



醫護行者 Health In Action

To eliminate health inequity in societies 消除社會上的健康不公平

The Legislative Council Subcommittee on Rights of Ethnic Minorities

27th February 2018 Meeting on

“Further discussion on education for children of ethnic minorities”

1. Education is an important social determinant of health because of its long-term impact on an individual’s life course, particularly early childhood education. This is the period during which cognitive skills and brain architecture are developed, and is the critical time for language acquisition for children, which is one of the reasons why it is difficult for adults to learn a new language.¹ Hence, an enabling learning environment must be created for children of all backgrounds for language acquisition, including ethnic minority children, and especially ethnic minority children with special education needs. Many ethnic minority children face immense difficulty in schools, as they are unable to speak Cantonese and this is a barricade to their learning process in school. Thus, it is essential to tackle the language barrier faced by ethnic minority children at the school setting, since many are immersed in their native language environment at home.
2. Increasing the ethnic diversity of teachers at schools
Every child has a right to education, regardless of their race or ethnicity. Kindergartens, primary schools, and secondary schools should have a flexible entry requirement for students who are non-Chinese speakers and must not be discriminatory towards students who are non-Chinese speakers. In view of differences in language and culture of ethnic minority students, local teachers who are Chinese may find it difficult to engage with ethnic minority students without sufficient cultural sensitivity training and support.
Suggestion: One possible solution is for schools to hire teachers from diverse ethnic backgrounds, particularly from South Asian backgrounds, such that the schools would be better able to communicate and cater for ethnic minority students. This could be a strategy for resolving some of the issues faced by children at school due to language barriers. Education Bureau could step up measures to train up ethnic minorities who would like to pursue a career in teaching, and could consider further subsidizing schools to recruit teachers of diverse ethnic backgrounds. Local ethnic minorities, who are often conversant in Cantonese and in their native languages, are well-placed to teach in kindergartens with ethnic minority children, which would provide a more enabling environment for children to learn Cantonese and other skills.

¹ Berkman LF, Kawachi I, Glymour M. *Social Epidemiology*, 2014. 1-641 p.



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3. Providing additional services to ethnic minority students with special needs

While Hong Kong's education system provides support to children with special education needs, it is catered mainly for Cantonese-speaking children, starting from initial needs assessment to ongoing educational support. There is currently limited opportunities for these children to be placed in suitable schools, and thus ethnic minority children with special education needs face tremendous barriers in accessing timely and appropriate services.

Suggestion: Additional resources could be provided to schools with ethnic minority children with special education needs to establish targeted support services. Such support services could also include creating volunteering opportunities for other students in the school, community members, retirees, and parents, to assist students with children with special needs in their learning, such as weekly meetings for homework support. Such measures would help schools to move towards the direction of mainstreaming.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, it is crucial to adopt a mainstreaming approach in ensuring equal learning opportunities for ethnic minority children in Hong Kong from young age. Facilitating measures such as increasing the diversity of teachers from multiple cultural backgrounds and supporting schools to provide additional support services for children with special needs could maximize the potential of early childhood education for ethnic minority children for both their lifelong development as well as our society's.

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