



**Oxfam Hong Kong's Response to the 'Report of the Committee
on Free Kindergarten Education'**

The Committee on Free Kindergarten Education announced the captioned report on 28 May, 2015 which agreed that early exposure to the Chinese language in a language-rich environment would be helpful for non-Chinese speaking (NCS) kindergarten students to learn Chinese. Committee members suggested giving out an additional subsidy – equivalent to the salary of a teacher – to certain kindergartens that admit NCS students. The Committee also suggested providing programs for teachers to understand how NCS students learn Chinese as well as encourage them to continue to learn about the needs of NCS students. Oxfam believes education is the best way to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty, so we welcome the Commission's recommendations in the report to provide additional resources to kindergartens concerned in order to enhance Chinese learning support for NCS students.

Support should be provided to all kindergartens that admit NCS students

While we welcome the Commission's recommendations, the proposed subsidy is only eligible for kindergartens that admit eight or more NCS students. However, paragraph 8.2.5 of the report states, 'most KGs have admitted only a small number of NCS students'. In fact, Oxfam Hong Kong's 'Survey on the Chinese Learning Challenges South Asian Ethnic Minority Kindergarten Students from Low-Income Families Face' in 2014 found that 60.5 per cent of responding kindergartens have only admitted seven or fewer NCS students. This means that the majority of NCS students from low-income families will still not be able to benefit from this funding, if it is ever introduced. Furthermore, there is a significant difference between the resources required to support a kindergarten that has eight NCS students and a kindergarten with NCS students making up more than half of its student population. With only one additional teacher available, Chinese learning support would probably not be enough for the latter type of schools.

We recommend that the government's subsidies correspond to the number of NCS students in each kindergarten to ensure sufficient resources and Chinese language learning support for NCS students. With regard to kindergartens that admit seven or fewer NCS students, the government should subsidise non-governmental organisations to either provide school support services or after school services at centres to enhance NCS students' Chinese language learning. With additional support, we believe that all NCS students will be able to learn Chinese more effectively at an earlier stage.

Designing a 'Chinese as a Second Language Curriculum' for pre-primary NCS students

The report does not mention how the 'Chinese as a Second Language Curriculum' for pre-primary NCS students should be designed, however, Oxfam believes this is crucial. Relevant research¹ has pointed out that apart from immersing children in a Chinese language-rich environment at the pre-primary stage, it is important to tailor-make a Chinese as a second language curriculum for NCS students to effectively learn Chinese. The curriculum should help them begin by acquiring listening and speaking skills, and then associate pronunciations with Chinese characters. With these special teaching arrangements, NCS students can accelerate their learning and better understand the Chinese language. This can help ensure a smooth transition between kindergarten and primary school by helping them meet the Chinese language requirements of mainstream primary schools.

Currently, many ethnic minorities' job opportunities are confined to physically demanding, low-paying and/or dangerous work due to their poor Chinese and Cantonese skills. The language barrier has even left some ethnic minority people without a job, thus forcing them into poverty.

The key to effective Chinese learning is to lay a solid foundation as early as possible. Therefore, the government should extend its Chinese learning support to all kindergartens that admit NCS students. That way, NCS kindergarten students will not only be able to lay down this foundation, but also receive an equal opportunity to education, and improve their upward social mobility so as to avoid or even escape poverty.

¹Tse SK, Loh KY, Chan SP (2010-12), "An investigation of effective teaching strategies in enhancing Non-Chinese speaking students' Chinese character learning ability (In Chinese)"
Kwan CY (2009-10), Study on Chinese Learning of Non-Chinese speaking students in Kindergartens(In Chinese)"