

Executive Summary

Exploring Intersectional Experiences of South Asian Ethnic Minority Students and Families in Special Educational Context in Hong Kong

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This project is sponsored by Equal Opportunities Commission.

2021

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1. Introduction

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) was extended to Hong Kong in 2008 and its vision is to embrace a disability-inclusive society (Rehabilitation Advisory Committee, 2020). The Disability Discrimination Ordinance (DDO) has been enacted in Hong Kong to protect persons with disabilities against discrimination and harassment on the ground of disability. Culturally diverse populations with disabilities usually encounter more difficulties accessing appropriate education and healthcare services (Gillborn et al., 2016; Hussein et al., 2019). Today, the population of non-Chinese ethnic groups make up 8.4% of the 7.4 million total population in Hong Kong, amounting to 619,568 people (Census and Statistics Department, 2022). In the school year 2019/20, there were about 1,106 non-Chinese speaking students with special educational needs (hereafter SEN) studying in public sector ordinary schools and special schools in Hong Kong (Education Bureau, 2021).

This study is funded by the Equal Opportunities Commission. It is an exploratory study that aims to examine the experiences of barriers and support of South Asian (Pakistani, Nepali and Indian) students with special educational needs and their parents in navigating the special educational needs context in Hong Kong. This is the first of its kind in special educational studies in Hong Kong. The main target groups are South Asian families with at least one child diagnosed with SEN or waiting to be diagnosed. This study follows the definition of SEN of the Hong Kong Government, referring to children and students with learning difficulties that make them harder to learn than other children. It covers students with SEN in both the integrated education (IE) and special education (SE) systems.

2. Method

This study adopts qualitative method. Data collection took place in the period between February 2021 and January 2022 in the South Asian communities in Hong Kong. In total, the research team conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with 15 South Asian ethnic minority families with children who were students with special educational needs. Among them, 6 families were of Pakistani origin, 5 Nepali and 4 Indian. Children from our informant families mostly had intellectual disability (ID) or/and autism spectrum disorder (ASD) among different types of special educational needs. This study also collected data from 7 professionals including teachers and social workers in the special education system through in-depth interviews.

3. Summary of Findings

3.1. Institutional Barriers

South Asian ethnic minority students and families seemed to experience more institutional barriers than their ethnic Chinese counterparts in terms of access to support in the special educational needs system in Hong Kong. These include:

- **The use of language in training** was a major obstacle. In Hong Kong, subsidized special educational training, including speech therapy and occupational therapy, are largely provided in hospitals, subsidized schools (governmental or aided) and NGOs. Most of

such training use Cantonese as the medium of instruction (CMI), with little resources provided for non-Chinese-speaking or English-speaking students. English medium of instruction (EMI) can merely be found in private special educational training centres that charge high training fee which is not considered to be affordable by many of our informants.

- **The use of language in assessment tools** represented another language barrier. Due to a lack of assessment tools in the appropriate language and expertise to make assessment for non-Chinese-speaking students, assessment would be delayed or not accurate.
- **Lack of subsidized English special schools** was another institutional obstacle that channeled most of the ethnic minority students with special educational needs to the Chinese-speaking ones. The only one non-subsidized English special school and some bilingual private training schools were expensive and not affordable for our informant families. This created a situation in which less well-off ethnic minority students with special educational needs could not enjoy the same education opportunities as other students, and that they became the “forgotten kids” in Hong Kong.
- **Lack of awareness education in the ethnic minority communities** might probably lead to an averagely poor understanding of special educational needs and insufficient information on relevant resources. This could cause confusion in the families and delayed assessment and intervention.
- **Social discrimination in the form of microaggression** against South Asian students with special educational needs was reported. Some professionals overlooked the fact that South Asian students with special educational needs are citizens in Hong Kong and have a right to receive education and medical care.

3.2 Institutional Support

- Some informants appreciated institutional support obtained from different professionals including teachers and social workers.
- **Parents Resource Centre (PRC) with Specialised Ethnic Minorities (EM) Unit**, a newly established service subsidized by the Social Welfare Department and operated by NGOs, has been very useful as a resource platform for South Asian parents and has potential to provide more supportive services.

3.3 Internal Resources

- **Family/ in-group support** was an important resource that helped parents get through barriers in accessing support services. For those with little family support, they found the help-seeking process particularly hard.
- **Religion** was another important resource. Muslim religion was explicitly mentioned as the spiritual guidance that supported many families in a spiritual way.

3.4 Other Factors

- **Different perceptions about** child development in the country of origin or in the South Asian migrant communities from the one of the mainstream Hong Kong society may sometimes attribute to missing timely assessment and intervention.
- **Co-ethnic belief regarding special educational needs.** There was a belief that speech delay could be outgrown in later years with a better monolingual environment. This belief could also lead to delay of assessment and intervention.

3.5 Intersectional Differences

- This study suggests that while “disability” itself may pose difficulties for students with special educational needs in our society, its interplay with country of origin, ethnicity and language further worsens the disadvantaged status of these students, leading to multiple deprivation of equal education opportunities.
- There were differences within the South Asian communities, which could be shaped by the intersection of factors such as socioeconomic status (SES) and cultural beliefs including religion and perceptions on children’s development.

4. Recommendations

The exercise of disability rights requires institutional support inside and outside the government. Therefore, this study makes the following recommendations that call for concerted efforts of relevant authorities and institutions including the Education Bureau, the Social Welfare Department, the Hospital Authority and various NGOs.

4.1 Language use and cultural sensitivity

- Use of English in subsidized special educational training including those in hospitals, in schools, in NGO services such as Special Child Care Centre should be introduced and enhanced for students with special educational needs and their parents.
- English assessment tools should be more broadly used for ethnic minority children with special educational needs undergoing assessment in subsidized services such as public hospitals, Child Assessment Centre, schools and NGOs. Simultaneous interpretation support should be offered if ethnic minority children or parents have difficulty in understanding the assessment process.
- Financial support should be offered for students with special educational needs and their families to acquire private special educational training in English if subsidized English training is insufficient or unavailable.
- There should be subsidized special schools using English as the medium of instruction (EMI).
- Cultural sensitivity of various professionals working in the special educational system should be enhanced. This includes understanding of South Asian students’ cultural backgrounds and some specific skills to communicate with them.

4.2 Community education and campaigns

- Community education on general understanding of special educational needs is necessary for South Asian ethnic minority communities. This should take place in the ethnic minority communities and in cooperation with ethnic minority associations or religious organizations such as mosques and temples. Educational sessions should be conducted with cultural sensitivity and the help of cultural facilitators. Public funding should be offered to encourage such educational activities.
- Community education should include support to connect South Asian parents with children with special needs to the parent mutual help groups in the wider society.

4.3 Awareness education

- Awareness education on the right to education of ethnic minorities targeted at the general public in Hong Kong is important. This will enhance the public awareness that ethnic minorities in Hong Kong are entitled to rights, including their rights to access to appropriate assessment, appropriate training and support services, to meet their special education needs like all other counterparts in Hong Kong.
- First, such awareness education can be incorporated in the multicultural education in schools for all children and youth living in Hong Kong.
- Second, awareness education should target at the various professionals working in the special education system.

4.4 Information flow

- Information flow of existing services should be improved. Efforts should be made by the authorities to proactively channel relevant service information (e.g, Parents Resource Centre (PRC) with Specialised Ethnic Minority (EM) Unit and the Pilot Project on Tier 1 Support Services in Kindergartens / Kindergarten-cum-Child Care Centres) to the ethnic minority communities and other relevant service units.