

Between A Rock and A Hard Place

-- The Current Realities of Navigating the Maze of the HK Education for Ethnic Minority Students

Hong Kong SKH Lady Maclehole Centre has been providing services for ethnic minorities of South Asian ancestry since the year 2000, these included language classes, local adaptation courses, activities enhancing their social integration and inclusion, as well as facilitating them to stay informed and be aware of their own rights. Our efforts have been well-recognized among communities of ethnic minorities, government departments, NGOs, as well as relevant social stakeholders. In our various service and field experiences serving ethnic minorities, we have discovered a host of daunting obstacles holding back the otherwise active and intelligent ethnic minorities children and youth from attaining a better future through education. We would like to share our views with your honourable panel members on this very important issue, and hope a brighter future might finally be within the grasp for non-Chinese Speaking South Asian Students (NCS) especially those in Hong Kong.

(I) Primary and Secondary Educations – What it Means for NCS

Going to:	The Good	The Bad
1. Mainstream Chinese School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ More choices in schools → potentially better academic outlook. ➤ More opportunities to learn Chinese and integrate with local students. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Extremely Difficult to attain Chinese reading and writing level <i>comparable to their Chinese classmate</i> → possibly lower academic achievement. ■ Fewer opportunities to learn English.
2. Schools traditionally accepting EM students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Curriculum tailored to their needs (i.e. in English). ➤ More English learning opportunities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Limited choices in schools → potentially limited academic outlook. ■ Fewer opportunities to learn Chinese and integrate with local students. ■ For Secondary school EM students: Have to learn a foreign language – either French or German, which many considered to have no obvious utility in Hong Kong – in order to fulfill the University entrance requirements

As obvious from the table above, the NCS and their parents would be faced with a hard choice that put unnecessary hurdles between them and the illusive goal of academic attainments, no matter what they choose. The optimists in the relevant Government departments and NGOs would no doubt point to the apparent success in the local adaptations for the new arrivals from mainland China, and expect that once after the initial “shocks” of adaptation fade away, our educational system, the NCS, and their parents could “Bite-the-Bullet” and make the new measures a success.

However, some would worry that such a parallel might not be entirely accurate, given the fact that the new arrivals from mainland China have the same written language, ethnicity, and culture as the local did. While the NCS, especially those of South Asian ancestry, use an alphabet-based language system more akin to English than the character-based language system of Chinese, not to mention their own distinctive religious and cultural heritage. Without adequate support and financial commitment from the Government to assist the NCS and the CMI schools that admitted these NCS students could even fared worse than their counterparts staying in the schools which offer a third language, learning inadequate Chinese and English while failing in other subjects taught in Chinese. A privileged few of NCS students would bond to succeed, of course, as in any other system, but the rest could linger on and fall behind both academically and socially. They fear that a policy of inclusion without adequate or at least reasonable support could be a receipt for disaster, causing more problems than it solved.

Government Support Measures: HK Born NCSs are not covered!!

Government support services such as Induction Programmes, Initiation Programmes, and School Based Support Scheme Grant are available **ONLY for Newly Arrived** ethnic minority students. EM students born in HK **ARE NOT covered**. Adding to the fact that EMB have not develop any dedicated curriculum or syllabus to tend for the special learning needs of ethnic minority students, odds are that NCS students and their parents would most likely to stay *Away* from mainstream Chinese schools.

(II) Tertiary Education and Beyond

The decision of requiring a mandatory pass in a second language in addition to English (Chinese or French or German for EM students) for most programs in universities and institutes of higher educations, means that **second-generations' South Asian like Pakistani might no longer be able to succeed in local education**. They would have to find lowly-paid jobs after graduation. If they go back to study in Pakistan, their academic qualification might not be recognized here in Hong Kong, so again they would not get an ideal job. These dashed the hopes of many, and for those who are affluent enough they would go to places such as UK to study instead, and never to return to Hong Kong. For those who stay behind, there is arguably an air of despair and hopelessness, as reflected by their extraordinary high rate of unemployment.

Social Indicators	Ethnic Minorities' Average	Hong Kong Average (2003)
Unemployment Rate	19.0%	7.9%
Working 50 Hours or More Each Week	76.1%	NA
Elementary Occupations (low skills / low paid)	75.2%	19.5%
CSSA Recipients	17.5%	4.3%

* Research excerpts from “A Research Report on The Life Experiences of Pakistanis in Hong Kong”, 2003

(III) Pre-Job Trainings: The English Dilemma

There was an obvious sea change in attitude in terms of English usage in practice and the subsequent change in educational policies after 1997, which affected the economic situations in general and social mobility in particular for the ethnic minorities such as Pakistani. The rapid decline of social acceptance of English in low-skill services’ sector means the Pakistani are increasingly difficult in securing stable jobs.

The rapid and massive influx of able-body Chinese new arrivals in the recent years also competed fiercely for the low-skills jobs that are traditionally the main source of income for the South Asian migrants. Currently, many ethnic minority youths are having difficulties in joining job trainings because most of the courses are offered in Cantonese. Some would advocate offer job retraining in English, or even more preferably, in the ethnic minorities’ own native language(s). Except for jobs in high-end restaurants and hotels, **this, however, might not pass the reality check**: low skill-level service sector jobs like construction, logistic, car-repairing and security guards do require Cantonese more than English, especially in light of the competition from the flood of migrants from mainland China. So a **“Training-in-English” solution might not be able to help them at long last.**

(IV) What should be done?

Deciding Priorities: Integration or Assimilation?

Our government has long avoid this seemingly touchy but ultimately unavoidable issue: are we fostering a policy of ethnic integration allowing or actively promoting diversities, or are we adopting an assimilation strategy liken to those adopted by US? Without clarifying this very important issue, our educational policies would be pronged to further flip-flopping. Consider the following example in the choice of language of instruction in our education system:

An Integration Approach in Language Would Means:

- NCS are required to learn only English,
- Chinese as an optional secondary language, with a different syllabus,
- Tertiary educational requiring only English language for NCS.
- Pre-job trainings in English.

An Assimilation Approach in Language would Means:

- NCS are required to learn both English and Chinese
- Massive aids and consistent programs and inputs to help NCS to essentially attain Chinese reading and writing level **comparable to their Chinese classmate**
- Tertiary educational requiring English and Chinese language
- Pre-job trainings in Chinese or English depending on job natures.

EITHER approach would require our Government to focus, invest, and then commit for the long haul: all of which is not happening right now. Failing to do so, the status quo would prevail, where NCS might well become the “losers” eventually. They would have to find lowly-paid jobs after graduation, and repeat the social fate of their parents once again. Eventually, they would become more isolated linguistically and socially – a de facto state of ethnic separation would then emerge. As such, they would be trapped in the vicious cycle of poverty and social isolation.

Prepared by:

Hong Kong SKH Lady Maclehorse Centre

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Contact Person: Mr. Chan Ching Wa Jonathan (Service Co-ordinator)