



20th March, 2008

The Office of the Chief Executive
The Chief Executive,
Mr. Donald, Tsang Yam Kuen, JP

Dear Mr. Tsang,

I, on behalf of Hong Kong Unison Limited¹, am writing to urge for your attention to the plights and the unfair situation ethnic minority children in Hong Kong are made to face under the current educational set up. We wish to highlight in particular the problems they have encountered in learning Chinese language – problems which by their consequences have deprived these young people, permanent residents of Hong Kong, from enjoying equal rights and opportunities in their future development. It is also by consequences of these problems that we are debarred from becoming a society with true harmony, one that embraces the core values of justice and equal opportunities, which you, as the Chief Executive of Hong Kong, have reiterated in different occasions.

Mr. Chief Executive, we recall you once told your audience in a public occasion a fable in which a family of mice, being threatened by a cat, was saved solely by the mother's imitation of a dog's bark, upon which she instructed her children about the invaluable skill of a foreign language.

Mr. Chief Executive, it is apparent that you are attuned to the potential benefits and real necessity of pursuing foreign languages. Yet, at the present moment in Hong Kong there exists a crisis directly stemming from this field, one that prevents a certain section of our society from truly being able to prosper and achieve their best; a recurring menace born out of society and government's collective apathy, helping to render many of your ethnic minority citizens incapable of advancing beyond a narrow and limited future. Mr. Chief Executive, it is our aim to bring to your attention their plight, so that you may recognize its danger and act to promote a solution.

¹ The Hong Kong Unison Limited is a local based non-profit, non-governmental organization. Over the past five years, we have been actively involved in advocating the rights of the ethnic minority residents of Hong Kong and in particular, those of the south Asian descent. More importantly, we have also strived hard to bring to public attention the adverse social factors at the root of many of their problems, and in campaigning to alleviate them. We have been working on a variety of issues which, among other, include educational development of the ethnic minority children and on drug and gang violence related issues of the young people.



Ethnic minority youth have never been able to learn Chinese effectively

It is estimated that there are more than 10,000 ethnic minority students in government/government-aided schools, outnumbering even special needs children, yet the former have received much less attention than the latter.

Hong Kong society has always had a misconception about the Chinese language competency of ethnic minorities. It is often believed that due to their fluency in spoken Cantonese, most ethnic minority individuals are similarly fluent in writing and reading the Chinese language.

This conclusion however, is highly erroneous. Presently, Chinese primary students generally have a Chinese vocabulary of about 3,000 words, compared to less than a hundred words on the part of non-Chinese students. What is the root of this discrepancy one may ask? We believe it is due to an inefficient learning apparatus in the majority of the schools, that foreign students are not facilitated to grasp the essentials of the Chinese language, such as structure of Chinese characters, grammar, pronunciation or sentence structure. In fact, there is no comprehensive learning programme in place to provide suitable instruction to a foreign student with no knowledge of these core facets. Requiring these ethnic minority students to study the same Chinese Language syllabus as ethnic Chinese students is simply unrealistic and will effectively drive them to give up in despair. Exacerbating this problem is the lack of immediate family support, as parents often lack the knowledge themselves. Illiteracy in Chinese thus becomes a cross-generational problem.

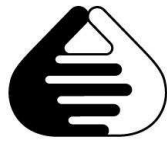
Knowledge of Chinese has become the biggest hurdle in further education and career development

Every year, about 300 to 400 non-Chinese students take the Hong Kong O-level Certificate of Education Examination. Were the results of these students to be compiled, they would most likely to be highly alarming (the Examinations Authority has refused to release such results on the ground that examination results are not differentiated along ethnic lines).

To require non-Chinese students to sit the same examinations in Chinese Language as their ethnic Chinese counterparts is most unfair. Although these students are offered French, Urdu and Hindi in order to fulfill the requirement of a second language, without a recognized qualification in the Chinese language which is an official languages, they face grave difficulties in further education and in career development.

Annually, fewer than 20 non-Chinese students are admitted to Form Six among the few hundreds HKCEE students who study in Government/Government

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Aided/Government Direct Subsidized schools and fewer than five to tertiary education (Last academic year, there were only 3 NCS students from public schools got admitted to University, for example), truly disheartening figures when seen as a proportion of the total number.

The majority of the ethnic minority students cannot consider vocational training either for their competency in Chinese language is often lower than that required by the VTC/IVE (even though the VTC/IVE had claimed that most of their courses do not require Chinese qualification /proficiency but in the reality, Chinese is commonly used as the media of instruction in most of the courses. For this reason, most of the NCS youths are excluded from VTC/IVE courses both intentionally and unintentionally.) There is none of NCS students has been enrolled in Project Yi Jin. This leaves them no choice but to opt for positions in the low-skill labor market. Yet, even in these positions, they can be readily turned away when prospective employers discover that they have difficulty filling in application forms. Ethnic minority youth thus are forced back onto a path well-trodden by their predecessors: low-income and low-skill jobs, often in discriminatory work conditions. No matter how hard they endeavor, they are by default, relegated to poverty.

New educational measure for ethnic minority students too hasty

Against this background, the Education Bureau opened up primary school places in mainstream schools for them to admit non-Chinese speaking students in 2004. However, the result of this hasty measure with neither sufficient planning nor a vision for long term development has been far from satisfactory. Many ethnic minority children have been left to find themselves bewildered by a Chinese language curriculum far beyond their capability and level. Neither do they have a natural environment at home to help them with their study nor are their teachers well equipped to handle students without any foundation. All that such a measure has done at most is to have alerted many teachers, school principals and legislators about the desperate situation of the ethnic minority students in Hong Kong.

The failure of the Education Bureau initiative

The Bureau is publicly funded, yet it has refused our repeated call to assume a coordinator's role in developing a more well-rounded policy for our ethnic minority students. Instead, it has left it for individual schools, many of which have no experience at all in handling ethnic minority students, to develop their so-called "school-based curriculums" to cater the needs of these students. Needless to say, the resulting curriculums vary greatly in substance, quality and level of difficulty among schools. This decentralized curriculum development for the ethnic minority students without the basic



framework and guidelines is highly problematic, especially when the schools do not have the ability to consult different parties and do not have enough resources and manpower to do scientific surveys and experiments before the new curriculum is being adopted. This inappropriate decentralized approach can be regarded as only an excuse for the Bureau to shift the responsibility. In the end, it is the ethnic minority students who have to bear the grunt.

Faced with students with different and distinct needs, and with no overall guiding approach many teachers are helpless too. The Bureau has tried to showcase a few successful cases to camouflage the overall failure of its measures and their ineffective outcomes for most schools and students.

A problem in education becoming a social problem

It is worthwhile taking a moment to consider just how much talent and potential amongst ethnic minority students has gone to waste as inappropriate educational policies go? The long slighted educational needs of theirs have led to the continued impoverishment of these young people and other issues linked with their lack of prospect and their dislocation as youth. Some youth among these minorities have taken to drugs and crime as an outlet, tarnishing their records and making their future even gloomier. Must the problem get out of hand before it is properly addressed? It is time for us to act on the case.

Education is a long-term endeavor, the later it is started, and the more non-Chinese speaking students will be sacrificed. Our inaction on this issue must come to an end.

In China, there is the “Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi” (中國漢語水平考試, HSK) used specifically for non-Chinese speaking people; in Taiwan, similarly, there is the Chinese Proficiency Test (華語文能力測驗, CPT) to test the Chinese competency of foreigners. It only seems archaic that Hong Kong should lag behind in this fashion.

A mission in co-invention and integration

Mr. Chief Executive, you have set yourself the mission of creating a harmonious society. You advocated constructing a stable and harmonious environment, resolving conflicts and minimizing disagreements, and defending the public interest. You also emphasized creating sufficient space for individual development and choice, and ensuring equal opportunity, especially equality in education. We firmly believe

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that once you understand the essence of the problem now bedeviling the ethnic minority students, a path will be opened up for this group of students under your able leadership.

Our requests:

We sincerely ask you to instruct the Education Bureau :

- 1) To formulate policy of Chinese as a Second Language. An independent tailor-made and systematic Chinese Language curriculum should be provided for NCS students, together with relevant guides and learning materials;
- 2) To develop independent assessment tools with learning objectives in different stages. The idea is to enable NCS students to learn Chinese Language on a step-by-step basis, so that they could catch up with local Chinese students gradually;
- 3) To deal with the problem of lack of textbooks by commissioning /sponsoring publishers or other institutions (like universities), to produce Chinese textbooks and other learning materials specifically for NCS students;
- 4) To provide additional resources and supports to all the other schools admitting NCS students, besides those designated schools.
- 5) To clarify if it would still recognize the qualifications obtained from GCE, IGCSE and GCSE exams in future, namely the new academic structure for senior secondary education , or the NCS students have to take the Chinese Language subject in the new HKDSE. Bridging and transitional arrangements, if any, should also be announced as soon as possible;
- 6) To provide financial assistance to those NCS students enrolling the aforesaid international recognized Chinese Language examinations, so that the entry fee will be the same as that of HKCEE;
- 7) To discuss with relevant parties, to have the results of the Chinese Language exam in GCSE announced at the same day with HKCEE. For the convenience with admission of students, a unified examination report/slip should also be provided, containing results of HKCEE and other exams taken by the students.



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- 8) To provide suitable incentive, for example, reward and validation, systematic and in-depth training and recognition by professional qualification, to encourage more teachers undergo training about Chinese Language teaching for NCS students.
- 9) To assume an active and professional role in coordinating related activities

We hope, Mr. Chief Executive, that you will recognize the suffering and difficulties faced by the ethnic minority students and their families, and that you will help to make Hong Kong their true home for the generations to come. We plead that you will meet and discuss with us soon for more intimate knowledge on the issues we have raised. If you need any further information, please contact me at 2789 3246.

Thank you for your kind attention and we look forward to your positive reply.

Yours Sincerely,

Fermi Wong Wai Fun
Executive Director
Hong Kong Unison Limited

Encl.

Unison's response to the Consultation Paper on Developing a 'Supplementary Guide to the Chinese Language Curriculum for Non-Chinese Speaking Students'

c.c. Members of ExCo

