

EO Files (August 2016)

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

**Free kindergarten education in Hong Kong is a welcome step towards
language equality in class**

Alfred Chan says the new policy of free kindergarten education in Hong Kong will strike at practices that discriminate against ethnic minority students, but monitoring is needed.

Since taking up the Chairmanship of the Equal Opportunities Commission in April, I have emphasised my commitment to advancing equal opportunities for marginalised and underprivileged groups in society. One such group is the ethnic minorities. Of particular concern are their education and employment opportunities.

I recently heard the case of a Pakistani mother who went to a local kindergarten to get an admission form for her son. She spoke to a staff member through the intercom from outside the gate. After checking if either parent spoke Cantonese, which they did not, the staff member declined to give her a form. Unfortunately, her story is not unique. Many ethnic minority parents have to knock on several kindergarten doors before finding a place.

Education Bureau figures for 2015-16 show that 44 per cent of kindergartens do not have non-Chinese-speaking students, while ethnic minority students are concentrated in a small number of kindergartens where the environment is less conducive to Chinese learning. We have been notified that more than a few practise one of several measures that prevent ethnic minority students from enjoying access to equal education opportunities. Some reportedly flatly refuse to admit ethnic minority children. Others choose to conduct interviews for applicants only in Cantonese, or provide information exclusively in Chinese. Not only is this tarnishing Hong Kong's image as a diverse, inclusive society, but the act may also be unlawful.

We have called on kindergartens to be open and inclusive in their admissions. Recently, we launched a booklet for schools, parents and students on promoting racial integration and preventing racial discrimination in schools. It provides essential guidelines, besides examples and suggestions, on the application of the Race Discrimination Ordinance in schools, particularly in the areas of language requirements in admissions, exercise of school rules with respect to religious practices and communication with ethnic minority parents.

Kindergartens justify their admission decision by citing the unavailability of language support for non-Chinese-speaking students in their schools. We don't expect this to be valid for long. The government announced in the policy address the extension of the current 12 years of free education to 15 years, by introducing free kindergarten education from the 2017-18 academic year. We welcome the move.

Of particular interest to us is that the policy of free kindergarten education also includes support for children with diverse needs, which includes non-Chinese speakers and children with special educational needs. We believe both these categories would benefit from the additional support. Non-Chinese speakers will gain substantially from any scheme that encourages kindergartens to integrate them into classes with their Chinese peers. As scholars point out, an integrated classroom has many benefits, including language acquisition. This is a significant benefit, especially given the dire state of Chinese language learning among non-Chinese-speaking students.

The Education Bureau should carefully monitor the implementation of the new policy to ensure fair admissions and adequate support for Chinese language learning, so more mainstream kindergartens are encouraged to admit non-Chinese speakers. It should also keep an eye out for inadvertent reverse segregation that may result. Some kindergartens might choose to take in more ethnic minority students due to the additional funding, which may lead to a rising concentration of non-Chinese-speaking students, again creating a "segregated" environment.

An immersed classroom supported by additional language learning measures is expected to lead to non-Chinese speakers "mainstreaming" early in their school lives thereby having a greater possibility of being on par with their Chinese peers

at the end of 15 years. That ideally should lead to a levelling of the playing field when it comes to access to higher education and finally employment. That will be the true test of whether Hong Kong actually lives up to its promise of providing equal opportunities to all, regardless of race, language or colour.

Professor Alfred C.M. Chan
Chairperson of the Equal Opportunities Commission

(Note: A version of this article was originally published in the South China Morning Post on 18 August 2016)