



Hong Kong Unison Limited  
香港融樂會有限公司

**Comments on Education Bureau's Support Measures for Non-Chinese**

**Speaking Students**

**(10 March 2011)**

**Introduction**

There are about 1,000 ethnic minority children admitted to Primary one of Government or Government Aided /Government direct subsidy schools every year. The trend is that the number is increasing. This means there are at least 10,000 children from ethnic minority backgrounds currently studying in public schools. However, these groups of children have neither been treated equally nor have they received equal concern and respect from the Government.

2. After more than a decade of campaigning for better treatment and efforts made by various concerned parties, such as legislative councilors, school principals, teachers, social workers of NGOs, ethnic minority concern groups/leaders, ethnic minority parents and their children, some supportive measures have been provided by the Education Bureau. However, we are of the view that the current supportive measures are piecemeal and far from adequate. They are not fulfilling the needs of these children. These measures could not resolve the problems faced by ethnic minority children.

3. In this paper, we would like to provide a picture of what is happening to ethnic minority children who are admitted to public schools and to give our comments on the paper (LC PAPER No. CB (2)123/10-11(01)) provided by the Education Bureau.

**Unequal educational opportunities: designated schools**

4. Currently, there are 28 designated schools for ethnic minority children (EM children): 19 are primary schools and 9 are secondary schools. These schools normally



provide a school-based Chinese language curriculum (more basic and easier) due to the weak Chinese ability of the students. Subsequently, in the case of primary students, it seriously affects their choices of secondary schools; in the case of secondary students, it seriously affects their opportunities and chances in further education or employment.

5. Some of these schools have more than 90% of their students from ethnic minority backgrounds; Yaumati Kai Fong Association School in Yau Ma Tei, Li Cheng Uk Government School in Sham Shui Po, Li Sing Tai Hang School and Sir Ellis Kadoorie (Sookunpo) Primary School in Causeway Bay are some examples. Some designated schools may not reach 90% EM children yet, but there is a trend that when a school starts admitting EM children, it will become an entirely or 90% EM school after a few years. One can see this trend in every designated school. The common phenomenon is that even though some schools still have a certain percentage of local Chinese students but normally they are concentrated in higher levels and there are a disproportionate number of EM students in the junior levels.

6. We appreciate the historical reason and function of designated schools; yet, we are of the view that this mode of school is **a form of direct discrimination (racial segregation)**; it not only affects the students' choices of schools but also adversely affect their life-chances and social integration in the long term.

7. Currently, about 60-70% of EM students are studying in designated schools. This gives the impression that EM parents prefer designated schools over non-designated schools. In reality, EM parents do not have a real choice because the alternative is to place their children in non-designated schools that provide either no or inadequate supportive measures. Rather than seeing their children learn in a disadvantaged environment that harms their development (including their academic performance, self-esteem, confidence etc.), EM parents place their children in designated schools knowing that the level of Chinese taught there would be lower.



8. It is saddening to see EM parents regret their decision when they found out that going to a designated school was only a temporary way of escape. They soon find out that their children are at a disadvantage when they go to a designated school.

**Actual case 1:**

*Bibi (pseudonym) is a local born Pakistani girl, who is currently studying F.5 in a designated school. Since her parents speaks no Cantonese and had seen some painful and unpleasant experiences of their relative's children who studied in mainstream CMI primary schools, they worried that Bibi would face the same negative experience. They therefore placed Bibi in an EMI designated primary school even though Bibi learnt some basic Chinese in kindergarten. Bibi did very well in primary school, being one of the top students in the class every year. The parents thought that Bibi might be able to manage in a mainstream EMI school since she is intelligent and diligent. They tried very hard to find an EMI secondary school for her daughter in different districts. Unfortunately, no school was willing to accept her daughter with the reason that Bibi's Chinese language skills are inadequate. Subsequently, without choices, Bibi was admitted to a designated secondary school. The school offers GCSE Chinese curriculum and Bibi has already exceeded that level as her Chinese proficiency is about primary 4 level. Bibi now faces a serious problem in Liberal Studies subject as most news reports and referencing materials are in Chinese. She is worried about her future, further educational opportunities and career choices.*

9. Many parents are facing the same dilemma as Bibi's parents. One the one hand, parents worry that placing their children in local mainstream schools without adequate support means putting their children in a very disadvantaged and harmful learning



situation; on the other hand, sending their children to designated schools and learning a lower standard of Chinese language would mean that the children end up with inadequate Chinese proficiency, few opportunities for further education and limited career choices.

### **Unequal treatment: non-designated schools (mainstream CMI schools)**

10. In 2004, the Education Bureau changed the school places allocation policies, including Primary One Allocation (POA) and Secondary School Places Scheme (SSPS), allowing EM children to be admitted to non-designated schools, namely local mainstream schools. In recent years, 30-40% of EM children are allocated to mainstream schools. The Government did not provide any support to these children, assuming they have the same level of Chinese ability as the local Chinese children. In fact, many of them are not able to comprehend what is happening in the classroom and eventually could not benefit from the lessons.

11. Studying in a local mainstream school is a painful and hurtful experience which seriously harms their self-esteem and limits their opportunities of success.

#### **Actual case 2**

*Meena (pseudonym) is a local born Pakistani girl; her parents accepted the notion of early integration and placed their daughter in a local kindergarten. Meena did well and was admitted to a mainstream CMI primary school. She was also fine at the beginning but she started facing serious problem in learning the Chinese language in Primary level. She not only failed in Chinese tests and examinations but this also affected her performance in other subjects. Since she was the only EM student in the school, the school refused to provide any extra support despite her parents' repeated request. Her parents speak no*



*Cantonese and were unable to give any assistance. They only managed to send her daughter to a tutorial centre. Yet, the result was no good. Meena was frustrated and cried almost every day. The poor results in her school reports seriously affected her self-esteem. Once bitten, twice shy, the parents had learnt a painful lesson. They placed Meena back in an EMI designated secondary school. Meena now is struggling with all subjects, including English due to her CMI education background. Her Chinese proficiency is about primary 4.*

### **Actual case 3**

*Hussein (pseudonym) came to HK since he was an infant. His parents wanted him to learn Chinese and placed him in a mainstream kindergarten and subsequently in a CMI primary school. He is very hard-working, clever and takes education very seriously. He is studying F.5 in a mainstream CMI secondary school now. He struggles in every subject. He could not express himself in writing, especially in Liberal Studies assignments; his English ability is not enough for writing assignments. His teachers are caring, supportive and extra efforts have been made. Yet, since his Chinese proficiency is only up to primary 6, he has found that no matter how hard he works, there is still no hope of going to university.*

### **Actual case 4**

*Ali (pseudonym) is a local born Pakistani boy who is currently studying in primary 5 in a mainstream CMI school. He faces difficulties in Chinese language as well as in Mathematics and General Studies as these two subjects are taught in Chinese. The school refused to provide any extra support with the reason that it could not afford*



*one-to-one service despite his parents repeated begging. The family is relying on CSSA and cannot afford a private tutor. Ali is sent to an after school support class runs by an NGO, yet the NGO can only manage to help Ali in homework. There is no extra Chinese teaching. As a result, Ali managed to obtain a pass in all subjects and his highest score was in English subject. The Mom is thinking if she should move Ali back to an EMI designated school. She is concerned that her son will definitely be categorized as a band 3 student. Consequently, there is no chance of Ali to enter a band 1 secondary school and this will seriously limit Ali's chances of going to university eventually.*

12. Meena, Hussein and Ali are only three of hundreds of similar cases. It reflects the failure of so-called 'early integration'; 'early integration' is just an empty slogan.

13. We believe that the failure of the education authorities to provide appropriate Chinese language instruction to ethnic minority students who cannot speak Chinese well enough to participate meaningfully in class (where Chinese is the principal medium of instruction) may constitute a case of unlawful discrimination under the Race Discrimination Ordinance (Cap 602).

14. As most of these children cannot speak, read or write Chinese well enough to understand what is going on in class, they are not learning very much. Many of them find their classroom experiences incomprehensible most of the time. As Chinese is also used to teach other subjects, the lack of basic Chinese language skills are also affecting their studies in other subjects.



15. The underlying assumption of the current education policy is that all children in mainstream schools have already acquired some basic Chinese language skills before they enter Primary One. EM children who speak no (or little) Chinese are not given appropriate support services in school to help them overcome their initial language-related limitations.

16. We are of the view that the current policy on primary education for ethnic minority children **may constitute indirect discrimination** under the Race Discrimination Ordinance which was enacted in July 2008 to render discrimination on the ground of race unlawful.

### **Our comments on the Education Bureau paper**

17. Basically, the paper just repeats what the Education Bureau have been doing, it fails to address the core problems that EM children are facing. Support measures are piecemeal and are not resolving the difficulties of EM children in Chinese language learning.

### ***Learning and teaching of the Chinese Language***

18. The supplementary guide provides a framework and direction to teachers but has nothing to do with day to day teaching. The responsibilities have been shifted to the



teachers. Since there are no systematic curriculum and teaching materials, subsequently the standard and quality varies, resulting in poor academic outcomes for the students.

*19. We urge the Education Bureau to develop a **Chinese as Second language curriculum**, coupled with standardized and quality teaching materials, assessment tool with bench marking as well as structured language learning classes for EM students who are late comers or those who for certain reasons cannot catch up the local curriculum.*

***3-year project of After-school Extended Chinese Learning for NCS students***

20. The project is the only support measure to non-designated (local mainstream) schools. Apart from that, there is nothing else from the Education Bureau. We foresee the project will prove to be ineffective. After the launch of the project, Hong Kong Unison received many calls from schools with 15 to 19 EM students saying that the amount is not even enough to hire a tutor. The problem is worsen given that the Chinese proficiency of their students is highly diversified. A classic example is that among 15 students, a few are newly arrived who speak no Chinese and English; a few are from an EMI designated primary school background who can speak and understand some Cantonese but are poor in reading and writing while a few are from mainstream CMI primary schools who have a certain level of Chinese proficiency but are poor in English. Yet, these students are placed in the same class which makes the teacher's work a 'mission impossible'. Those schools with less than 15 students which are not eligible for the funding project have even more problems.



21. *We propose that special measures should be taken to help EM children whose Chinese language skills are inadequate to participate meaningfully in the mainstream schools. These children should be placed initially in a **Chinese language learners' programme, or language immersion class**, (with not more than 15 students in a class). The aim of the programme is to enhance their Chinese language skills. After they have attained a certain level of competency in the Chinese language, they should join the other students (local Chinese students) in their class where they would study together.*

22. *It is suggested that EM children should not stay in the Chinese language learners' programme for more than two years. During their stay in the programme, they should join other local Chinese students in other school activities in order to expose them to a Chinese language environment.*

### ***Alternative Chinese Qualifications for further studies***

23. The Education Bureau has allowed EM students to sit for the GCSE (Chinese) examination instead of sitting for the HKCEE (HKDSE from 2012 onwards) to obtain an alternative Chinese qualification for further studies. We appreciate the transitional need; yet, the level of GCSE is too low as an A\* in GCSE is only equivalent to about local primary 3 level. There is a huge gap between A\* in GCSE and grade F in HKCEE (Level 1 in HKDSE). Although the UGC institutions have provided flexibility for the acceptance of GCSE, it is only in general admission policy; faculties and departments have their own requirements for Chinese proficiency. EM students still have very limited choices when choosing university programs.



24. Since the level of GCSE is too low to be sufficient in Hong Kong Chinese society, it does very little to help in employment.

25. *We think it is necessary to develop a local alternative Chinese examination which in between the HKDSE and GCSE, so as to allow our EM children to attain a certain level of Chinese proficiency which leads to a recognized qualification.*

### ***Pilot scheme on workplace Chinese Language***

26. The new initiative is another remedial measure. The scheme proves that the current support measures are ineffective and incoherent. We are of the view that the scheme should target IVE students studying post secondary programmes and employees only.

### ***Designated Schools***

27. Criteria for designated schools remain unclear and unfair. The Education Bureau said once a school has enrolled a critical mass of EM students, it will be eligible to become a designated school which entitles it to receive an annual special grant of \$300,000 to \$600,000 depending on the number of NCS students. We have found that is not entirely true.

28. Education Bureau provides differential treatment to schools without any grounds or reasonable justification. For example, Pak Kau College has 76 EM students and is receiving \$500,000 annually and their number of EM students has declined year after year. On the contrary, Delia (Man Kui) English Primary School has enrolled 450 EM



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students and has applied to become a designated school for 3 consecutive years but was rejected without reasons. The number of EM students in this school is increasing year by year.

29. *We urge the Education Bureau to clarify the criteria for obtaining the status of designated schools, so that the concerned schools can apply for the extra funds so as to help their students.*

## **Conclusion**

30. Owing to the failure of the education policy and its support measures, our EM children have suffered and many dreams were ruined. It is time for the Government to formulate a comprehensive policy coupled with appropriate and adequate support measures to resolve the problem.