

EO Files (December 2011)

“THINGS WE DO, PEOPLE WE MEET - Reflections in Brief”

Out of touch

The government's decision to leave ethnic minority children to struggle on their own in school without adequate language support is inexcusable, and society will be the big loser if it goes on.

Why has the Education Bureau refused to face the issue? That was the question I put to the Legislative Council panel that met recently to discuss education for ethnic minority children. The state of their plight that I presented to the panel was echoed by the participating legislators: the present system is not working and ethnic minority children are failing in school en masse. We must face up to reality now. Hong Kong needs positive outcomes through a change in the education officials' mindset, not bland statements and half-hearted measures.

A whole generation of ethnic minority children are being affected by the disappointing outcomes of our current education policy. These children should be helped to learn effectively during their formative years. The gap in language ability begins at the pre-primary stage and grows exponentially as they progress through the education system. In July, the Equal Opportunities Commission released a report by its Working Group on Education for Ethnic Minorities, which detailed how the

mainstream education system has been letting down many ethnic minority students who are largely from low-income families. The report offered achievable and affordable recommendations. Disappointingly, the Education Bureau's response has been evasive and apathetic.

Despite numerous warnings over the years from frontline social workers, experts and stakeholders, the bureau has achieved little to improve the situation. Instead, it is barricading itself behind the self-made brick wall of a "one size fits all" approach, while thousands of ethnic minority children and their families are made to bang their heads against it in futility.

Hong Kong's ethnic minority students, hampered by cultural and linguistic differences and a lack of financial resources, continue to face massive hurdles in learning Chinese. Without the home language environment and systematic language support, failure sets in from an early age, and the children are invariably left behind their peers.

Confined to taking the standard local Chinese examination or the British-administered General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) Chinese exam, the students are effectively choosing either failing badly or gaining a qualification that is so low that it is not much use. Despite the policy change in 2008

to accept the GCSE Chinese exam results as an admission criterion for university, the entry rate of ethnic minority students to local tertiary programmes remains very low.

Meanwhile, parents have little choice but to enrol their children in "designated schools", practically forfeiting their children's chance to catch up with their peers in Chinese-language study.

The Education Bureau characterises the flight of ethnic minority students to designated schools as the "free choice" of their parents. This is typical bureaucratic talk. Given that ethnic minority students are generally better at English, they should be assigned to study in mainstream schools with English as the main medium of instruction. But, as the ethnic minority students perform poorly in all subjects taught in Chinese, most do not do well enough to qualify for these more popular schools. In effect, they are stuck in a flawed system.

Despite these difficulties, the Education Bureau has categorically dismissed the idea of developing a more effective Chinese-language learning and assessment system.

Instead, it is clinging to its superficial notion of "equal opportunities" by subjecting all students to a single framework for teaching and assessment.

Giving everyone equal opportunities in fact requires that reasonable accommodation measures, if needed, are put in place to level the playing field. Hong Kong, as an

open city, will always have a considerable number of minorities who need a realistic language policy that is supportive and integrative. The Education Bureau's refusal to set its sight beyond administrative simplicity is counterproductive.

Any effort to address the situation is further undermined by the absence of reliable data, for Hong Kong lacks a uniform and systematic mechanism for collecting statistics on this issue.

What little information there is paints a bleak picture for ethnic minority students. For instance, in 2011, only 17 "non-Chinese-speaking students" from public and Direct Subsidy Scheme schools who sat the Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination received admission offers through the Joint University Programmes Admissions System (Jupas). Yet, in 2011, according to Jupas, a total of 19,210 offers were made in the main round. The numbers support the mountains of anecdotal evidence that suggests ethnic minority students are failing under the present system.

The Equal Opportunities Commission continues to advocate the three prime recommendations for action. These are the strengthening of language support at the pre-primary/junior primary level; the development of an effective teaching and assessment framework; plus an improved data collection system to facilitate evidence-based policy formulation and enhancement of support measures.

It is time for the Education Bureau to step out from behind its brick wall and face the issue. Whatever their ethnic origin, these disadvantaged students are Hong Kong's children. Invest in them through the right compensatory measures and they will be our asset. Leave them to the pool on their own, and many of them will drown. This latter approach is not only morally wrong but probably also legally discriminatory, as it deprives them of genuine equal opportunities in education.

The hurdles are not immovable, but the government must lead the charge.

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