

Researching Ethnic Minority Students in a Chinese Context: Mixed Methods Design for Cross Cultural Understandings¹

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Researching ethnic minority students is characterized by a growing international literature (He et al., 2008; Caballero et al., 2007; Arora, 2005; Mansouri et al., 2005; Atzaba-Poria et al., 2004; Codjoe, 2001; Haque, 2000; Ruiz-de-Velasco et al., 2000; Rassool, 1999; Fuligni, 1998; Dentler et al., 1997; Rutter, 1994; Cummins, 1989). The commonality across this literature is its grounding in liberal democratic theory that has embraced multiculturalism as a democratic process that values diversity, promotes equality and seeks equal opportunities for all citizens. Such literature, however, is socially and politically situated – described best by Kymlicka (1995) as “liberal multiculturalism”. Ethnic diversity, however, is not confined to liberal democratic societies but rather is an international phenomenon that does not respect political ideologies. A key issue, therefore, is to understand how ethnic diversity is constructed and responded to in those societies that are not underpinned by liberal democratic values.

Kymlicka and He (2005) addressed this issue to some extent when they reviewed multiculturalism in a range of Asian societies and concluded that there was a range of local traditions and policy approaches that sought to accommodate the interests of ethnic minorities. McCarthy (2009) has recently talked about “communist multiculturalism’ in an effort to analyze the way ethnic minority groups are treated in China. Here the motive

^{1 1} The research reported here was supported with a Public Policy Research Grant [HKIEd 8001-PPR-2] from Hong Kong’s Research Grants Council. The views expressed are those of the authors.

for multiculturalism is national harmony rather than the promotion of and valuing of ethnic diversities for their own sake. In other jurisdictions such as Myanmar there is a complete disregard for the rights of ethnic minorities (Ang, 2007) representing an even more extreme response from an authoritarian government. What is clear from these perspectives is that the existence of ethnic diversity in a society dictates national responses but these responses vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction and they cannot be encompassed in a single theoretical framework. Thus when Joppke (2004, p. 451) argued that liberal democratic states supported opposing responses to cultural diversity:

Abolish it by means of ‘antidiscrimination’ policy, and protect or promote it by means of ‘multiculturalism’ policy. In other words, liberal-democratic norms require the simultaneous rendering invisible *and* visible of ethnic diversity.

He was highlighting an important point: ethnic diversity can be subject to the binary of visibility and invisibility. Yet he portrays this binary as obverse sides of the same coin since “antidiscrimination” (invisibility) triggers “multiculturalism” (visibility). In reality, however, visibility (i.e. multiculturalism) requires deliberate values based response. Such a response is social and political in nature linked as it is to liberal democratic values. Without it ethnic diversity remains at best invisible and protected by antidiscrimination but at worst ignored or subject to discrimination. In this paper, we want to use Joppke’s (2004) binary to show how researching ethnic minority students outside of a liberal democratic framework requires methodologies that enable researchers to see beyond the invisibility. We also want to show how invisibility (i.e. antidiscrimination) can be also be further culturally constructed, confounding even more any broader multicultural project. In order to do this we shall canvass four broad areas:

- Ethnic minority students in Hong Kong and the Racial Discrimination Ordinance: Becoming invisible;
- Interrogating dominant culture discourses: Listening to power and exploring its histories and sociologies;

- Chinese teachers' views of ethnic minority students: Developing a comparative survey methodology;
- “Digging deeper”: Listening to teachers' views of ethnic minority students

Ethnic minority students in Hong Kong and the Racial Discrimination Ordinance: Becoming invisible

Ethnic minority students form less than 2% of the total school population in Hong Kong (Census and Statistics Department, 2007). Their presence in the local school system, when they managed to gain entry to schools (Loper, 2004), went largely unnoticed until the Hong Kong SAR government proceeded with a Racial Discrimination Bill in the early years of the twenty first century eventually becoming an Ordinance (RDO) in July 2008. In the period leading up to the RDO, these hitherto little ethnic minority students became the focus of policy attention since they were given more public attention and it was not always favorable (*South China Morning Post*, 2006; Ku et al., 2005; Loper, 2004; Yang Memorial Methodist Social Service, 2000, 2002). Little was known at that time about the educational practices that supported ethnic minority students in schools where a centrally developed curriculum catered for the needs of the 98% of Hong Kong students who were Chinese. What happened to ethnic minority students within schools and classrooms was very much masked.

It is important to note that there was an extended process in the development of the RDO. The rationale for legislating to proscribe racial discrimination in Hong Kong was first introduced to the public in November 2004 in the form of a consultation paper (Home Affairs Bureau, 2004) with the consultation period ending in February 2005. The proposed Bill was finally passed by the Executive Council on 21 November 2006, and was officially introduced to Legislative Council for the first reading on 13 December 2006. It was not passed into law until July 2008 following an extensive period of public consultation. Such consultation on new government initiatives is not unusual in Hong

Kong. Nevertheless, there were some important education conditions in the Bill, prior to its becoming an Ordinance, that can help to explain the delay.

In the area of education the Bill stated that no educational establishment is allowed to discriminate against any person on the ground of race in terms of admission and students' treatment:

It is unlawful for the responsible body for an educational establishment to discriminate against a person ---

- (a). in the terms on which it offers to admit that person to the establishment as a student;*
- (b). by refusing, or deliberately omitting to accept, an application for that person's admission to the establishment as a student; or ---*
- (c). where the person is a student of the establishment ---*
 - (i). in the way it affords the person access to any benefits, facilities or services, or by refusing or deliberately omitting to afford the person access to them; or*
 - (ii). by expelling the person from the establishment or subjecting him or her to any other detriment (Home Affairs Bureau, 2006: Clause 26(1)).*

Nevertheless, the Bill noted that it would not be mandatory for schools to make any change or special arrangement for people of any race.

Nothing in subsection (1) is to be construed as requiring the responsible body for an educational establishment ---

- (a). to modify for persons of any racial group arrangements of the establishment regarding holidays or medium of instruction; or*
- (b). to make different arrangements on those matters for persons of any racial group persons (Home Affairs Bureau, 2006: Clause 26(2)).*

In addition, exception for use or failure to use a particular language is allowed as mentioned in Clause 58.

- (1). Nothing in section 20, 21, 26, 27, 28, 29, 35 or 36 renders unlawful the use of, or the failure to use, any language in any circumstances relevant for the purposes of the section.*
- (2). For the avoidance of doubt, nothing in subsection (1) affects the Official Languages Ordinance (Cap. 5) or provisions on the use of language contained in any other enactment.*
- (3). In this section, a reference to the use of, or failure to use, a language includes a reference to the provision of, or failure to provide, a translation, interpretation or transcription into the language.*

Loper (2007) pointed out that that Section 26 (1) is very similar to other anti-discrimination legislation in Hong Kong by proscribing discrimination in admission, access to services and benefits and expulsion. This is not unimportant in the Hong Kong context since there was evidence of such discrimination in the past, especially in relation to admission (Loper, 2004). Yet the provisions of Section 58, that refer to exemptions in terms of language, were considered too onerous by Loper (2007) and she pointed to a range of international case law that highlighted the centrality of language to successful educational experience. Yet Section 58 meant that Hong Kong schools were not required to make any modifications to the language of instruction or take into consideration the language needs of ethnic minority students in the course of their instruction. The RDB, therefore, rendered ethnic minority students invisible by requiring them to be treated like every other student: this was the effect of the antidiscrimination measures. Becoming invisible in this way, of course, was one step up from not being noticed at all or by being the subject of overt discrimination (e.g. in relation to admissions). Yet there was no complementary policy that highlighted the value of diversity or the contribution that diverse cultures, languages and backgrounds might make to the educational context. In other words, the proposed RDO had no supporting legislation designed to render ethnic minority students visible.

This restriction led to Peterson's (2007, p.17) comment that "the Hong Kong government has taken a step backward and proposed that Hong Kong's ethnic minorities should be content with a far weaker definition of discrimination than the definition enacted in 1995 in the SDO and the DDO²". Chan (2005, p.605) was critical of the proposed legislation but from the perspective of its exclusion of Mainland Chinese from the provisions of the proposed Ordinance. These criticisms suggest that from the perspective of some community members the proposed legislation did not go far enough. This was certainly the view of ethnic minority advocates who took the opportunity to voice their views through the formal consultation channels made available by legislative processes in Hong Kong (Legislative Council, 2006). There were thus tensions within the proposed legislation that to some extent may explain its slow passage through the Legislative Council. Yet these tensions were symptomatic of a more significant problem.

Hong Kong's commitment to anti-discrimination cannot be questioned since it has been enshrined in specific legislation related to sex and disability discrimination, a local Bill of Rights and the adoption of international covenants on anti-discrimination. The Racial Discrimination Ordinance, however, was the government's first attempt to enter the area of cultural diversity – a contentious area in all societies. In was against this background that we were applied for and were successful in gaining a Public Policy Research funded project to investigate the RDO and the possible liabilities it might generate if the education system were not able to meet the antidiscrimination requirements.³ The objectives of the project were:

- a. Outline the system level policy context in which education is provided for ethnic minority students and compare it with international trends.

²*Sex Discrimination Ordinance (SDO) and Disability Discrimination Ordinance (DDO).*

³*Educational Provision for Ethnic Minority Students in Hong Kong: Meeting the Challenges of the Proposed Racial Discrimination Bill.* A Public Policy Research Project (HKIEd8001-PPR-2) funded by Hong Kong's Research Grants Committee

- b. Explore the way in which schools develop policy and adapt practice to meet the needs of ethnic minority students.
- c. Appreciate the aspirations that ethnic minority parents and students have for education and the barriers they perceive to be operating at different levels.
- d. Assess the extent to which the Hong Kong SAR government may be exposed to possible litigation under the proposed Racial Discrimination Bill and suggest new policy directions for policy and practice to meet this challenge.

The contexts in which the project was to be conducted posed a particular challenge for the choice of research methods and the participation of members of the research team. Our research team consisted of both monolingual and bilingual researchers with various degrees of research experience in Hong Kong. Multicultural research was a relatively new area for Hong Kong and the members of the team had different experiences including two team members who had researched the area in Western contexts. Thus we approached the research with different frames for thinking about multiculturalism and these will become more obvious when we report later on issues that arose during the research process. The team also had different skill sets, including language competency, local experience and diverse perspectives on methodology. We capitalized on this diversity to address the main issues raised by the project. The remainder of this paper will report on the way a mixed methods approach enabled us to pursue the objectives outlined above in a context where ethnic minority students had been rendered invisible, where multiculturalism was not valued and where ideology often determined approaches to research.

Interrogating dominant culture discourses: Listening to power and exploring its histories and sociologies

Our initial task was to gain a picture of how policymakers regarded the RDO and what actions were being taken to support ethnic minority students. We have written elsewhere about specific initiatives that the government was supporting through its Education Bureau (Kennedy, in press). Interview methods were adopted as the most direct way of gaining access to the broader policy context. These methods were seen to be efficient, all members of the team could participate because Hong Kong government officials were bilingual. We saw this largely as a policy scan that would be unproblematic. Yet as we progressed we realized that the interview was a somewhat limited technique to capture the complexities of policies embedded not just in government decision making but also in a cultural landscape which for some members was entirely new.

Initial interviews were conducted with three key officials who had policy responsibilities for ethnic minority students. It was clear from these interviews that largely because of the RDO ethnic minority students had surfaced as a group whose needs had been given greater attention. One key issue was that in the past there had been no requirement for ethnic minority students to learn Chinese even though lack of it meant that progression through the education system was severely limited. This issue was quickly addressed and Chinese was made compulsory. Specific schools were then designated for ethnic minority students so that resources could be focused although this did not address the issues of schools that continued to cater for small numbers of such students. Nevertheless it was clear from these and a raft of other measures that the Hong Kong government was providing resources that were meant to address these issues. Nevertheless we identified an issue that did not fit with this picture of government provision for ethnic minority students.

There were a number of non government organizations (NGOs) that advocated on behalf of ethnic minority groups. While our interviews seemed to indicate that the government had responded well to the recently identified needs of ethnic minority students, these NGOs continued to advocate strongly for these students. They often accused the government of neglecting them and seemed to use very public processes such as writing to the Legislative Council to make their views known. As a rule they seemed to avoid

direct negotiation with the Education Bureau (EB) preferring instead a much more politicized process. Whenever EB seemed to concede on a claim, the NGOs pushed for even more. Since this was all publicly reported, it was easy to become aware of this process and it seemed that the NGOs were not asking for all that much. For example, on the issue of the compulsory teaching of Chinese, they wanted a Chinese as a second language curriculum but EB remained adamant that there should be a single curriculum for all students. NGOs also wanted to expand the number of designated schools that received additional support but EB was not willing to do this even though the cost would have been minimal. There thus emerged this picture of reluctance on the part of EB to accede to NGO requests unless they had to do so through the political processes associated with Legislative Council committees. This reluctance had not emerged as a feature of EB action during our interviews with officials. Yet the daily reporting of EB-NGO interaction on ethnic minority student issues made it clear that while attempts were being made to support ethnic minority students they were attempts that met the letter of the law rather than what might be seen as its spirit. Why was this so and how could we resolve it?

We could not answer this question with further interviews – it was too sensitive an issue and in any case would have met with resistance on the part of officials. We needed to seek an answer elsewhere and we did so by reviewing literature related to social justice since from the research team’s perspective, the treatment of ethnic minority students was a social justice issue. As we read in this broad area we began to realize that there was some evidence to suggest that Western conceptions of social justice are not the same as those in Confucian societies such as Hong Kong (Chiu & Hong, 1997; Chan, 2001). For example, it has been argued that “when it comes to matters about people’s well being, material welfare and life chances, Confucian justice seeks to promote sufficiency for all and not equality between individuals” (Chan, 2001). This concept of social justice is expressed through the idea of impartiality (Chan, 2001):

Political rule should be impartial or fair (*gong* in Chinese) to everyone – by that it means political rule should promote the good of everyone without

prejudice or favoritism. In other words, it would be a violation of fairness or justice (*gong*) if the ruler were selectively concerned about some people only.

Thus when Hong Kong's Education Bureau insisted on a common curriculum, a common examination, limited support for induction programmes and a reluctance to expand the number of designated schools for ethnic minority students, it seems consistent with this Confucian principle. The government is responsible for *sufficient* provision rather than *equitable* provision. Chinese students and ethnic minority students must be treated the same way to meet the standards of Confucian justice. We could also see that this principle further reinforced the invisibility of ethnic minority students by not doing more for them than for other students.

This understanding of Confucian conceptions of social justice drew us back to our interviews and to the public disagreements between EB and NGOs supporting ethnic minority students. We could now recognize a pattern of interactions that we had not seen previously. If government actions were motivated by sufficient provision rather than equitable provision then the reluctance on the part of EB could be understood. We could also identify the points at which the government ceded more to ethnic minority students in order to maintain social harmony – another key Chinese value. It was at this point that we realized we were researching “against the grain” of dominant social values. As our research progressed we began to see that these values were deeply held and culturally determined. Even though antidiscrimination legislation had the effect of rendering ethnic minority students invisible, so too did a long cultural tradition that highlighted sufficiency rather than equity. It became clear to us that multiculturalism that required a celebration of difference and diversity to the point of providing more in order to ensure equitable outcomes would be a very difficult idea to take root in a Chinese society such as that of Hong Kong. In this context it seemed to us it would be difficult to move beyond the invisibility cloaking ethnic minority students.

Chinese Teachers' Views of Ethnic Minority Students: Developing a Comparative Methodology

Having understood the policy context that was shaping educational provision for ethnic minority students we then wanted to learn more about the views of teachers. As Chinese teachers steeped in the traditions and culture of their own society we could assume that they might hold a similar philosophical position as the policymakers discussed previously. We wanted to know if this were the case but more importantly, since teachers since were the front line workers dealing with ethnic minority students on a daily basis we need to know more about their views in general. There were a number of constraints on how best to approach this task.

Interviews were too resource intensive as only one team member was fluent in Chinese. It was, therefore, not feasible to try to interview an adequate sample of teachers even with the support of a research assistant. Yet communication had to be in Chinese otherwise we would be relying on second language skills to talk about and understand complex professional issues. We eventually decided on a survey that could capture the views of a large group of teachers, it could be prepared in Chinese and it would be efficient to administer and analyse. In reality, we may have preferred interviews to try to get closer to teachers beliefs and understandings but the context did not allow for them.

In designing the survey we drew on an existing instrument that had already been translated in Chinese (Tsui and Kennedy, 2009). It was a measure of teacher self efficacy and we adapted the wording to relate it to teachers' self efficacy in teaching ethnic minority students. Yet we also felt we needed some indication of the general level of teacher self efficacy as well since so that we could make a judgment about whether teachers felt more or less efficacious when it came to ethnic minority students. We therefore used a single set of questions (twelve in all) and asked teachers to rate their level of self efficacy in relation to both Chinese students and ethnic minority students. We have reported the results of this survey elsewhere (Kennedy et al., 2008) and there is no need to go into details here. Overall, it was clear that teachers had a higher level of

self efficacy for teaching ethnic minority students than they did for Chinese students. This result surprised us since we had thought that teachers would feel more confident teaching Chinese students. We picked up from some other questions including open ended questions that teachers felt Chinese students and their families were more demanding than ethnic minority students. What was more, teachers reported that they did not do anything different for ethnic minority students. That is to say, in terms of curriculum content, pedagogy and assessment there was no differentiation between the two groups of students. Eventually, the picture we developed was that ethnic minority students remained invisible: they were not demanding, they did not require any special effort on the part of teachers and they did not disrupt the classroom.

On reflection, we felt that the results of interviews with policymakers and the teacher survey were quite consistent. Ethnic minority students were not being neglected in a policy sense, but neither was anything being done to provide more support than was thought by officials to be sufficient. In this sense, ethnic minority students were not considered “special”, but simply in need of adequate support. Teachers appeared to feel much the same – ethnic minority students would be treated the same as all students – no better and no worse. These approaches were considered by both groups to be fair and this view would probably have won wide community support. This result confirmed for us that in focusing on ethnic minority students we were “researching against the grain” of dominant social values. We did not encounter any opposition or hostility towards ethnic minority students on the part of either policymakers or teachers. Yet we did encounter what we would describe as “passive action” - both in terms of policy and classroom activities – designed largely to eliminate deficits. Yet there was not recognition of the structural disadvantage that characterized most ethnic minority families and the additional resources that would be needed to address it. Eliminating deficits was seen to be the best way to assist ethnic minorities. Yet as will be shown in the following section ethnic minority families themselves had a different perspective.

“Digging deeper”: Listening to teachers’ views of ethnic minority students

Survey methodology was a useful way of gaining a perspective on teachers’ views of ethnic minority students. As pointed out previously it was adopted largely as an efficiency measure because our research team had only one bilingually competent member, along with a research assistant. Yet the results of the survey remained puzzling even though they seemed to be consistent with the general views held by policymakers as outlined above. We decided that in order to understand teachers’ views better we needed to listen to them rather than simply infer their views based on the survey. This was not to undermine the survey methodology in any way – it had served a useful purpose. We simply needed to know more in order to understand in a deeper way. Of course, this threw the burden onto the one bilingually competent member of our team but we had little choice. If we wanted to “dig deeper” we could only do so in the local language and this meant relying on one team member.

Over thirty teachers were interviewed in three secondary schools. Interviews were transcribed and summaries were made of the interviews in English so that other non-Chinese speaking team members had access to them. At one level, the interviews reinforced the results of the survey in as much teachers explained why they could not be seen to be doing more for ethnic minority students than Chinese students. Yet their response to the home cultures of the students was more revealing since it had not formed part of the survey. Teachers realized the need to involve the parents of ethnic minority students but found parental attitudes so different from the attitudes of Chinese parents that they could only develop negative images of the home environments of ethnic minority students. Strongly differentiated gender roles, the primacy of religion, an inability to communicate in Chinese, lack of availability of parents and not a high regard for education were the parental qualities identified by teachers. Such views can only contribute to negative constructions of ethnic minority students themselves although teachers did not speak in this way about the students – just their parents.

It is little wonder, then, that multiculturalism remains an alien concept in Hong Kong. The dominant culture exerts an influence not through any overt action but subtly through the views of individuals and their long held beliefs. Yet this is not seen to be problematic in anyway by local teachers. Integration and harmony remain the policy priorities for ethnic minority students in Hong Kong and teachers' views reinforce this and to some extent help to explain it. Hong Kong regards itself as a very successful Western-oriented society but at the same time it is deeply embedded in Chinese cultural traditions. When teachers express views about the value of education these are not just modernist views but deeply held cultural views as well. Thus their experiences of ethnic minority families clash with their cultural views about the importance of education and negative image are formed. What teachers are really saying is "Why can't ethnic minority families be more like Chinese families"!

At the same time as teachers expressed these views about families they also indicated that they enjoyed teaching ethnic minority students and having them in their classes. They also indicated the need to be supportive of these students and to help them in any way that they can. As mentioned earlier, however, this did not mean doing any more for these students than for Chinese students. Even though these teachers were aware that ethnic minority students did not get the same kind of support from their parents for pursuing high educational standards, this did not move them to provide additional support\or any more support than would be available for Chinese students. The concepts of balance and harmony appeared to be paramount for these teachers in much the same way as they were for policymakers there was no thought of any kind of affirmative action for ethnic minority students.

The interviews consolidated the views of the team about the nature of educational provision for ethnic minority students in Hong Kong. For those members of the team who had worked in multicultural research in Western contexts, the views of teachers and policy makers went entirely against the thrust of policy and to some extent practice in other contexts. This highlighted both the political and cultural construction of multiculturalism, social justice and equitable provision. It was clear that context

determined local approaches to these processes and that Western conceptions of equal opportunity could not be applied. Yet this left ethnic minority students disadvantaged and this remained troubling for the research team.

This was not an irrelevant question because one of the issues to be addressed by the project was whether schools might find themselves at risk of contravening the RDO. On reflection, we felt that based on our interviews and survey, formal requirements of the RDO were being met. As shown earlier, some areas were exempt under the Ordinance so the fact that ethnic minority students were not taught in their own language was not a contravention of the act. Indeed, it was allowable under the Ordinance. The government was providing targeted support for ethnic minority students so it could not be argued that they were being neglected. Legally, therefore, at both system and school level there were clear indicators of support. Even though the research team could identify and acknowledge these things, we were left with the uneasy feeling that more was needed if ethnic minority students were to flourish in the local education system. We understood the cultural constraints that were operating for both policymakers and teachers but we questioned among ourselves the unfortunate impact these had on students who remained marginalized to the dominant group within society. We knew there were other and better / ways of supporting marginalized groups and we even identified how other Asian societies (e.g. Korea) were implementing affirmative action programmes for immigrant groups. In Hong Kong, however, we were left with the irreconcilability of cultural values and progressive concepts of social justice and the debilitating effects this had on ethnic minority students.

Conclusion

Research is rarely objective – there are always values at different point in the research process. In the project reported it was values that came to the fore. In an important sense it was a clash of values – those of the researchers and those encountered in the research context. Caught in between were ethnic minority students themselves. The researchers

felt much more could be done for them while policymakers and teachers felt they had done all that was necessary to ensure sufficient provision. Within their own frames of reference, both groups were right and the researchers could do little to advance their own conceptions of equity and social justice. NGOs in the local community showed how advocacy could advance the cause of ethnic minority students but in this regard research seemed somewhat limited. It could identify the problem, but did not have solutions. This remains an unsatisfying conclusion for the researchers – but it is even more so for ethnic minority students caught in a cultural press by the dominant group with little prospect of advancement. In this context ethnic minority students will remain invisible masked by long held cultural values and destined to remain in the margins rather than at the centre of Hong Kong's future growth and development. This will not contravene the RDO, but it signals strongly that more work is needed to challenge cultural values and elevate principles that seek to remove barriers and create new opportunities for individuals. It is not a short term goal and given the strength of long held cultural values it may not even be achievable. Yet if equality is to be a principle for Hong Kong's future democratic aspirations, cultural values may need to be challenged and new values created to meet the needs of a diverse population.

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