

**Extract from the minutes of special meeting of the
Panel on Education held on 3 March 2003**

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I. Progress on the harmonisation of pre-primary services

At the invitation of the Chairman, Principal Assistant Secretary for Education and Manpower (Quality Assurance) (PAS(EM)QA) briefed members on the main points of the Administration's paper entitled "Way forward for harmonisation of kindergartens (KGs) and child care centres (CCCs) [LC Paper No.CB(2)1125/02-03(01)].

Subsidies to service providers

2. The Chairman asked whether the recommendations of the Working Party on Harmonisation of Pre-primary Services (the Working Party) as outlined in the Administration's paper had addressed all the concerns of the service providers in the pre-primary sector.

3. Assistant Director of Social Welfare (Family and Child Welfare) (AD(FCW)) responded that the Working Party had proposed some modifications to the original recommendations to address the concerns of the pre-primary sector and the public. He pointed out that aided day nurseries (DNs) and day creches (DCs) received a direct subsidy equivalent to 5% of the fee approved on the basis of the approved capacity (the 5% Subsidy Scheme), whereas non-profit-making KGs were eligible to join the Kindergarten Subsidy Scheme (KSS) and receive grants under the Scheme. Since the two Schemes operated on a different basis, some service providers in the CCC sector might receive a smaller level of subsidies after the expansion of KSS to cover the CCC sector. However, non-profit-making DN and DC operators with reasonable enrolment would receive a higher level of grant under the expanded KSS than that under the existing 5% Subsidy Scheme.

Financial assistance to parents

4. Responding to the Chairman, AD(FCW) explained that the Kindergarten Fee Remission Scheme (KGFRS) was enhanced by adding a new tier of 75% to benefit more families. Under the enhanced KGFRS, the level of fee remission granted would be, taking the four-person families or three-person single-parent families as example, 100% for those with a household income up to \$8,500, 75% for those with an income between \$8,501 and \$12,356, and 50% for those between \$12,357 and \$22,700. The levels of assistance should therefore be reasonable. Besides, having considered the views of the sector and parents, the Working Party had also recommended to include meal charge (not exceeding

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\$400 per month for children aged 2-6 and \$500 for children aged 0-2) and expenses on air-conditioning fees in the calculation of inclusive fees and subject to fee remission under KGFRS. After harmonisation, existing beneficiaries would be given the option to continue receiving subsidies under the Child Care Centre Fee Assistance Scheme (CCCFAS) upon transfer between institutions or from DCs to DNs/KG-cum-DNs.

Qualification of KG teachers and Child Care Workers

5. Mr YEUNG Yiu-chung asked whether Child Care Workers (CCWs) would be allowed to be registered as Qualified Kindergarten Teachers (QKTs) in order that they could serve in KGs or CCC-cum-KGs before and after harmonisation.

6. AD(FCW) responded that currently there were around 2 800 CCWs and some 1 000 QKTs registered before 1997 who might not meet the new registration requirements for QKTs and CCWs respectively. CCWs and QKTs registered after 1997 should have undergone similar training and could serve in either post. The Working Party considered that although the training courses attended by CCWs and QKTs registered before 1997 differed in programme structure, they had common modules on education and child care. When the harmonisation was implemented in 2004-05, these CCWs and QKTs should have some seven years of experience in KG education or child care. The Working Party therefore recommended that all serving and trained CCWs and KG teachers should be mutually recognised by the Education and Manpower Bureau (EMB) and Social Welfare Department (SWD) as Registered Teachers/QKTs and CCWs upon harmonisation without further qualification assessment or requirement of attending conversion courses.

7. Ms Cyd HO considered that the quality of pre-primary service was pivotal to the development of the interest to learn among young children between the age of 0 to 6. She suggested that the Administration should provide QKTs and CCWs with some education resource centres or websites such as the Hong Kong Education City Net to exchange views and disseminate successful teaching and learning experiences in order to enhance the quality of early childhood education in the long run.

8. PAS(EM)QA responded that as a long term goal, the Administration was working towards providing a professional and life-long learning ladder for pre-primary practitioners. At present, the basic qualification for appointment of a KG teacher or a child care worker had been raised to QKT or equivalent. The Administration would continue to promote the quality of the pre-primary workforce by way of raising the qualifications required and encouraging KG and CCC operators to facilitate their staff to acquire higher qualifications. In particular, the Administration was collaborating with tertiary institutions with a view to enhancing the training and development programmes for the pre-

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primary workforce. As regards the provision of an electronic forum, the Hong Kong Education City Net on the Internet incorporated a component on early childhood education through which QKTs and CCWs could share their successful experiences in delivery of pre-primary services. In addition, the Administration would continue to co-ordinate the provision of experience-sharing sessions, seminars and meetings for interested QKTs and CCWs to exchange views and experiences in early childhood education and child care.

9. Referring to the submission of the Early Childhood Education Administrators Association [LC Paper No.CB(2)1125/02-03(02)], Ms Emily LAU asked why university graduates were not exempted from the one-year pre-service training for QKTs and allowed to teach in KGs and CCCs before completing the QKT training. Ms LAU was of the view that the higher the qualifications of KG teachers, the better the quality of early childhood education. She expressed reservations that a three-year degree programme could not be accepted as an equivalent of a one-year QKT training.

10. PAS(EM)QA explained that QKT training was a one-year full time professional training on early childhood education specifically designed for teaching young children between the ages of 0 to 6. University graduates without a major in early childhood education would unlikely possess the necessary knowledge and skills in early childhood education. Those who had completed an education-related degree programme would be granted partial exemption from the requirements for registration as a QKT. The Administration would carefully consider the subject relevance of individual degree programmes in deciding whether exemption should be given. He added that the Hong Kong Institute of Education offered an in-service QKT training for serving KG teachers/CCWs, including degree holders, who were interested to pursue a career in early childhood education.

11. Miss CHOY So-yuk asked whether degree holders working in Special Child Care Centres (SCCCs) operated by non-profit-making non-Government Organisations (NGOs) could be exempted from the QKT requirement. In view of the rehabilitation nature of their duties, she asked whether supervisors working in these SCCC who were degree holders and possessed recognized basic child care training should be exempted from the training requirement of completing the relevant Certificate of Education (Early Childhood Education) (CE(ECE)) before 2005.

12. AD(FCW) responded that SCCC would remain under the supervision of SWD in accordance with the Child Care Services Ordinance after harmonisation. The current staffing arrangements and requirements for SCCC workers and supervisors would continue and whether a serving supervisor could be granted an exemption from the requirement of a CE(ECE) would depend on the relevance of his/her degree studies and other qualifications in early childhood education. In view of the smaller size of the SCCC workforce,

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the Administration would liaise with the NGOs and institutions concerned on appropriate transitional arrangements for serving SCCC supervisors after harmonisation. In response to Miss CHOY So-yuk's further enquiry, AD(FCW) clarified that some serving SCCC supervisors in possession of a degree were appointed on temporary terms, pending completion of the required training (i.e. currently the basic child care training) within a specified period before they could be registered as Child Care Supervisors.

Pre-primary services for children of ethnic minorities

13. Ms Cyd HO suggested that a full-day rate of fee remission should be payable to a non-Cantonese speaking Southeast Asian family even when the female parent was a housewife. She pointed out that in order to integrate with the mainstream culture, children of the ethnic minorities should attend full-day ordinary schools and practise speaking Cantonese as often as possible.

14. AD(FCW) responded that eligible children of ethnic minorities enjoyed an equal right to enrol in KGs, DNs and DCs and needy families of the ethnic minorities could, like other local families, apply for assistance under KGFRS, and receive full-day rates of fee remission if meeting also the set of criteria for assessment of their social needs apart from a means test. He pointed out that the Administration considered it fair to assess the social needs of families of different ethnic origins based on the same set of criteria, which included, among others, the recommendations of social workers. Similar to their local counterparts not meeting the criteria for social need assessment, ethnic minorities aged 3-6 might attend half-day KGs and receive half-day rates of fee remission subject to a means test. He added that from an educational point of view, a half-day KG programme would suffice for children aged 3 to 6.

15. Ms Cyd HO was not satisfied with the Administration's response. She stressed that the need of the young ethnic minorities to interact with their local peers in schools was essential for enhancing their integration into the local communities. She urged the Administration to consider incorporating the need to integrate into the mainstream education system as a qualified social need for provision of full fee remission to needy families of the ethnic minorities.

16. Ms Cyd HO further requested the Administration to publish leaflets in the languages of the ethnic minorities to promote their awareness of the availability of the pre-primary services and the fee remission schemes. She pointed out that not all non-Cantonese-speaking Asians were aware of the provision of subsidised pre-primary services offered by CCCs and KGs which would facilitate their children to integrate into the mainstream education system. She considered that enabling young ethnic minorities to interact with local children at KGs or CCCs at their early ages would reduce their learning difficulties due to language problem and save the costs which would otherwise be used to assist them to integrate into the local education system at primary

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schools. She opined that providing these children with special treatment would not constitute reverse discrimination against local children. She added that the requirement of the recommendations of social workers for award of full-day rates of fee remission to ethnic minorities would incur additional administrative expenses.

17. Ms Emily LAU shared Ms Cyd HO's view. She urged the Administration to make every effort to remove any obstacles or discriminatory elements in the provision of KG and CCC places for children of the ethnic minorities. She stressed that these children should enjoy an equal right to education as local children.

18. AD(FCW) stressed that all children of the ethnic minorities enjoyed the same rights as their local counterparts in entitlement to the pre-primary services offered by DCs, DNs and KGs and fee remissions under CCCFAS and KGFRS. PAS(EM)QA supplemented that publicity leaflets in Southeast Asian languages such as Hindi, Bengali and Nepali were published and distributed to the respective ethnic minorities through their local communities and related NGOs.

19. Ms Cyd HO remarked that children of ethnic minorities should be given special arrangements in education so as to enhance their integration into the local society. She pointed out that equity should not be superficially interpreted as ensuring equal treatment to different parties, regardless of their individual circumstances and needs. She stressed that special arrangements and remedial measures should be provided for children of ethnic minorities as a kind of affirmative action to facilitate their integration into the local education system.

20. AD(FCW) reiterated that from an educational point of view, a half-day KG programme would suffice for children aged 3 to 6, and would serve the purpose of integration. The purpose of a full-day programme was to add care elements in response to social needs or parental choice. He considered that the existing criteria for assessing social need were reasonable, and it would not be difficult for families including those of ethnic minorities to satisfy the criteria for assessing social need. AD(FCW) added that those exceptional cases could also be considered upon recommendation by social workers.

21. The Chairman said that members were very concerned about the right and access of children of ethnic minorities to pre-primary education. He requested that the Administration should provide supplementary information on the provision of relevant services to children of the ethnic minorities for members' reference.

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Staff to children ratio

22. Mr CHEUNG Man-kwong expressed support for keeping the existing statutory staff to children ratio of 1:8 for children aged 0 to 2; and adopting the ratio of 1:15 for children aged 3 to 6. He, however, suggested that a lower ratio, say 1:10 or 12, should be considered for children aged between 2 to 3, having regard to the characteristics of children between the ages 2 to 3. He asked about the staffing and cost implications for implementation of his suggestion.

23. AD(FCW) explained that the current staff to children ratios in DCs, DNs and KGs were 1:8, 1:14 and 1:15 respectively. The Working Group recommended adopting the ratio of 1:15 for all children aged 2 to 6 as the minimum standard. Operators might choose to adopt a more generous staffing ratio to give children more individual attention. He pointed out that improving the ratio for children aged between 2 to 3 to 1:10 or 12 would incur additional staff costs and lead to increase in fees which might not be favoured by parents at this stage. He added that the Administration might review the ratio from a long term perspective.

24. Mr CHEUNG Man-kwong remarked that young children aged 2 to 3 still required intensive care and more direct supervision. He considered it sensible to adopt a gradual approach in increasing the ratio according to the age. He suggested that the Administration should consider the views of the trade and make use of the harmonisation exercise to rationalise the staff to pupil ratios for appropriate age groups of children in DCs, DNs and KGs.

25. The Chairman urged the Administration to consider the views of the trade on the appropriate staff to children ratio for children between the age of 2 to 3.

Kindergarten subsidy scheme and quality assurance mechanism

26. Mr CHEUNG Man-kwong pointed out that there was an inherent contradiction between the policy principles of fee remission and quality assurance. He explained that under the enhanced KGFRS, a KG would receive subsidies in proportion to its enrolment of pupils. In other words, KGs might have to design their curriculum over-emphasizing academic studies to meet the preference of parents in order to promote enrolment. On the other hand, inspectors of the Quality Assurance Teams would advise KG operators that KG curriculum should be appropriate to the development needs of young children and pre-mature drilling or excessive training should be avoided. He asked how the Administration would resolve such a contradiction.

27. PAS(EM)QA responded that the policy on education subvention and quality assurance policy on KG operation should be considered as complementary in enhancing the quality of early childhood education in KGs.

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He pointed out that KGs were now encouraged to develop their performance indicators for self-evaluation and keep parents informed of their self-evaluation findings. The Administration would continue to publicise the education principles and concepts in delivery of pre-primary education and make available information related to the characteristics and performance of KGs on the Internet. He added that EMB would continue to monitor the performance of KGs by way of quality assurance inspections and would withdraw from giving subsidies to KGs which failed to deliver quality pre-primary education. He stressed that the Administration would strive towards improving the transparency of KG operations and promoting parent education on early childhood education.

28. Mr CHEUNG Man-kwong asked whether EMB had stopped subsidising a KG on the ground that its curriculum was too over-emphasising on academic studies or inappropriate for KG children. PAS(EM)QA responded that EMB had withdrawn from giving subsidies to some KGs which had failed to provide an appropriate curriculum and deliver a satisfactory level of pre-primary education in the past.

29. Mr CHEUNG Man-kwong reiterated that in the face of a declining pupil population, some KGs would have to change their curriculum according to parents' preference in order to increase enrolment. He considered that the Administration should work out measures to maintain an appropriate balance between the differing demand arising from the operation of KSS and the quality assurance mechanism on KG curriculum after harmonisation. The Chairman added that the Administration should reinforce its monitoring role on KG curriculum by way of quality assurance inspections.

30. PAS(EM)QA undertook to consider members' views and suggestions expressed at the meeting.

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