

EO Files (May 2021)

Better use of education resources for non-Chinese students called for

By Mr Ricky CHU Man-kin, EOC Chairperson

Education stopped being a luxury and became a basic need a long time ago. However, whether that education is equal in terms of quality and access is a moot point.

The fact that the United Nations lists Quality Education as Goal #4 among 17 Sustainable Development Goals or SDGs, coming right after poverty, hunger and health, is proof of the criticality of this subject. The stated goal is to “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.”

Hong Kong does a good job of ensuring education for all children. Education in Hong Kong is free, and school is compulsory from age 6 to 15. While the question of having access to quality education in Hong Kong is not in debate for most children, the issue is not as clear cut when it comes to the ethnic minorities (EMs). The complication is owing to the requirement of knowing Chinese, not just to get by in Hong Kong, but in order to go through schooling, higher education and finally secure a job.

The recent Audit Commission’s report on Education Support for non-Chinese-speaking Students spotlights certain problem areas that echo concerns raised by the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) often and most recently in our 2019 report titled Closing the Gap. The first step is to acknowledge that teaching a language to a second- or third-language learner is vastly different from teaching a native speaker or someone for whom it is the mother-tongue. The skills and materials required are different as is the time-scale. The EOC report strongly recommends plugging the gaps in the existing system in order to have in place a full-fledged Chinese-as-a-second-language curriculum. Among the many recommendations it made, the EOC report also called for strengthening the teacher training program and introduce measures so that all schools would have teachers trained to teach Chinese-as-a-second-language.

The Audit report is clearly focused on the utilisation of funds that is specifically allocated for support measures for non-Chinese speaking students, one of which is capacity building for teachers. While the EOC’s focus is more on the implementation and impact of the measures, we are aligned with the Audit

Commission's points on the need for more teachers to undergo professional development training to serve non-Chinese students better. The EOC report suggested incentivising teachers to take up in-service professional training and for schools to help facilitate this.

The non-Chinese student numbers in Hong Kong is steadily growing and we are also seeing an increase in the labour force participation rate of the racial minorities. In order to give them a level playing field, the issue of language acquisition has to be dealt with fair and square. I would like to point out that it is not for want of funding. The government has allocated \$456.3 million in the period from 2015/16 to 2019/20 for education support measures for NCS students according to the Audit Commission's report. However, there appears to be a gap between planning and implementation. We need to seal that gap and it has to be done quickly. We have to be mindful that every six years lost is one generation of students entering and exiting secondary school.

It might be argued that several efforts have been made and measures put in place to take care of the Chinese learning needs of NCS students. However, unless one sees the results of these efforts, it is hard to judge if simply having the measure or expending resources on it is proof of success. I would urge that it is prudent to evaluate existing efforts, re-allocate resources if needed, do away with measures that are not working and go back to the drawing board if necessary. In the end, what matters is the outcome. From what we are hearing from non-Chinese parents who wish for their child to have Chinese language skills in order to ensure a better future in Hong Kong, a course-correction may be called for.

Hong Kong has to look at its resources to future-proof itself. Its people are its most valuable resource. Having this home grown talent of non-Chinese youngsters who call Hong Kong home, and yet leaving them inadequately skilled to serve its society is poor planning to say the least and a waste of resources. It is also not fair for the students. It is time to fix this gaping hole in our education system, not simply because it is the right thing to do, but because it is an investment into Hong Kong's future.

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