

Education for Ethnic Minorities Children

Meeting of Legislative Council

Panel on Education on 12 December 2011

--Submission from the Equal Opportunities Commission--

Purpose

This paper aims to update Members the views of the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) on education for ethnic minorities (EM) children. In the context of EOC's concern, ethnic minorities in this paper refer largely to South Asians, essentially Filipino, Indonesian, Nepalese, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Thai, Sri-Lankan, Vietnamese etc. who are residing in Hong Kong, and who are from low income families which cannot afford the choice of international schools.

Background

2. Education is the key to the future of our children. Equal access to quality education provides children with a level-playing field in the education system and eventually in the employment market. EOC recognizes that education is an effective means of empowerment, and is fundamental to personal, social and career development of individuals. Concerned with the high failure rate of EM children in the mainstream education system, a Working Group on EM Education was set up in July 2010 to specifically deal with the subject.

3. The Working Group has met with different stakeholders including school principals and teachers, EM parents and students, and NGOs serving the EM community to ascertain their concerns and views on the subject. While the views of different stakeholders are diverse, probably because of their different personal experiences and perspectives, there are common concerns of which

learning Chinese language is seen to be most daunting. The majority of them considered that although language and other support programmes were funded, the outcome was disappointing. There was neither central monitoring of the support programmes' effectiveness nor quality assurance. The bulk of the EM students failed to attain the mainstream Chinese qualification in the end. What is worse is that most of them gave up mid-stream because their poor examination results in Chinese Language dragged down their overall academic attainment which in turn frustrated their aspiration to move up the academic ladder.

4. After working for nearly a year, the Working Group has come up with a set of recommendations in a Report published in July 2011 (copy attached). The Report attracted public attention and generated considerable discussions among the stakeholders as well as in public platforms. Nevertheless, the response of Education Bureau (EDB) has been disappointing. It failed to recognize the problems faced by EM students and only made vague and non-committal response to the Report's recommendations.

Key Recommendations

5. While it may not be practicable to have all the recommendations implemented at one go, the EOC and stakeholders consider that the recommendations on strengthening pre-primary/junior primary language support, developing an alternative curriculum/qualification assessment, and capturing relevant information for policy formulation and improvement of support measures should be accorded top priority.

Language Support at Pre-primary/Junior Primary Level

6. It is universally recognized by educationists and linguists that students tend to be much more receptive to and be capable of learning a foreign language at younger age. With the introduction of the Pre-primary Education Voucher

Scheme, there is an increasing number of EM children enrolled in kindergartens taught with mainstream curriculum where Chinese is predominately the medium of instruction. The EOC recommends in the Report that the Government should commit to providing Chinese language support programme for EM children at pre-primary level to help them lay a solid language foundation for learning Chinese and to lessen their language difficulty in their integration in the mainstream primary schools. A useful reference is that, a charitable organization, the Lee Hysan Foundation, has been funding a pilot scheme to hire students of the Hong Kong Institute of Education and retired teachers to provide Chinese language support to EM children at about 30 kindergartens and primary schools (for junior primary level). Children who are covered by the scheme have undoubtedly benefited by the early intervention. We strongly urge the Government to learn from the experience and to seriously consider providing structured language support programmes for EM children at the pre-primary level.

7. In addition to language support, it would also be helpful to have EM kindergarten teachers, who are proficient in minority languages and familiar with their cultures, serving in mainstream kindergartens to help EM children to adapt and integrate more effectively. EM teachers can also enhance communications between the kindergartens/schools and parents who may not be proficient in Chinese or English. In this respect, the Government should, by making reference to the JUPAS, explore with the training institutes concerned to admit more EM students for training as kindergarten teachers, with a more flexible Chinese language admission standard.

Alternative Chinese Curriculum and Qualification

8. It is commonly agreed that the gap between GCSE (Chinese) and the mainstream Chinese curriculum/qualification is huge. Attainment of the GCSE Chinese qualification hardly helps school leavers to meet the vocational requirements. Despite the fact that starting from 2008/09, local universities

could exercise discretion to admit EM applicants vide JUPAS by accepting GCSE as an alternative Chinese language requirement, there is no noticeable increase in the percentage of EM students getting a place in tertiary institutions. The reasons could be either the universities seldom exercise their discretion, or EM students, frustrated by their low attainment in Chinese language, generally perform unsatisfactorily in other subjects that hinder their academic advancement. So far, relaxing the admission requirement on Chinese language could hardly be considered an effective measure in enhancing EM students' academic pursuit.

9. EOC advocates a more pragmatic approach: to develop a dedicated Chinese Proficiency Programme and Testing System (CPPTS) with curriculum taught in stages, graded assessment and accreditation. Unlike an alternative syllabus/academic curriculum which is categorically dismissed by the EDB as a 'second-class' qualification, the CPPTS aims to provide an alternative language qualification for educational advancement as well as a benchmark for language proficiency required by different trades and job groups. Reference could be made to the globally recognized International English Testing System (commonly known as IELTS). Adaptation could also be made to the Chinese Proficiency Test (HKS) (*Han yu Shui ping Kao shi*) administered by the China National Committee for Chinese Proficiency Test (HSK) (CNCCPT). This alternative offers a set of more specific and achievable qualifications than the EDB's present policy which is either too high to be achievable by most or too low as to be meaningless. It also offers a range of language attainment standards to suit the different abilities of EM children who may have widely varying language backgrounds.

Data Collection

10. In the course of following up the Report, the EOC has tried to capture statistics and information about the educational attainment of EM students with particular reference to their attendance in tertiary education. To our

disappointment, there is no uniform and systematic mechanism among the tertiary institutions in collecting information about students' ethnicities, modes of their secondary education, main language spoken etc. The University Grants Committee Secretariat provides statistics about students studying in the government-funded programmes, but categorization is essentially by local/non-local students, or Chinese speaking/non-Chinese speaking. Further enquiry with the tertiary institutions reveals that the interpretation of 'ethnicities' vary among institutes when they capture students' profile differently, including 'nationalities', 'place of origin', 'place of birth' and 'language spoken at home'. Apart from the tertiary level, there is no accurate statistics and information about the dropout rate of EM students at each level of studies in the primary and secondary education. One can only deduce from the statistics on student population by 'ethnicities' (the definition of which was unclear) at different level of studies/age groups. The latest available information was the 2006 Population By-census which was seriously out-dated.

11. In the absence of accurate data and information collected via a systematic, methodical and uniform mechanism, it is doubtful how policymakers could make out the scope and intensity of the issue, and to formulate effective policies and measures for improvement. In this respect, the Government should develop an effective data collection system to capture the relevant information. The Report also recommends that the Government should undertake comprehensive longitudinal study to keep track of the academic and social development of EM students in order to identify policy deficiencies and service gaps for devising appropriate and effective support measures.

Way Forward

12. Education is a major undertaking. For many EM families, their children's access to quality and higher education remains their only effective hope to rise above poverty in time. The EOC is prepared to collaborate with the Government and stakeholders in enhancing equal opportunities of EM

students to enjoy quality education. We await anxiously, like the EM communities and other concerned stakeholders, positive and solid response from EDB in respect of the problems identified and the recommendations made in our Report.

Equal Opportunities Commission

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