

**EO Files (October 2019)**

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

### **Hong Kong’s education gap hurts ethnic minorities as much as society at large**

Hong Kong has been caught up in tension and turmoil in recent years. Among all the theories tossed about, there is one recurring narrative: our youth feels pessimistic and powerless – about their lives, the city’s future, and the general state of things.

And yet, most of these conversations often make the mistake of seeing our youth as a homogeneous group, thus overlooking the frustrations – and aspirations – specific and unique to different communities *within* the younger generation, such as ethnic minorities.

This is unfortunate, because data show that ethnic minorities have as much stake in Hong Kong as anyone else. According to the 2016 Population By-census, they made up 3.6% of the population, totalling over 250,000 (excluding foreign domestic workers). In particular, the number of ethnic minority citizens aged 15 to 24 more than doubled, increasing from 13,117 in 2006 to 27,651 in 2016. The trend stood in remarkable contrast with the dwindling of that same age segment of the overall population, due partly to dropping birth rates.

What these figures represent is a sizable and growing pool of talent with a diverse mix of cultural backgrounds, and a potential answer to the problems arising from our shrinking workforce and beleaguered economy. However, entrenched language barriers, which stem from struggles with learning the Chinese language under the current education system, continue to bog down academic and career pursuits for ethnic minority students.

As revealed in the Government’s Hong Kong Poverty Situation Report on Ethnic Minorities 2016, one in every five ethnic minority households were living below the poverty line in 2016, and an overwhelming majority of South Asians worked in low-paid elementary positions. Education, supposedly a ticket to gainful employment, has failed to deliver empowerment.

For sure, once in a while we get fascinated by success stories: the rare student who gets admitted to medical school, the first registered ethnic minority social worker, and the journalist making incisive commentary in fluent, pitch-perfect Cantonese. But let us not peddle the myth that the individual is the fix to systemic failures. Structural problems

need structural solutions, whether it is the lack of a full-fledged Chinese-as-a-second-language curriculum, the absence of a qualification ladder of Chinese proficiency recognised by tertiary institutions and employers, or insufficient incentive for teachers to receive training. It is not about how much hard work ethnic minority students put in; it is about how the system places them at a disadvantage by default.

To be fair, the Government rolled out a number of initiatives in the 2014-15 school year, including a tiered funding system for schools admitting a specified number of non-Chinese speaking (NCS) students, a “Chinese Language Curriculum Second Language Learning Framework” (Framework) that sets out target learning outcomes at eight levels, and an option for NCS candidates of the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination (HKDSE) to sit for Applied Learning Chinese, which features the use of Chinese in hospitality and service industries and serves as a practical alternative to the conventional, literature-heavy Chinese Language examination.

As well-meaning as these measures might be, problems have persisted to this day. To begin with, the Framework has little to contribute in terms of pedagogy, leaving teachers at a loss to devise methods they need to help NCS students accomplish the stated outcomes. The Education Bureau has also been slow in developing textbooks based on the Framework: lower primary textbooks were just made available in phases in the previous school year, while upper primary ones reportedly will be produced at a later stage. The fact that the Bureau does not provide regular progress updates on the performance of students taught under the Framework has fuelled further skepticism over its effectiveness.

Meanwhile, other issues remain unresolved, such as insufficient teacher training, fraught access to school information for ethnic minority parents, and learning stagnation among many NCS students who take the GCSE/IGCSE Chinese examination, the easiest among their options (more difficult options such as GCE AS and A-Level Chinese are given the same consideration in university admissions).

Determined to level the playing field, the Equal Opportunities Commission’s Working Group on Education for Ethnic Minorities met with a wide spectrum of stakeholders over the course of 15 months since January 2018, including students, ethnic minority parents, teachers, principals, language experts, NGOs and employers. Over 20 sharing sessions, interviews and school visits were held, engaging a total of 170 individuals whose feedback has been incorporated into our latest report, *Closing the Gap*. Besides

pinpointing common areas of concern, the report offers 22 recommendations for ensuring equal opportunity in education for ethnic minorities.

As the Chief Executive is now consulting the public for her upcoming Policy Address, we have submitted our report to the Government and called for immediate action in three priority areas, namely: plugging gaps in the current system to provide a complete Chinese-as-a-second-language curriculum for NCS students; strengthening training policies to equip teachers with both the skillset and mindset needed to educate second language learners; and reviewing all the existing Chinese examination options and structuring them into a qualification ladder, where various levels of Chinese proficiency could be better reflected and recognised.

The Dutch writer Alexander den Heijer once said, “When a flower doesn’t bloom, you fix the environment in which it grows, not the flower.” Of course, the Government can always avoid fundamental reform, but when it comes to inequality in education, there is no time for piecemeal change. Ethnic minority youth is hurting, and so is society at large. We have already offered the cure; let us hope the Government uses it.

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(Note: The above article was originally published in Hong Kong Free Press on 8 October 2019.)