

Commentary: Inclusive education policy long overdue for kindergartens

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Hong Kong has implemented an inclusive education policy since 1997, in response to a 1994 call by Unesco for action on special needs education. However, it is only confined to primary and secondary levels of education.

Research shows that the best intervention period for children with developmental disability is before the age of six. That is why Unesco's call for action prioritises early childhood education. With the enrolment rate of kindergarten in Hong Kong reaching 100 per cent, providing support to students with developmental disabilities via kindergarten is one of the most effective ways.

According to government data, children aged two to six who have been diagnosed with developmental disabilities can be classified into two groups. The first comprises some 6,000 children with access to a rehabilitation service, while the second comprises 7,000 children on the waiting list. Around 12,000 of these children are enrolled in ordinary kindergartens, while 1,700 are enrolled in special schools.

Although mainstream kindergartens must cater to a large number of children with special needs, Hong Kong has no inclusive education policy for early childhood education. This means no support from the Education Bureau.

Many of these children missed their golden period for identification and intervention because of the policy vacuum.

Unlike primary education, no universal screening for kindergarten students at risk of developmental disabilities is implemented. Many at-risk cases in kindergarten are "hidden" until they enter primary school. It not only delays appropriate support to them, but also harms the normal teaching and learning process.

In the past, the bureau justified its non-interventionist approach because kindergartens were completely privately run. However, this changed with the introduction of the pre-primary education voucher scheme in 2007.

The Committee on Free Kindergarten Education is reviewing the city's early childhood education and it is expected to propose a further transformation of early childhood education from the private to the public sector. Therefore the bureau has no excuse for maintaining its non-interventionist approach.

There is an urgent need to formulate an inclusive policy for early childhood education or it will be difficult to facilitate early identification and early support for kindergarten students at risk or diagnosed with developmental disabilities. The committee should stand with us and urge the government to formulate an inclusive policy for early childhood education as soon as possible.

