

Education for Ethnic Minorities in Hong Kong
Paper Submitted to the Equal Opportunities Commission by Hong Kong Unison
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Introduction

Some advanced countries, such as the United States, United Kingdom, Canada and Australia, share similar educational problems which are faced by ethnic minority (EM) children in Hong Kong, particularly their difficulties in learning and understanding the language which is required for integration into society. These countries have a high respect for the rights of ethnic minorities. Apart from the provision of appropriate legislation to ensure equal opportunities, they also provide various support measures for new immigrants. They have placed special emphasis on helping ethnic minorities and newly arrived students to adapt and succeed in the local education system. Quite a number of Hong Kong people have migrated to these countries. Their children have not suffered segregation by being placed in a small number of “designated schools” or “special schools”, whilst adjusting themselves to the local education system. On the contrary, these countries provide adequate support services¹ to Hong Kong children, thereby giving them equal access to quality education. In turn, they are able to integrate into the new environment and make contributions to society. In Hong Kong, which is an advanced and prosperous metropolis, there is a lack of concern for the educational problems faced by ethnic minority students.

2. From our experience working with the Education Bureau (EDB) over the years and our observation of the discussions between the government and various concerned parties such as ethnic minority parents, school principals/teachers, legislative councilors and NGOs, we are of the view that the EDB is not handling

¹ These countries have a policy of “English as a Second Language” coupled with other support programmes, language immersion classes, training for teaching professionals using English as a second language, etc.

the educational problems faced by ethnic minorities with genuine concern and political sensitivity. The EDB also lacks experts who are accountable and familiar with the problems. The unfair education system has shattered the dreams of many generations of ethnic minority youngsters. This is due to their lack of Chinese language skills. What is encouraging is the enactment of the Race Discrimination Ordinance in July 2009 which aims to combat racial discrimination. The Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) has set up a working group last year to deal with the problems of education for ethnic minority children. Recently, it has published a booklet to give a brief overview on the current education system and to put forward recommendations to the EDB. We welcome these initiatives taken by the EOC. We also hope that the EOC will urge the EDB to **respond to the proposals and implement an action plan (with a timetable)**, as well as to continue to put pressure on the EDB. Where necessary, the EOC should exercise the powers given to it by the Ordinance to conduct a formal investigation on the EDB so as to eliminate discrimination against ethnic minority students as soon as possible, with the ultimate goal of bringing new hopes to new generations of minorities and to uphold the principle of justice.

Recommendations

3. Effective Chinese language learning is fundamental to the access to equal opportunities for education or employment and to integration into society. In this paper, we would like to propose the following recommendations for the EOC with regard to Chinese language education for EM children, and we hope the EOC would implement appropriate actions accordingly.

- (i) Formulate a timetable with the EDB as soon as possible to **follow up and implement the various recommendations** proposed by the Working Group on Education for Ethnic Minorities.

- (ii) Urge the EDB to implement support measures such as supplementary Chinese language learning for **EM kindergarten children** (please refer to the relevant paper we submitted to the EDB).

- (iii) To ensure that EM students achieve similar academic outcomes in **mainstream schools**, the EDB should arrange for them to attend **Chinese Immersion Classes** to enhance their Chinese proficiency in understanding the subjects taught in class. After they have attained a certain level of competency in the Chinese language, they should join mainstream classes where Chinese is the medium of instruction (CMI) and study together with local Chinese students.

- (iv) Provide adequate and appropriate resources to assist mainstream schools which admit a small number of non-Chinese speaking students. A long-term plan should be made to **replace “designated schools” gradually** to avoid the adverse effect of racial segregation² and allow EM students to fully integrate into society.

- (v) Currently, some schools designated for the intake of EM students have a poor learning atmosphere. Students in general lack personal drive to learn; they have no aspiration, nor do they have a cognitive awareness of the mainstream society. This has seriously affected their career planning and their work attitude in future. The EDB should develop a **Career Counseling Scheme** for EM youngsters to enhance their zeal for learning and to instil aspiration.

² There is a trend that when a designated school starts admitting EM children, it will become an entirely or 90% EM school in a few years after “the flight” of local Chinese parents and students. The common phenomenon is that even though some designated schools still have a certain percentage of local Chinese students, normally they are concentrated in higher levels and there is a disproportionate number of EM students in junior levels.

- (vi) At present, the Chinese language standard of the majority of EM secondary students is inadequate to cope with the local diploma programmes and examinations (HKDSE). However, for some of these students, their Chinese language standard is well above the level of the UK-based GCSE Chinese. We think it is necessary to develop an alternative programme **“Advanced Level Chinese” (AL Chinese)** to allow EM students to continue their studies and keep up their learning spirits.
- (vii) In the long term, there is a need for Hong Kong to design a new curriculum **“Chinese as a Second Language” (CSL)**, coupled with standardised and quality teaching materials and assessment tools, for the implementation of a professional **“Chinese Proficiency Test System”**, with which to assess their Chinese language standard. Reference can be made to the “Assessment for Learning”, a learning assessment tool developed by Professor Tse Shek Kam of the Faculty of Education at The University of Hong Kong, for further developing a localised Chinese proficiency test system. Reference can also be made to the globally recognised “International English Language Testing System” or “Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi “ (漢語水平考試) of Mainland China.
- (viii) For the newly arrived EM youngsters who need to learn Chinese as quickly as possible, the **“Chinese as a Second Language” (CSL) curriculum** would be an advantage to facilitate social integration.
- (ix) Urge the EDB to offer **adequate and professional training for teachers** including: raising their sensitivity towards racial and cultural backgrounds of EM students and their awareness of the challenges facing EM students; enhancing the knowledge and skills involved in teaching

EM students on the use of Chinese as a second language; providing incentives e.g., programme fee subsidy, promotion prospects and salary increment, programme sponsorship, etc. to encourage the academic sector to nurture professionals teaching “Chinese as a second language”.

- (x) The EOC should conduct a series of studies as soon as possible on the following topics:
1. Has the current “integration policy” of the EDB, which targets at non-Chinese speaking students, constituted indirect discrimination under the Race Discrimination Ordinance?
 2. Has the “Secondary School Places Allocation (SSPA)” constituted direct or indirect discrimination against non-Chinese speaking students under the Race Discrimination Ordinance?
 3. Has the policy of “designated schools” given rise to racial segregation of non-Chinese speaking students (from the mainstream education system), i.e. direct discrimination?
- (xi) Implement a **systematic Civic Education Scheme** which includes: promoting the importance of **racial equality** and **acceptance** to **local Chinese-speaking parents and children**; promoting the importance of **pre-school education** and **Chinese language learning** to **EM parents**; formulation of guidelines and taking effective measures in **creating an inclusive and racially harmonious learning environment**.

- (xii) Explore the possibility of setting a timetable for drafting a **Code of Practice** on education and examine under what circumstances the EOC can initiate a formal investigation on education for EM students.

Conclusions

4. Following the efforts made by Hong Kong Unison and various concerned parties to campaign for the rights of ethnic minorities over the years, the EDB has in fact deployed more resources to provide support measures for EM students. **However, we find that the current support measures are piecemeal and far from adequate. They cannot fulfill the needs of the children and resolve their problems due to a lack of comprehensive and long-term planning.**

5. We reiterate that the current policy of allowing “**designated schools**” for EM students has an adverse effect of giving rise to racial segregation. It is not conducive to integration and learning of Chinese since there is a lack of effective local language environment. It seriously affects not only the students’ choices of secondary schools and universities and their opportunities in employment, but also their life chances and social integration in the long run. This mode of school is obviously a form of **direct discrimination** under the Race Discrimination Ordinance. Moreover, under the so-called “**integration policy**” of the EDB, the non-Chinese speaking students are scattered in different mainstream schools without adequate support in learning Chinese, which results in their inability to participate meaningfully in class where Chinese is the principal medium of instruction. This would adversely affect their academic performance, subsequently would limit their choices for educational advancement and employment. We believe this would constitute **indirect discrimination** under the Race Discrimination Ordinance.

6. We are of the view that based on the law, the EOC should try its best to work out a comprehensive and long-term policy with the EDB to resolve the educational problems facing EM students. Moreover, we are looking into a number of cases and working with legal practitioners to explore the possibility of **filing a legal challenge** against the EDB (possibly **judicial review**) with regard to the current education policy for EM students. However, we still hope that **through further discussions and direct dialogue with the EDB**, the EDB would improve the situation by administrative measures and avoid any court action which would otherwise create a controversy in the community and result in a waste of resources.

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