

“On Second Thought” column
LAM WOON-KWONG

Battle for ethnic minority children

Further measures are needed to help the students learn Chinese from an early age

When American author Robert Fulghum wrote, “All I really need to know I learned in kindergarten,” he was not far off the mark. The positive benefits of early education are well documented.

Yet many children in Hong Kong miss out on quality kindergarten education.

Last month, a study from the Society for Community Organisation found that nearly two-thirds of kindergartens charge fees that exceed government subsidies, adding to the financial burden of poor parents.

It's especially bleak for ethnic minority children from low-income families. Straining to afford the school fees, parents also have to battle linguistic barriers, cultural differences, and a lack of knowledge about the system.

Ethnic minority pupils have a considerably lower attendance rate at kindergarten than the whole population average. This - as the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) pointed out in the July 2011 Report from its Working Group on Ethnic Minority Education - is disadvantageous to their language and academic development. Scant resources and training are given to kindergartens and their teachers to work with ethnic minority children.

This directly correlates to the difficulties the children encounter later in mastering Chinese, which affect their access to higher education and employment opportunities in the city.

The gap widens as the students, disadvantaged by the absence of a home language environment, wind their way through schooling.

Some ethnic minority parents, disheartened when they see their children struggle in class, feel they have no choice but to enrol them in “designated”

primary schools. These schools, with a large concentration of ethnic minority students, are viewed by many as not conducive to integration and effective learning of Chinese.

Even if the children continue in mainstream schools, they seldom have the chance to fare better. Lacking support, they eventually lag far behind in their Chinese-language proficiency, particularly in reading and writing. Their subsequently poor performance in subjects taught in Chinese has long-term impact on their school placement and future prospects.

The EOC's Report listed the strengthening of early Chinese-language support at kindergarten/junior-primary level as one of its key recommendations to the government on tackling the educational inequity. Other recommendations included the development of an alternative curriculum and assessment framework.

Legislators passed a motion in February calling on the Government to review its education policy for ethnic minority students and follow up on our recommendations. And the chief executive reiterated his commitment to this issue during a meeting with EOC representatives in June.

Now we need real resources and concrete action. The Education Bureau has taken some steps towards this end, including an expansion of subsidies for non-Chinese students to take other overseas Chinese Language examinations.

The EOC expects further measures to help the students learn Chinese from an early age. These children are a part of Hong Kong's tomorrow, and early investment in them will pay off for society.

We should also instil equal opportunity values in all children at an early age. An EOC study last year found that children pick up on prejudice as early as the age of three, but early education can counteract such thinking. Doing so can strengthen social cohesion for generations to come.

LAM Woon-kwong
Chairperson, Equal Opportunities Commission

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