

EO Files (March 2021)

Chinese language education is key in fight for racial equality

By Mr Ricky CHU Man-kin, Chairperson EOC

Psycholinguist Frank Smith used to say "one language sets you in a corridor for life. Two languages open every door along the way". And the absence of language closes many doors.

As we mark yet another International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination today, the language barrier faced by racial minorities in Hong Kong remains an area of grave concern. Despite years of advocacy, activism, policy recommendations and measures, not to mention expenditure, the problem remains.

It is easy to dismiss this issue in the current climate where we are facing more urgent matters related to the pandemic, economic downturn, global relations and trade wars. But March 21 is always a good day to remember a subject that will never go out of date: equality.

It is clear that Hong Kong's racial minorities would be much better integrated and have access to equal opportunities in every area, including education, employment and services, if only they knew Chinese. However, the solution does not seem to be as obvious, and it is not for want of trying.

The demographic hardest hit by the language barrier and on whom we should focus our energies is the many young members of our racial minority communities who have been educated mostly, if not entirely, in Hong Kong and yet are challenged by a lack of Chinese skills. It is hard for many in the majority Chinese community to understand how this is possible.

Dismissive remarks attributing this to laziness, cultural ineptitude and a lack of interest are made all too often, but these are arbitrary and misleading. The issue is more complex, and has frustrated stakeholders for years.

Without going into details of the various measures put in place in the name of second-language learning in schools, suffice to say that we are no wiser when it comes to their effectiveness. Monitoring and data are key to understanding the success or gaps in any policy implementation.

Not only must data be collected, it must be shared and evaluated to provide input for improvements or modifications where necessary and appropriate. Unfortunately, there is still room for improvement here.

Worryingly, the move to online learning has set back racial minority students' Chinese-language learning even further. The premise of the Chinese-language learning policy is to accelerate learning by providing an immersive experience. But the lack of a Chinese-language home environment and the absence of learning support at home have made that difficult.

In addition, students cannot get help from their teachers because of the online format. It is easy to lose interest and leave doubts unclarified unless the student is exceptionally driven. The few gains achieved in previous years, before the pandemic, may well have been wiped out.

Given this, it is vital that new data be gathered and the current teaching framework be looked at with a fresh pair of eyes.

From my interactions with racial minority students and parents, there is no doubt that many understand the importance of learning the local language. Parents who have been here long enough to know the disadvantages of not knowing Chinese surely do not wish their children to face the same issues, especially when it comes to employment.

An increasing number of parents are sending their children to local Chinese schools but are frustrated either by seeing their child struggle or being nudged towards a lower level of language attainment by their schools.

The realisation that the level they attain is insufficient for the job market hits much later. We are not only letting down Hong Kong's ethnic minorities, but are at risk of losing potential talent the city desperately needs.

While integration begins with language, it does not end there. A culturally inclusive society needs a collective effort by all in society. Intent is important.

On this International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, I sincerely hope racial biases and prejudices are put aside and the true intention of racial equality and respect is embraced by all. We must do this for the sake of humanity and for the welfare and benefit of Hong Kong.

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