

Study Sheds Light on Needs and Challenges of South Asian Ethnic Minority Students with Special Educational Needs and Families in Hong Kong

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), which embraces the vision of disability inclusion, was extended to Hong Kong in 2008. However, the society has little understanding of the needs of and challenges faced by ethnic minority students with special educational needs and their families. This topic remains under-researched.

In light of the above, Dr. Kim Kwok, former Associate Professor of Caritas Institute of Higher Education (Principal Investigator), conducted the study “Exploring Intersectional Experiences of South Asian Ethnic Minority Students and Families in Special Educational Context in Hong Kong” in the period of February 2021 to January 2022. This study is funded by the Equal Opportunities Commission. This is the first quality academic study of its kind in special educational needs studies in Hong Kong. It covers in-depth interviews with 15 South Asian families with children with special educational needs and 7 key informants in relevant education and social service sectors. The findings help to enhance our understanding on the needs, challenges encountered and support received by South Asian students and their families in navigating the special educational needs and healthcare systems as well as making recommendations for reducing barriers for building a more disability-inclusive society in Hong Kong. Follow-up activities in the form of community education were conducted in collaboration with Caritas Rehabilitation Service Parents Resource Centre and Hong Kong Christian Service M.O.T.I.ON Multicultural Outreaching Team for InclusiON.

Key Research Findings

1. This study reveals that South Asian ethnic minority students and families seemed to experience more institutional barriers than their Chinese counterparts in terms of access to support in the special educational needs and healthcare systems in Hong Kong. These barriers include insufficient English special educational training, insufficient expertise to make special needs assessment for non-Chinese-speaking students and the absence of subsidized English special school.
2. Social discrimination in the form of microaggression inside and outside the ethnic minority communities existed.
3. The lack of awareness education in the ethnic minority communities probably led to an averagely poor understanding of special educational needs.
4. Parents Resource Centre (PRC) with Specialised Ethnic Minorities (EM) Unit, a newly established service, was reported as being helpful.
5. Family support and religion played an important role in assisting students and parents to overcome challenges in accessing support services.
6. Some parents believed that speech delay could be outgrown in later years with a better monolingual environment, and some others were less concerned about pre-school education.

7. 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 opportunities.

Recommendations

The exercise of disability rights requires institutional support inside and outside the government. Therefore, based on the findings, 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.

1. Broader use of English in subsidized special educational training and more expertise for making special needs assessment for non-Chinese speaking children in public hospitals, subsidized schools and service units.
2. Financial support should be offered for private special educational training in English if subsidized English training is insufficient or unavailable.
3. There should be subsidized special schools using English as the medium of instruction (EMI).
4. Cultural sensitivity of various professionals working in the special educational systems should be enhanced.
5. Public funding should be provided for community education in the ethnic minority communities to enhance their information base on special needs and awareness about their rights to education and healthcare.
6. Connecting South Asian parents with children with special needs to the parent mutual help groups in the wider society.
7. Awareness education for general public: ethnic minorities are entitled to rights, including their rights to access to appropriate assessment, appropriate training and support services. This should be carried out in schools as well as for various relevant professionals.
8. Better information flow of existing services to channel relevant service information to the ethnic minority communities and other relevant service units.

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