

Panel on Education
Progress on Supporting Chinese Learning and Teaching for
Non-Chinese Speaking Students

Submission from the Equal Opportunities Commission

Purpose

This paper aims to provide the views and recommendations of the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) on the education and career development for non-Chinese speaking (NCS) students. These views are consolidated from diverse feedback from important stakeholders and racially disadvantaged groups; as well as empirical findings from a series of dedicated studies conducted by the EOC.

Education & Career Development

2. Some non-ethnic Chinese (NEC) groups have been facing systemic barriers in education. This issue was raised by the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in their concluding observations in May 2014¹; and the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination which recommended in its concluding remarks in September 2018 that the Government, “[f]acilitate the smooth integration of non-Chinese speaking students in Hong Kong, China into the education system, and ensure that children of all ethnicities enjoy their right to inclusive and Chinese-language education.”²

3. Noting that education is an effective means of empowerment, the EOC has long been focusing on this area for NCS students as a strategic priority area. We published the “Closing the Gap” Report of the Working Group on Education for Ethnic Minorities³ (Working Group Report) in September 2019 and released two related studies, namely “A Study on the Challenges Faced by Mainstream Schools in

¹ UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), *Concluding observations on the second periodic report of China, including Hong Kong, China, and Macao, China*, 13 June 2014, E/C.12/CHN/CO/2, paragraph 52; available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/53c77e524.html>

² UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), *Concluding observations on the combined fourteenth to seventeenth periodic reports of China (including Hong Kong, China and Macao, China)**, paragraph 24(c), available at <https://urlzs.com/92Roy>

³ Equal Opportunities Commission, “Closing the Gap” Report of the Working Group on Education for Ethnic Minorities, September 2019
https://www.eoc.org.hk/EOC/upload/ResearchReport/Closing_the_Gap_Full_Report.pdf

Educating Ethnic Minorities in Hong Kong” conducted by the Faculty of Education at the University of Hong Kong and Oxfam Hong Kong⁴; and “A Study on Education and Career Pathways of Ethnic Minority Youth in Hong Kong” conducted by the Centre for Youth Research & Practice at the Hong Kong Baptist University⁵, in January and June 2020 respectively. The Working Group Report delineated the key concerns and areas for improvement from diverse feedback while the two studies provided strong empirical evidence on the problems and required actions.

Key Concerns on Education & Career Development

4. The EOC’s Working Group of Education for Ethnic Minorities concluded that the following eight areas were of major concern:

- i. Gaps in the Chinese Language Curriculum Second Language Learning Framework (Learning Framework)
- ii. Unclear indicators to measure the progress of the Learning Framework
- iii. Insufficient teacher training and support
- iv. Available Chinese examinations either too hard for second language learners or too low in standard with not enough options in between
- v. Limited knowledge and access to information for NEC parents in school choice and examination options for their children
- vi. Need for more integration in schools
- vii. Lack of continuing Chinese learning opportunities beyond secondary school
- viii. Inadequate support for parents and community

5. In “A Study on the Challenges Faced by Mainstream Schools in Educating Ethnic Minorities in Hong Kong”, it was found that, among 612 Chinese language teachers in primary schools:

- i. Only 37.8% are confident in teaching NCS students to achieve the learning level of Chinese speaking students
- ii. 86% faced greater difficulties in ensuring NCS students keep up with the mainstream curriculum schedule; and making NCS students achieve the learning goals

⁴ Oxfam Hong Kong, Loh Ka Yee Elizabeth and Hung On Ying, *A Study on the Challenges Faced by Mainstream Schools in Educating Ethnic Minorities in Hong Kong*, January 2020, https://www.eoc.org.hk/eoc/upload/ResearchReport/researchreport_20200115_e.pdf

⁵ The Centre for Youth Research and Practice, Hong Kong Baptist University, *A Study on Education and Career Pathways of Ethnic Minority Youth in Hong Kong*, June 2020, https://www.eoc.org.hk/EOC/upload/ResearchReport/20200619_em.pdf

- iii. 96% indicated that the Chinese language curriculum in use is too difficult for NCS students and there is a lack of resources for teaching Chinese-as-a-second-language for them
- iv. 91% believed it is difficult for NCS students to reach similar Chinese language level as their Chinese speaking counterparts before the internal assessment for the Secondary School Place Allocation exercise

6. In “A Study on Education and Career Pathways of Ethnic Minority Youth in Hong Kong”, a survey covering 483 NCS students and 426 Chinese students showed that NCS students have higher aspirations and self-efficacies as well as stronger family and peer support than Chinese students. However, in-depth interviews with 53 NEC youth and 15 parents, teachers and social workers found that, despite this, NEC youth face many difficulties in their career pathways. They reported limited job opportunities and options, due to their low Chinese language proficiency and common stereotypes against their racial and cultural backgrounds among employers. Some NEC youth from lower socio-economic backgrounds resorted to taking a gap year to earn school fees or simply abandoned aspirations of further education looking at the difficulties commonly experienced by their community people in finding jobs even after tertiary education. There is an evident gap between NEC youths’ career expectations and the school advice they get on when and how they should equip themselves to pursue their goals. Accuracy and sufficiency of information as well as availability of and accessibility to related resources are important determinants of their plans and decisions.

7. Another important finding of this study was the co-relation identified between concentration of NEC students in a school and the sense of social inclusion and belonging (*Perceived Host Receptivity*) among them. It showed that students studying in schools with lower concentration of NEC students had significantly higher perceived host receptivity which is strongly associated with their aspirations and very important for the successful transition of NEC youth in their education and employment pathways.

Key Recommendations on Education & Career Development

8. All the three study reports pointed to a major gap in the current education system for NCS students. At the root lies the need to acknowledge that a non-native learner learns a language differently from how a native-speaker does, and then making the necessary tools available to cater to that difference. It does not imply that they

learn a “simpler” Chinese language curriculum. Instead, they should be taught what is necessary to attain a reasonable level of proficiency that is required for the job market, and in a manner that is most effective given the different starting point and learning pattern. To plug this gap, the EOC recommends:

- i. Developing a full-fledged Chinese-as-a-second-language curriculum complete with specific pedagogy, corresponding teaching tools and textbooks, systematic teacher training, etc., which are inadequate in the current Learning Framework
- ii. Implementing this curriculum diligently across all schools admitting NCS students with standard requirements, close monitoring and ongoing guidance from the Education Bureau and teaching experts
- iii. Making it essential for Chinese subject teachers to have undergone pre-job training on teaching second language learners; providing intensive and progressive in-service training courses for practicing Chinese subject teachers; and requiring every school to have a certain ratio of trained teachers
- iv. Revising the Chinese language examination options for second language learners and developing a qualification ladder with progressive levels between GCSE/IGCSE and HKDSE, through which a range of language proficiency among NCS students can be better reflected and recognized

9. It was also recommended to strengthen manpower resources for schools in the following areas:

- i. Introduce an independent coordinator position in schools to co-ordinate learning support resources and needs as well as promote cultural inclusion, mirroring the established coordinator position for students with special educational needs
- ii. Formalize the support teacher position (currently short-term non-Chinese teaching assistants in many schools) to be an established post to recognize their roles in supporting group teaching of NCS students, communication with their parents and cultural integration with mainstream students

10. On career planning and counselling for NCS students, guidance, training and resources should be strengthened for career teachers to provide timely and culturally responsive advice for the students to make realistic assessment of their career needs and take early actions to equip themselves with the necessary skills, including language learning. Stakeholder feedback reflected that some schools with a small NCS student population may overlook the teachers’ training needs for counselling this

student group. It is therefore imperative to require all schools admitting NCS students to have their career teachers properly trained in planning the education and career pathways of NCS students

11. We also called for the Government to address the following disadvantages faced by NCS students in their education process:

- i. The Learning Framework may not go in line with the Secondary School Place Allocation exercise. As schools are required to use a uniform test in assessing the Chinese level of both Chinese and NCS students, many teachers abruptly shift from the Learning Framework to teach the mainstream curriculum in Primary 4 even though the NCS students cannot cope with the leap.
- ii. NCS students studying in schools with a high concentration of non-Chinese students felt less accepted by and less integrated into the mainstream society. This gravely impacts their career aspirations and development. Even worse, it reinforces a detachment mindset which, together with their low social-economic background and Chinese language incompetency, creates a perfect breeding ground for intergenerational poverty.
- iii. As the majority of primary schools and many secondary schools teach non-language subjects in Chinese/Cantonese, the deficiency of NCS students in Chinese language impacts almost all subjects, leading to an overall underachievement in school.

12. Last but not least, the following infrastructural improvements should also be made to provide a level-playing field for NCS students to flourish in schools:

- i. All the three study reports indicated that NCS students who start learning Chinese at the pre-school stage and get concerted support from family, school and community have a better chance of catching up with their Chinese counterpart. While the Government has granted an additional funding for kindergartens to support NCS students since 2017, the Hong Kong Jockey Club also launched a 5-year C-for-Chinese@JC pilot project in 2016 to develop an evidenced-based culturally responsive curriculum and home-school-community support model for 20 kindergartens. With positive empirical data from the pilot project on its effectiveness in the Chinese learning and school performance of NCS students under the scheme, the model should gain Government support to be expanded to all kindergartens and also extended to primary schools.

- ii. A school environment that embraces racial diversity and respects cultural differences is key to promoting NCS students' sense of belonging and inclusion and at the same time preventing racial discrimination and harassment. Regrettably, more than a few Chinese and NCS students in our encounters shared that, even though they are studying alongside schoolmates from different ethnicities, interactions with each other are limited and racial integration in school is somehow rarely talked about. There should be clear instruction and guidance for all schools to develop their policies on racial inclusion and curriculum in equipping all students, Chinese and NCS, with cultural understanding, awareness and sensitivity towards people from different racial backgrounds.

Conclusion

13. People from all races should enjoy equal opportunities in maximising their abilities and pursuing their goals. However, it is evident that some racial minority groups remain disadvantaged especially in the critical areas of education. Even worse, we saw ominous signs that these disadvantages have been further exacerbated in the pandemic.

14. The move to online learning is understandably essential for outbreak control but has also set back NCS students' Chinese-language learning. The premise of the current Chinese-language learning policy for NCS students is to accelerate learning by providing an immersive language experience. Regrettably, the deprivation of physical school life for practicing Chinese and the absence of Chinese language environment and learning support at home have made that difficult. In addition, students are less able to get help from their teachers because of the online format. It is easy to lose interest and leave doubts unclarified unless the student is exceptionally driven. The few gains achieved in previous years, before the pandemic, may well have been wiped out.

15. The setback is worrying. It is therefore vital to critically review the current Learning Framework, Chinese examination system and support measures to address the longstanding issues we have identified above. It is essential to take steps now to prevent irredeemable damage and foster this section of our younger generation to be equally skilled in building our future.

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