

Dear Speaker,

This is Kulsoom, a third year nursing student studying in The University of Hong Kong. I am of Pakistani descent and was born and bred in Hong Kong. I would like to bring forward a learning issue faced by the ethnic minority students in terms of Chinese language education of which I myself am a victim. A bit more about my background is that I went to a designated primary school so basically my primary school had students from different countries and of different ethnicities, essentially all walks of life. However, after graduation I opted to study in a mainstream Chinese Secondary school to learn Chinese. I was the first ethnic minority student to be accepted by this secondary school and there was no other non-Chinese student in this school during my 6 years' of study, what I want to say is that the school had no prior experience of students like me and had no understanding of how we are taught.

So, during my study I took all the same classes like my local peers and was preparing for Chinese DSE until form 5 when my Chinese teacher learnt that I could actually sit for an easier Chinese examination such as the GCE, GCSE etc, the exam was in 2 months and I had only that amount of time to prepare for it.

The problems, as you would see from my case, is that teachers do not know how to teach ethnic minority students, so the whole time I was taught with all other local Chinese students whose mother tongue is Chinese while to me Chinese is not even a second language. Learning a mother language and a second language is not the same, as everyone would agree, to learn a second language one would need to start learning from the very basics in a systematic and strategic way. This is exactly the reason why for many years now, many NGOs and social enterprises have been advocating for a Chinese-as-a-second-language curriculum, because schools are not meeting our needs by teaching us in the same manner as they would the local Chinese students.

The current situation is that the government is pouring monetary resources into schools accepting ethnic minority students, however what is lacking are proper guidelines on how and in what forms the teachers will teach the ethnic minority students, and what and how much content is to be taught or covered. The schools are therefore left to decide themselves what components of Chinese language they will be teaching the ethnic minority students and in which forms based on their limited understanding of the problems we are facing and our needs. As a result, the students graduating from different schools across the city are being taught in various different ways and while some may acquire proficiency in both spoken and written Cantonese, others may not be able to learn even the basics. Some students get immense amounts of help and others remain neglected because the schools and the teachers are clueless. There are huge variations in the quality of their learning, and subsequently their Chinese proficiency. What we are advocating for is a unified, systematic and strategic curriculum which is used across the city in all schools where ethnic minority students are studying.

This kind of curriculum or framework is important so that ethnic minority students will be able to understand and learn Cantonese by learning it from its basics such as the character writing, their origins and intonation which are not included in the Chinese curriculum because it was designed for those whose mother tongue is. Yet, if they are not taught the non-Chinese will not know about them. It is also significant so that schools will not just dump these ethnic minority students in a class full of Chinese students learning 12 designated Chinese articles (十二片指文章) consisting of poems about ancient China and what they will do is hold separate classes for ethnic minority students to first learn the basics and lay a strong foundation on which the advanced curriculum as learnt by Chinese students could be supported. An example to illustrate the current condition of ethnic minorities learning Chinese is like placing a Chinese student in an Urdu language class full of urdu-speaking students and at the end of the day the Chinese student is said to be lazy for not knowing how to speak the language already and not working hard enough.

Under the existing learning framework, there are no policy goals, outcome indicators, detailed implementation plan and timetable, or monitoring mechanism for the Learning Framework. Research finds that nearly 80% of teachers criticize that the Learning Framework is lacking teaching resources that match with the learning framework, while 90% of Chinese Language subject teachers indicated a lack of Chinese teaching materials, exercises and assessment tools. We urge the Government to formulate a comprehensive and adequate “Chinese as a second language” policy with a concrete policy goal, an implementation plan, output indicators, and a transparent monitoring and evaluation mechanism as soon as possible.

What we also need is a better understanding of teachers across the city about ethnic minority students in Hong Kong. Without this, many schools and teachers yet do not know how the students can be supported and what existing policies, measures, or resources are in place for them, as also seen from my example that my school and Chinese teachers did not know I could sit for GCE exam until form 5 which is the final year to sit for this exam and with only 2 months of time remaining for me to prepare. Had my teachers not informed me about this availability of choice, I would have had to sit for Chinese DSE and consequently I would not have been able to secure a place in the universities under jupas. This is just one example of how students have suffered and lost learning opportunities because of the lack of understanding of schools and teachers and variations in support. These problems continue to compromise the futures of ethnic minority students and the current system is to be blamed for this. We urge the government and the education bureau to take measures such as holding even one-time teachers’ trainings and informing them of current learning situation of ethnic minority students, problems encountered, existing policies, solutions and resources, and potential tertiary education pathways for them.

To conclude, everyone would agree that education plays a huge role in the social mobility of youngsters and their future prospects, and it is a right to be enjoyed equally by everyone irrespective of their nationality. So, it is high time that the government looks into this fundamental problem and secure the futures of the ethnic youth living in Hong Kong, and make Hong Kong a more inclusive society.

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