

**EO Files (September 2013)**

**"THINGS WE DO, PEOPLE WE MEET - Reflections in Brief"**

### **Ghetto treatment blocks advance of Hong Kong's ethnic minority students**

*York Chow says our education system - and society at large - is failing ethnic minority students by not giving them a fair chance to overcome their difficulties in learning Chinese*

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child is holding hearings this week to look at the situation in Hong Kong. The Equal Opportunities Commission has long been concerned about discrimination issues affecting our youngsters. In particular, I have named the exclusion of children with disabilities and special needs as well as ethnic minorities from equal educational opportunities two of our priority areas going forward, the latter being the focus of this article.

In reality, the hardship ethnic minority students face in accessing higher learning and potential employment opportunities stems primarily from their struggle to master Chinese in their school years. Recently, a media programme reported that only 120 non-Chinese-speaking students were admitted to degree courses last year, representing fewer than 1 per cent of the offers of study places made via the Joint University Programmes Admissions System.

More must be done for our ethnic minority students. After the 2011 release of our report on education for ethnic minorities, we have been urging the government to commit to broader and longer-term support for these children, including language and cultural programmes starting from a pre-primary level to help them lay a solid language foundation and facilitate their transition into mainstream schools.

Indeed, many ethnic minority families, lacking options, end up sending their children to so-called "designated schools". Although the Education Bureau has recently removed the label "designated" and implemented reforms on how these schools may receive grants

to assist non-Chinese-speaking students, these policies are still merely stop-gap measures.

Many of the former "designated schools" represent situations of de facto segregation, which are not conducive to learning Chinese and do not provide youths with chances for wider integration. The schools are tasked with devising their own simplified curriculum - a heavy burden on teachers - and the standards may vary widely between schools. Rather than creating separate schools, what is sorely needed is comprehensive and systemic support at mainstream schools for ethnic minority students to learn effectively alongside their local Chinese peers.

In particular, an alternative Chinese curriculum and testing system is necessary. This curriculum should take into account the specific challenges faced by many ethnic minority students who are learning Chinese as a second or third language, while providing them with practical Chinese skills for future education and employment pursuits.

Their access to opportunities in tertiary education and employment must also be enhanced. We are currently talking to the presidents and vice-chancellors of universities regarding recognition of third-language skills as a bonus in student admission and, so far, all of those we approached have agreed to adopt a flexible approach. A boost in the number of ethnic minority students in our universities would benefit not only those students, but also their classmates who can gain new perspectives and ideas from a diverse learning environment.

I have also recommended to the government that it should act to increase the number of ethnic minority candidates for civil service and public organisation jobs. Specifically, I appealed to officials to recognise third-language capabilities, in addition to English and Chinese, in the recruitment process. In the absence of systemic reforms and an alternative curriculum to help all ethnic minority students learn Chinese, this measure can enable the youths who dream of working in public service to compete on an equal footing for some of these jobs in which other language skills may prove useful.

After all, our public-service providers should have multilingual abilities to appropriately serve our diverse community. If we have police or health care professionals who can speak a third language, we would not require so many interpreters, and surely the services provided would be improved.

It is important to note that this measure should not replace the need for an alternative Chinese curriculum or stop ethnic minorities learning Chinese. Rather, in the interim, it aims to enable current generations of ethnic minorities whose Chinese skills may not be strong to access equal opportunities.

"Equal", of course, does not necessarily mean "same". Recently, there has been media attention on the fact that some secondary schools were providing segregated classes as well as an alternative timetable and uniform code for some girls in an effort to accommodate different religious requirements. My colleagues and I have visited a few schools in order to better understand the situation.

As a general principle, the Equal Opportunities Commission believes segregation should be avoided. Schools are public arenas, serving our community without favouritism to culture or religion. They should strike a careful balance between respecting different cultural or religious requirements and adhering to the spirit of equal education for all. The commission has raised this with the Education Bureau, and will consider producing a guideline covering these issues in the future.

Most importantly, all children, irrespective of race, sex or any other characteristic, must not be deprived of their fundamental right to equal education. Such steps take true commitment from all parties, which must come with better planning and distribution of expertise and resources, as well as increased development and training of relevant professionals, including teachers.

We also need more awareness and sensitivity from all parties, including educators and parents, to build truly caring schools and enable all students to benefit from a diverse learning environment. Presently, misconceptions remain common. Some local Chinese parents do not wish to send their children to schools with a high

intake of ethnic minority students. In reality, the benefits of diversity in education are well documented, not least because it encourages empathy and develops cross-cultural competence - all important components for 21st-century success.

Ethnic minority children are a part of Hong Kong's future. Without the right foundation forged through equal education, they will face difficulties over their entire lifetime. Yet the right measures can facilitate their ability to integrate, break the cycle of poverty and reach their potential. The government and the education sector must lead this charge.

Dr. York Y.N. Chow  
Chairperson, Equal Opportunities Commission

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