that 75% of the teachers have never attended any professional teacher training in teaching non-Chinese speaking students (see figure 7).

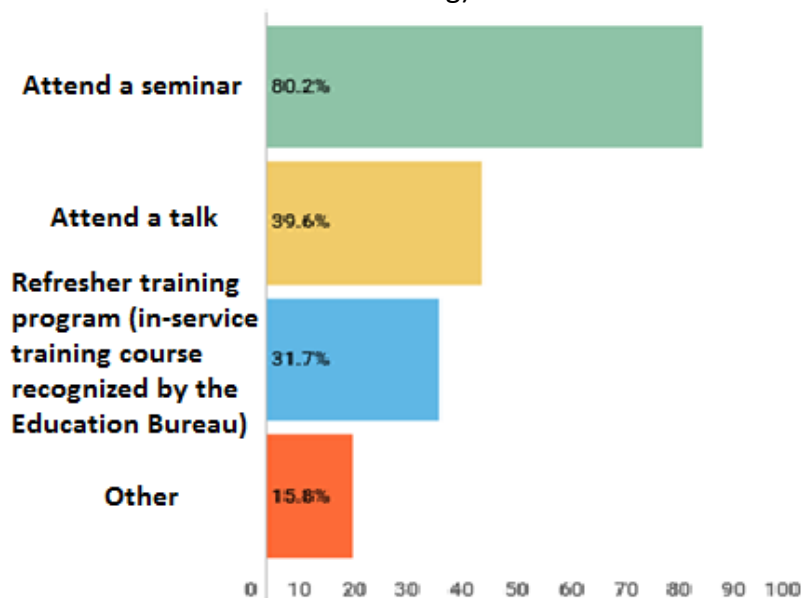
Figure 7 Attend professional training in teaching NCS students



75% never attend any professional training

In the other 25% of teachers, who have attended related professional training, nearly 80% of them have only attended one-off training in the form of seminars, 40% of them attended talks, and only 32% of them have attended EDB recognized in-service teacher training program (Figure 8).

Figure 8 Form of training (among the 25% who have attended related professional training)

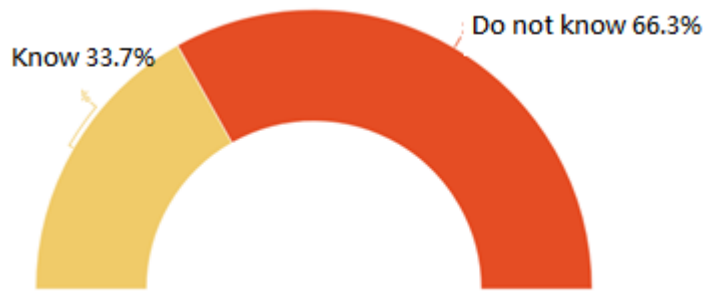


Based on these findings, we observe that most local kindergarten teachers have never attended any related teacher training in teaching non-Chinese speaking students, even if some do have attended, the training was lacking comprehensiveness and a clear focus on the teaching strategies to teaching non-Chinese speaking students.

Since 2018, the EDB has suggested a qualification framework for kindergarten teachers in Hong Kong that it requires at least one of the teachers in kindergartens enrolled with the non-Chinese speaking student is required to attend the basic course¹ by the end of the school year 2018/2019. However, about two-thirds of the interviewed teachers are not aware of this new measure (see Figure 9).

¹ EDB Circular no. 8/2018. Enhancing Professional Competency of KG Principals and Teachers. Retrieved from: https://www.edb.gov.hk/attachment/en/edu-system/preprimary-kindergarten/free-quality-kg-edu/Circular_CP2018%2006%2008_FINAL_Eng.pdf

Figure 9 Aware of EDB’s requirement of at least one of the teachers in kindergartens attend the basic course



3.4 Over 90% of teachers support “dynamic enrichment learning mode” to teach Chinese as a second language

As high as 96% of teachers support adopting the “dynamic enrichment learning mode” to teach Chinese as a second language (Figure 10).

Figure 10 Support adopting the “dynamic enrichment learning mode” to teach Chinese as a second language

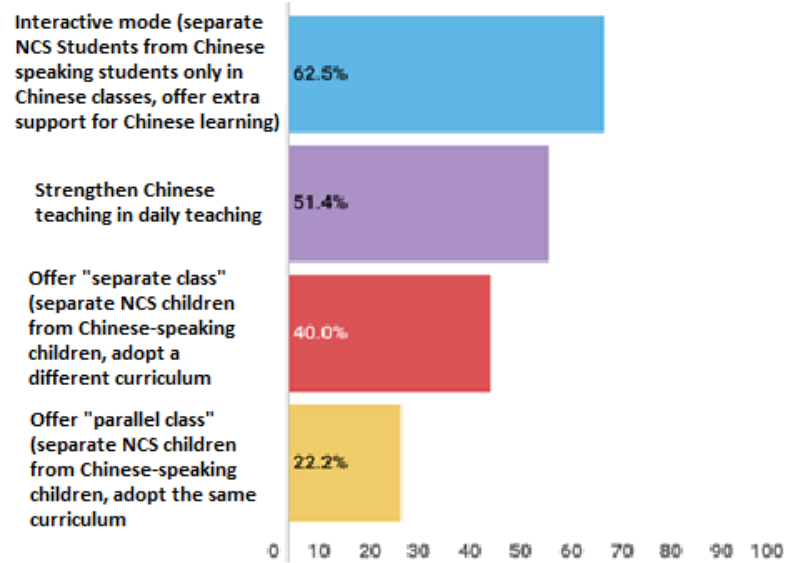


96% Support

More than 62.5% of the teachers agree that the “dynamic enrichment learning mode” would be the most effective learning support model. The “dynamic enrichment learning mode” refers to taking part of the lesson time arranging the non-Chinese speaking students to receive additional Chinese learning (about 1 to 1.5 hours per week) and the non-Chinese speaking students join their classmates in the rest of the time (see Figure 11).

The “dynamic enrichment learning mode” enables non-Chinese speaking students to receive learning support at a suitable level for them, and at the same time, they can be benefited from immersing in the Chinese language environment of the school.

Figure 11 The Most Effect Learning Support Model perceived by Teachers



3.5 Over half of the interviewed kindergartens did not provide primary school allocation related information to the non-Chinese speaking parents

Most of non-Chinese speaking parents do not have much knowledge about the local education system, for instance, the application process to primary schools, resources provided by the primary schools, the medium of instruction used in Chinese or other subjects.

Oxfam Hong Kong conducted another research study in 2018 on the supports provided by different primary schools. The supports varied amongst school: from schools without any support to schools provided with a series of accommodation and learning supports. The learning support measures included Chinese learning support (e.g. pull-out sessions or individual education program, after-school remedial), extra time to students in completing test assessment, employing non-Chinese speaking teaching assistant to translate school circular and communicate with parents. Yet, the understanding of the local education system amongst these non-Chinese speaking parents is still far low that they might not be able to tell which school would have better support to their children.

According to this survey, 50.5% of kindergartens were found not providing any information on primary school allocation (Figure 12).

Figure 12 Special measures provided by kindergartens to NCS parents about transition to primary schools



50.5% kindergartens have no special measures to NCS parents about transition to primary schools

3.6 Over 60% of teachers expressed that the EDB's support measure is insufficient

The survey has revealed that 64% of teachers observed an insufficiency in EDB's support measures (see Figure 13)

Figure 13 Sufficiency of EDB's support measures to NCS kindergarteners



64% inadequate

The current support measures to the non-Chinese speaking students in early childhood education are still at the beginning stage. The support, thus far, is limited and mainly monetarily. We are pleased to see that the EDB has taken our policy avocation. The Policy Address in 2018 has made a change on the subsidizing method, from "cut-off" subsidizing method in the past to now subsidizing based on the number of students in the regime of 5-tire subsidy support model. The amount of subsidy is also adjusted to be equivalent to the salary of a kindergarten teacher (i.e. HKD \$360,000 in a year).

In addition to the financial support, more work is definitely needed to better support the non-Chinese speaking students, such as provision of professional teacher training, curriculum development and helping with the transition from kindergarten to primary school related issues.

4. Current issues on the policies in supporting non-Chinese speaking students

4.1 Chinese as a second language learning enrichment program

The present survey revealed an urge from the kindergarten teachers to have a Chinese as a second language learning enrichment program. Currently, EDB did not provide any curriculum and teaching material for teaching Chinese as a second language. The “Starting from the beginning” project aimed to address such insufficiency. Building on the kindergartens’ theme-based curriculum, it develops a set of teaching material and lesson plans for the non-Chinese speaking kindergarteners. The “dynamic enrichment learning mode” would be applicable to all kindergartens in Hong Kong. It provides teaching material, strategies and assessment tool, which has been evidenced to be effective.

The “dynamic enrichment learning mode” has been widely recognized by the kindergartens that it is the most effective way to support the non-Chinese speaking students to learn Chinese as a second language. In the “dynamic enrichment learning mode” program, non-Chinese speaking students would receive learning support at a suitable level for them, and at the same time, they can be benefited from immersing in the Chinese language environment at the school.

The current kindergarten curriculum document “Kindergarten Education Curriculum Guide”² assumed that “Chinese is the medium of communication for most people in Hong Kong.”. Hence, the curriculum is developed primarily for Chinese speaking learners. It might not have considered the learning needs of non-Chinese speaking students. Although the guide has highlighted the Chinese learning component, the guidance has been over-simplified that it does not help kindergarten teachers practically.

4.2 Teacher training

Most kindergarten teachers do not have received any training in teaching non-Chinese speaking students. It is a significant challenge for them to cater the learning of both Chinese and non-Chinese speaking students, at which teacher training is crucial.

The EDB has released a circular in June 2018³ that all kindergartens under the “Kindergarten Education Scheme”, which have been subsidized for support to non-Chinese speaking students”, are required to arrange at least one kindergarten

²Curriculum Development Council (2017). Kindergarten Education Curriculum Guide (page 34). Retrieved from https://www.edb.gov.hk/attachment/en/curriculum-development/major-level-of-edu/preprimary/ENG_KGECG_2017.pdf

³ EDB Circular no. 8/2018. Enhancing Professional Competency of KG Principals and Teachers. Retrieved from: https://www.edb.gov.hk/attachment/en/edu-system/preprimary-kindergarten/free-quality-kg-edu/Circular_CPD_2018%2006%2008_FINAL_Eng.pdf

teacher to attend the “basic course” program. The kindergartens are also required to meet such requirement before 2020/2021 school year ⁴.

However, the basic course program, which is provided by several organizations, has a number of training time ranged from 15 to 40 hours. The limited training time might not be enough to enhance teachers’ skills and have an in-depth discussion to address the issues related to teaching non-Chinese students.

It is appreciated that the Education Bureau will start to provide “advance training course” for teacher, however, the way of delivery is still over-reliance on lecturing. School-based teaching training should be strengthened so teachers could be professionally trained in real classroom settings.

In addition to the time limitation of the training, it is questionable that there might not be sufficient “incentive” and “time” to motivate teachers’ participation. On the aspect of “incentive”, the duty on teaching non-Chinese student does not seem giving a career prospect, or salary incentive to the teachers. Given the added workload to the teachers teaching non-Chinese speaking students, the extra time in training might lead them to leave their jobs easily. On the aspect of “time”, the survey has revealed that 75% of teachers do not have the time capacity to attend the professional training. After all, encouraging the teachers to participate related training might be more difficult than imagined.

4.3 Kindergarten-primary school transition

According to the observation and experience from “Start from beginning” project, a smooth transition from kindergarten to primary school is another crucial factor for non-Chinese speaking students’ learning of Chinese language. In fact, most non-Chinese speaking parents are not familiar with the local education system. They are not familiar with the application process, the learning supports of different primary schools to their children, the medium of instruction in Chinese and other subjects.

Despite the fact that EDB has provided some support to the non-Chinese speaking parents (e.g. pamphlets on primary one admission, seminars, enhancement of the primary school profile information), most non-Chinese speaking parents are not aware of such information and the usage is low. These measures are arguably helpful to the non-Chinese speaking parents.

The present study reflected that over half of the kindergartens did not provide any support for non-Chinese parents in primary one admission. With a lack of the primary one admission information, many non-Chinese parents have difficulties in choosing the right primary school for their children.

⁴ <https://applications.edb.gov.hk/circular/upload/EDBC/EDBC18008C.pdf>

Many non-Chinese parents wish to let their children studying at main stream primary schools, but they are concerned that school enrolled with only a few non-Chinese students (9 or below non-Chinese students) might not provide sufficient resources to support their children as only primary schools enrolled with 10 or more non-Chinese speaking students would have received the provision fund (\$800k to \$1.5million). The primary schools enrolled with 9 or fewer non-Chinese speaking students would received only \$50k subsidy (if the school has applied). Under the lack of subsidy, it is questionable if these schools would have enough resources to support the non-Chinese speaking students.

5. Suggestions

5.1 Develop supplementary guide and teaching material for teaching Chinese as a second language

Given the discrepancy on the starting point of learning Chinese between the Chinese and non-Chinese speaking students, their Chinese language proficiency gap is significantly large that it is considerably difficult for teachers to cater the learning needs of both of them at the same time within a tight teaching schedule. EDB needs to adopt the evidence-based “Dynamic Enrichment Learning Mode” program (including the teaching material, teaching tool and lesson plan, assessment) in kindergartens to support teaching of Chinese as a second language. EDB also needs to support teachers taking part of the school time to provide learning enrichment to the non-Chinese speaking kindergarteners. Besides, the teachers need to assure their teaching is level-appropriate and students are learning Chinese language in a systematic and progressive manner.

5.2 Require a proportion of teachers to receive basic and advanced professional training

Regarding the in-service professional training, we suggest the EDB to strengthen Chinese as a second language professional training by increasing the course quota and enhance the curriculum, based on the existing basic and advance courses. The bureau could take the reference of teacher development implemented in special education support among the primary and secondary schools⁵. For example, in five years, the EDB could require a certain proportion of teachers to complete basic and advance level professional training, to make sure the teachers have the necessary knowledge and skills in teaching non-Chinese speaking students.

⁵ EDB Circular No. 12/ 2015. Teacher Professional Development on Catering for Students with Special Educational Needs. Retrieved from: <https://www.edb.gov.hk/en/edu-system/special/sen-training/index.html>

In addition to the training, EDB should provide a career prospect for teachers or pre-service teachers to pursue in the specialist of teaching non-Chinese speaking students.

5.3 Provide support to the parents during primary one admission

We suggest the EDB should strengthen the parent support on the transition from kindergarten to primary one, such as: primary one admission procedure, facilitating parents to understand the local education system, increase the transparency on the medium of instruction used in different primary schools.

5.4 Review the existing additional funding mechanism for Primary and Secondary schools with NCS students

Sufficient support of primary schools will be the prerequisite for NCS students in smooth transition to Primary One. However, under the current additional funding mechanism, primary and secondary schools admitting ten or more NCS students are granted an additional funding ranging from \$0.8 million to \$1.5 million, while those admitting nine or less are granted \$50,000 only.

As a matter of fact, about 47.5% primary schools were with less than 10 NCS students in year 2017-18. ⁶According to the direct investigation report “Government’s Support for non-Chinese Speaking Students” issued by the Office of the Ombudsman issued in February 2019, it provided comment to the policy, “The above situation shows that the difference of only one NCS student (whether admitting nine or ten students) could mean a difference of 16 times in additional funding to primary and secondary schools (i.e. \$50,000 for admitting nine students and \$0.8 million for admitting ten students).”⁷ We recommend EDB should review the funding mechanism and increase the subsidies for schools admitting less than 10 NCS students so as to enhance the support of teaching.

⁶ https://ofomb.ombudsman.hk/abc/files/2019-2_FR_DI422_Governments_support_for_non-Chinese_speaking_students.pdf, p.10

⁷ https://ofomb.ombudsman.hk/abc/files/2019-2_FR_DI422_Governments_support_for_non-Chinese_speaking_students.pdf, section 5.5