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Language policy, ethnicity and education: challenges for Nepalese students in Hong Kong

Issues relating to ethnic and linguistic minority students in the post-colonial context of Hong Kong have received limited attention from policy makers and researchers. This paper highlights the challenges faced by Nepalese students in two Hong Kong schools. Based on data arising from interviews with 28 secondary school students in 2013 and 2014, and an observation of two schools with a sizeable population of Nepalese students over a period of more than two years, this paper investigates how students handle the experiences of learning in an environment where English is the medium of instruction, and spoken Cantonese and written Chinese are the main modes of communication for school management. Analysis of the data suggests that ethnic and linguistic minority students face inequities in schools due to neglect of attention to their overall educational development, discrimination in the school settings, and lack of opportunities to maintain their own heritage language and identity. The paper concludes by proposing an alternative model of multilingual education for ethnic minority students that has potential to redress the balance.

Keywords: Nepalese, ethnicity, language policy, Hong Kong, minorities, identity

Introduction

Language and ethnicity are intricately connected and education is a site for powerful groups to exert their domination and control over minority groups (May, 2012). Language policy in education allows scope for these dominant groups to inculcate their cultural and linguistic norms in others (Bourdieu, 1991). Studies in various contexts confirm that such policies have a strong, negative impact on educational equity for children from minority ethnic and linguistic groups (Tollefson & Tsui, 2004; 2014;

Gill, 2009; Alidou, 2009). Students may face challenges in issues of equity such as accessing ‘quality education [...], literacy, textbooks’ as well as ‘assessments’ (Tollefson & Tsui, 2014, p. 189), in particular for the children who have different linguistic practices at home and in other social settings. The impact of a language-in-education policy is experienced most by the ethnic minority students in schools where they have to either switch to a second language or a foreign language as the medium of their overall learning. In some contexts, ethnic minority students are also socially identified as culturally deficit beings due to the imposition of dominant linguistic and cultural practices within the school settings (May, 2012). This inequitable situation leads to another more fundamental problem, that is, a crisis of identity (Choi, 2017). The aim of our study is to examine the experience of ethnic minority students in schools with particular reference to language-in-education policies and practices, and the impacts these have on equity, educational opportunity and self-identity.

The setting for the study is Hong Kong. As a British colony from 1842 until 1997, when it was retroceded to China, Hong Kong was transformed from a fishing community by an influx of immigrants. While the majority of the newcomers were Chinese, immigration by Europeans, South Asians, South-East Asians and people from other regions in the British Empire was a feature of colonial times, and, in recent decades, the growing prosperity of the city has led to further arrivals. Socially, the immigrants are diverse: those from developed countries have tended to be located at the higher end of socio-economic scale (and are often referred to as ‘expatriates’), while another group comprise migrant workers (such as domestic helpers) who do not usually bring their families to settle. Those who have settled in Hong Kong (in some cases for several generations) from South Asia and South-East Asia are often labelled ‘ethnic minorities’ or ‘linguistic minorities’, and have been reported to encounter

discrimination and barriers to accessing education, employment, accommodation and social welfare (Social Work Department at Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2005). According to 2016 figures (Census and Statistics Department, 2017), Filipinos (184,081) and Indonesians (153,299) are the largest minority groups, followed by Whites (58,209), Indians (36,342), Nepalese (25,472), Pakistani (18,094), Thai (10,215) and Japanese (9,976). This paper focuses on the Nepalese community, which settled in Hong Kong mainly a result of their association with the Gurkha Regiment in the British Army, and of whom approximately 2,200 are of school age. It investigates the challenges that these students face in mainstream schools—those governed by the Education Bureau—in Hong Kong.

The particular nature of the colonial and post-colonial arrangements mean that Hong Kong governments before and after 1997 have taken into account extraneous factors in language and language-in-education policies. The colonial government had to consider the respective merits of English (the imperial language) and Cantonese (the variety of Chinese spoken in Hong Kong), while the post-colonial government has felt the need to incorporate Putonghua (also called Mandarin, the standard variety of Chinese in the People's Republic of China) with Cantonese and English (which has retained its value because of its predominance as an international language). The presence of these three languages at the core of the school curriculum has reduced the scope for attention to the other languages that have acquired critical mass in Hong Kong. Both the colonial and post-colonial governments have made minor provisions for ethnic minority groups in the school curriculum. For instance, students were able to study Urdu, Hindi, French and other languages as an elective in colonial times, while the post-colonial government has made somewhat belated efforts to address the barriers set up by its decision to make native-speaker Chinese a core subject in its curriculum

reforms, such as by developing support for learning Chinese as a second or foreign language and allowing students to take Urdu, Hindi, Japanese, Spanish, French or German as part of the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education.

The top-down nature of language policies in education in Hong Kong has exacerbated challenges and tensions for ethnic minority students in aspects such as their overall educational development, racial and cultural discrimination, and the maintenance of their own heritage language and identity. Until recently, those wishing to study in the mainstream education system in Hong Kong would have been encouraged to attend one of a handful of ‘designated’ schools set up to cater for them. The label was removed in 2013 over concerns that it might be considered discriminatory. The schools that the students now attend are former designated schools or some that, due to falling rolls with the declining birthrate in Hong Kong, have identified the enrolment of minority students as a means of avoiding closure.

In this paper, we investigate these challenges and tensions by drawing upon Nepalese students’ narratives and researcher field notes. We conclude by suggesting ways in which policy makers and educators might be more accommodating to the cultural and linguistic practices as well as the needs of the ethnic minority students.

Equity and language-in-education policy research

Bourdieu (1991) argues that language policies are designed with a motive of political or ethnic/linguistic unification that is destined to establish the ‘relations of linguistic domination’ (p.46), which tends to cause inequities in education and social wellbeing among the students from linguistic minority groups (May, 2012). In many countries, the language policies in education contribute to the perpetuation of various forms of inequities among linguistic minority students (Tollefson & Tsui, 2014). To combat this

trend, educational equity and access of the students from diverse linguistic and ethnic backgrounds have become priorities for major international organisations such as UNESCO. For instance, the Education for All agenda called for equity to be measured based on the learning achievements and graduation rates of students from linguistic minority groups (UNESCO, 1990).

Societies transitioning to post-colonial self-government have often instigated initiatives to formulate particular language-in-education policies to address the ‘inequities’ in education arising from the colonial era, and such policies typically include provision for languages used by students from politically and linguistically marginalised groups (see Tollefson & Tsui, 2014; Alidou, 2009; Gill, 2009). The colonial language would often be replaced as the medium of instruction (MoI) by a language of national unity or by a range of local languages. However, the forces of globalisation represent a pressure to strengthen students’ proficiency in English, local and/or minority languages come under threat from national and international languages, and concomitant community aspirations to allow their children to access dominant languages for the social, economic and political capital that they bring (Alidou, 2009; Gill, 2009). Assimilationist or integrationist language-in-education policies tend to disregard the cultural and linguistic sensitivities of the minority students, and inequities often create ethnic tensions in some contexts such as in parts of China (see Sunuodula et al., 2015; Yi & Adamson, 2017; Tollefson & Tsui, 2014). Sunuodula et al. (2015) show that the promotion of Mandarin Chinese as a national language and also a language of instruction in mainland China has threatened the linguistic identity of the Uyghur communities and further marginalised the Uyghur minority students by developing a curriculum with high standards for English language education in a region that lacked competent teachers.

However, the model described by Sunuodula et al. (2015) represents the ‘weak’ end of a continuum depicted by Adamson and Feng (2015) based on the findings of a project carried out over six years in nine key minority regions of China. The continuum covers four major models (Table 1) adopted by ethnic minority schools in the regions. The first two, namely Accretive and Balanced, are effective models that are likely to bring about additive bilingualism or trilingualism, as well as contributing to the maintenance of a strong ethnic identity, while the other two, Transitional and Depreciative, would probably result in subtractive bilingualism or trilingualism, assimilation rather than diversity low self-esteem, loss of cultural or ethnic identity, and thus further marginalisation.

[INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

The approaches to language-in-education policies have been highly contentious in Hong Kong since the early colonial days (see Bray & Koo, 2004; Morrison & Lui, 2000; Tollefson & Tsui, 2004; 2014; Poon, 2004). Despite protestations from the first Inspector of Schools, Frederick Stewart, English as the medium of instruction (EMI) was introduced into government schools (Bray & Koo, 2004; Morrison & Lui, 2000). When migration from southern China accelerated in the mid-20th century and industrialisation prompted a shift from elite to mass education, the government accepted that Cantonese should be used as the MoI in the majority of schools. However, their implementation of the policy was half-hearted and under-resourced, and EMI schools maintained greater prestige than their Cantonese counterparts. Immediately after Hong Kong was returned to China in 1997, the new government announced that mother-tongue (i.e. Cantonese) teaching would become the norm, within an overall goal

of fostering biliteracy (in written standard Chinese and English) and trilingualism (spoken Cantonese, Putonghua and English) (Education Commission, 2005). This announcement produced a backlash from parents and schools, resulting in a compromise that 114 mainstream secondary schools (just under 20%) would be allowed to maintain their EMI practices (Kan & Adamson, 2010). During the fierce debate, the Education Commission (2005, p.14) presented some educational justifications for their stance promoting the mother tongue as the medium of education:

Learning through a second language inevitably creates language barriers, the extent of which may vary from student to student. For most students, such barriers may reduce their interest, confidence and effectiveness in learning.

The text above seems to consider written Chinese and spoken Cantonese as the mother tongue and English as a ‘second language’ for students. However, the mother-tongue policy takes no account of the languages of the ethnic minorities or ‘non-Chinese speaking students’, as the government categorises them (Hong Kong Government, 2014; Equal Opportunities Commission, 2011). For many of these students, the limited choice of Cantonese or English—neither of which is their first language—would appear to be discriminatory as harmful for their learning opportunities and, by consequence, life chances. The government seems aware of legal liabilities that might arise from this situation. When a race discrimination ordinance was promulgated, it stated explicitly that the use of a particular MoI in educational establishments would not be ‘construed’ to be a form of racial discrimination (Hong Kong Government, 2008, p. 13).

Growing voices of discontent among ethnic minority groups over the language policy were evident in a campaign in 2014. However, their demands were complex and not entirely coherent across the groups. Divisions in opinions arose concerning the recognition of minority languages in schools, the appropriate MoI for the ethnic

minority students, suitable frameworks to develop the Cantonese competency of the EMI students and the ethnic minority students' access to schools using Cantonese as the medium of instruction (CMI). The official response appeared to be mainly tackling the latter concerns when the Hong Kong government drew up a 'Chinese as a Second Language Framework' by which ethnic minority students' access to CMI schools would be facilitated by a process of 'migration':

Most South Asian ethnic minority residents call Hong Kong home. *To integrate into the community and develop their careers, they must improve their ability to listen to, speak, read and write Chinese.* [...] Annual funding of approximately \$200 million for intensive teaching [...] to improve the Chinese foundation of ethnic minority students at junior primary levels to *facilitate their migration to the mainstream Chinese language classes.*

(Hong Kong Government, 2014, p. 22-23; our emphasis)

This text articulates two contradictory messages. While the government acknowledges that the South Asian ethnic minorities view Hong Kong as their home, the government does not consider them to be integral members of the community, unless they improve their spoken and written competence in Chinese. However, this competence does not seem to be sufficient alone: ethnic minority students should also undertake their learning experiences through CMI. This policy objective sharply contradicts the report of the Education Commission (2005) cited above and suggests that the postcolonial government of Hong Kong has (wittingly or unwittingly) has adopted differentiated, inequitable and ethnically discriminatory policy strategies for the Cantonese-speaking ethnic Chinese students and non-Cantonese speaking minority students. With this in mind we present the challenges and difficulties of the Nepalese linguistic minority students in education, particularly in their overall educational development,

interpersonal relationships and language identity, and propose a trilingual education model for ethnic minority students' education that could address these challenges.

The study

This qualitative study was undertaken in two secondary schools (referred to by the pseudonyms, Chung Hing School and Ming Hing School) that have a large number of Nepalese students (almost 40% of the school roll). This study involved a 'family of methods' (O'Reilly, 2012, p 11) in which participant observation, conversations and interviews were conducted, to learn about the use of language not only inside the classroom, but also in various spaces and activities within the institutional settings, and how it impacted upon the students' perceptions of their education, social relationships and learning opportunities. Data collection was undertaken between 2013 and 2016 by one of the authors, Researcher A (a Nepalese by ethnicity, a speaker of Nepali, English and Cantonese, and a long-term resident of Hong Kong). He observed students' everyday language practices, community participation; and interactions with the families and teachers. He took field notes of such observations and interacted with the participants through social media such as Facebook, using the languages that they chose.

The schools were purposefully selected on the grounds that they had, under the previous policy, operated as designated schools. The two schools were previously CMI schools, but due to the demographic changes in the early 2000s, they had introduced some EMI classes. While these institutions had students from diverse ethnic backgrounds, Chinese students (and teachers) now dominated the school demography. The students, comprising 18 females and 10 males from Form 2 to Form 5, were randomly selected by the Nepalese teaching assistants who facilitated this study with the permission of the school principals. All were Nepalese students studying in EMI

classes; one of them had previously attended a CMI primary school. Interviews were conducted in two phases (May to July 2013 and April to June 2014), based on open-ended and unstructured questions about the students' preferences for language education, their views and perceptions about the use of different languages in the school and their views about their own educational wellbeing in the linguistic environment. The interviews and interactions took place mostly in mixed code between Nepali and English according to the preferences of the participating students; five of them chose to speak in English throughout an hour-long interview. The interview recordings in mixed code were transcribed and translated into English, while the interviews or interactions in English were transcribed verbatim for analysis and interpretation.

Analysis and interpretation were governed by the research questions, and the responses from the students were coded inductively and grouped around three main thematic categories that emerged. 'Educational challenges' include the learning barriers arising from institutional language policies and practices. The second theme is 'interpersonal challenges', and covers tensions in ethnic relationships, and the students' perceptions of the way school authority figures interacted with them and managed their conflicts with the Chinese students. Thirdly, 'challenges in maintaining the heritage language' encompasses participants' desires and perceived threats to their ethnic identity associated with lack of competence in the Nepali language.

Educational challenges

The struggles of ethnic minority students to learn through a language that is not their mother tongue are reflected by Kina as she recalls her experiences at a CMI primary school:

I never understand the lesson at the Chinese school, all the subjects were in Chinese. I still remember all I pass is Eng in [primary school] though the English

level isn't any high nor my English level there. Even though the environment were so intense with books, I didn't study at all. I never understand what was meant to study, or get good grades nor the teachers or anyone there cared about my grades [...].

(Kina, Facebook interaction)

In recent years, an increasing number of CMI schools have started accepting students from ethnic minority families, motivated either by the subsidies associated with the language education policy of the government of Hong Kong or by the lower birthrate that threatened the viability of some schools. Many of these students are able to speak little Cantonese, but are often put in classes in which Cantonese-speaking Chinese students form the large majority. Even when the schools offer an EMI track, Nepalese students reported difficulties in understanding lessons in various content subjects such as Mathematics, Science or Liberal Studies, largely due to the teachers' lack of competence in English.

Daha- When I was in Nepal, we needed to study Nepali subject compulsory. I studied it since my childhood I am good at it [...]. Here the teachers cannot explain properly and that's why we have difficulties in understanding. They can't explain properly like the meaning, the difficult meaning [...].

Researcher A: Uh-huh.

Suchi: When we ask questions, they can't explain properly. I mean like the teachers do not understand even if we ask them sometimes.

(Interaction with Daha and Suchi, Chung Hing School, 24 May 2013)

The EMI streams are unable to offer the Nepalese students with as wide a choice of elective subjects as for the CMI students:

About teachers, like [...] that subject teacher is like, little, some teacher cannot explain properly/ so we don't understand. Now we are going in Form 4 in our school and we have to choose subjects and Chinese can choose more subjects and we can choose only few and those subjects which we like are in their part, most of it.

(Interview with Suma, Chung Hing School, 21 May 2013)

While many schools in Hong Kong do not employ ethnic minority teachers, some schools, such as Chung Hing School, seem to be acknowledging the difficulties faced by the ethnic minority students by making use of community liaison officers or teaching assistants from ethnic minority backgrounds in assisting the students in the classroom.

Researcher A: Do you find a Nepalese teaching assistant helpful in the class?

Ami: Yes, it does help because like I said some teachers really can't communicate with us in English. Then, we can, you know, we can ask. If we have a same language, then I think we can have a better understanding. While they are teaching us in English, if they can't really teach us properly, I can ask the Nepalese teacher, and he can make us understand what is happening.

(Interview with Ami, Chung Hing School, 21 May 2013)

When this interview was conducted, Ami was studying in Form Three. She was one of the brighter group of students in Chung Hing School, but she moved to a fully EMI school the following year. She was able to pass HKDSE with good grades and was admitted to an undergraduate programmes at a reputable university in 2016.

Interpersonal challenges

Most students in the study expressed their sense of discrimination perpetrated by Chinese students and teachers in the school arising, in particular, from the fact that they did not speak much Cantonese or the teachers' failure to engage with them when they

spoke in English. According to 19 of the interviewees, school principals and teachers often distributed important information in Cantonese, which the students perceived as a form of racial discrimination:

In the assemblies, so far I know, [...] it's been five years I have been studying in this school, I have never seen our principal giving her speech in English. [...] Whenever our principal starts speaking, she always gives speech in Chinese. [...] Sometimes we also want to listen to what the principal says, right? Like what things, what knowledge she is distributing—only the Chinese students know. We never know. Like, in this case, sometimes we feel discriminated.

(Interview with Sarda, Chung Hing School, 21 May 2013; some parts our translation from Nepalese)

Sarda came from Nepal after completing her primary education. At the time of the interview, she was in Form Five in Chung Hing School. Students' narratives and field observations revealed that most of the multimodal discourses in this school are conducted in spoken Cantonese and written Chinese. The use of English is limited to teaching and individual interactions with non-Chinese speakers.

Moreover, 18 students reported that the Chinese principal and teachers tended to have low expectations of the ethnic minority students.

Pasan: The principal doesn't understand what we can do because they think that non-Chinese are not highly that capable of what we can. They always think that we are lower than them because [...] the activities, facilities most of the time they do for Chinese students. [...]

Aman: Because they sometimes discriminate us. They don't think we are good enough as Chinese [...]

(Interview with Pasan and Aman, Ming Hing School, 3 July 2013)

They complained that teachers often favoured the Chinese students whenever there were disputes or misunderstandings:

Pasan: To say about discrimination, like, there was once almost a big fight with the Chinese students because when [...] our boys (also me, our sisters) were practicing band music, [...] the Chinese boys were, like, discriminating us, bullying, like. [...] But we were punished—but we didn't make mistakes.

(Interview with Pasan, Ming Hing School, 3 July 2013)

During informal conversations, the Nepalese students revealed that they do not have much communication with the Chinese teachers, and the teachers often interact with the Chinese students in Cantonese. Pasan and Aman suspected that the Chinese students might have told lies to the teachers in Cantonese and that might have prompted the teachers to punish the ethnic minority students for the incident. Field observations noted that Chinese teachers often targeted the non-Chinese students for disciplinary action in respect of the ways they were wearing the school uniform, the ways they were standing during the assemblies and other rituals, and also the ways the students were behaving.

Today, Class 3C comprising all the students from Nepalese, Pakistani and Indian backgrounds were punished for what the disciplinary teacher complained their improper ways of wearing the uniform. The students were asked to stand behind after the assembly was over. Chinese students were led to their classrooms by their class teachers.

(Field note, Ming Hing School, 27 February 2014)

The teacher in charge of discipline then lectured the students on the dress code for about half an hour, keeping them standing in the playground. The students murmured and frowned with frustration over this treatment. After the students were asked to go to their

classrooms, they were heard expressing their anger among themselves in Hindi, interpreting such treatment by the teacher as a form of discrimination because they were not Chinese or did not speak Cantonese to argue with the teacher. In their experience, the Chinese students would often argue with the teachers in Cantonese when targeted in such a way.

Here, teachers give us more punishments. Chinese students disobey the lines, when we buy the foods, but teachers blame us for that and punish us. I feel that teachers discriminate Nepalese students in this school.

(Interview with Yoja, Ming Hing School, 2 July 2013)

Most of the extra-curricular activities were observed being conducted in Cantonese, thereby excluding the ethnic minority students:

I first arrived at the school at lunch time today. A group of Chinese students were rehearsing a band show at the covered canteen area. A teacher, probably a music teacher, was standing by and watching their rehearsal, perhaps in order to guide them. Few Chinese students were watching the rehearsal, but no NCS [non-Chinese speaking] students could be seen around.

(Field note, Chung Hing School, 21 May 2013)

Schools may also exert linguistic domination in the process of their communication with the families:

A Nepalese parent of a student from Ming Hing School told me in a dinner meeting today that she transferred her child from a CMI school to an EMI school because the CMI school was made her like 'a crow in the fog'. All the letters, notices and leaflets were sent in Chinese, and these parents did not understand anything what's going on in the school.

(Field note, Ming Hing School, 20 December 2015)

The families felt unable to guide their children on what to do or to participate in many of the school activities, which might disadvantage the students.

Challenges in maintaining the heritage language

During the study, Researcher A was requested by the Nepalese students to teach them the Nepali language.

Pratima: Sir, will you teach us Nepali language during summer?

Kina: Sir, are you going to teach us Nepali?

Researcher A: Why do you want to learn Nepali language?

Pratima: The reason why I want learn Nepali is because last time we were studying, and our grandparents are Nepali.

(Interaction with Jankee, Kina, Pratima and Aman, Ming Hing School, 2 July 2014)

This interaction was recorded during lunchtime at a restaurant near the school. These students spoke in mixed code (English and Nepali) as they did not have sufficient competence in Nepali. The participants' use of mixed code itself suggests that these students are struggling to maintain their heritage language. Pratima intimates when requesting Researcher A to teach them Nepali that she wishes to resume her studies of the language, which would enable her to communicate better with her grandparents.

Some of the students felt that they were forced to acknowledge the prevailing linguistic hierarchy in which they have to learn English, oral Cantonese and written Chinese, while others lamented the lack of opportunities to learn their heritage language. In the following excerpt, Anita expresses the tensions in recognising the value of her heritage language:

Nepali is our own language. Our language is important, but I think we study in English here. We need Chinese. Like, it's difficult if we don't know English [...] Nepali language has no use at all in Hong Kong, because we don't study in Nepali.

(Interview with Anita, Ming Hing School, 3 July 2013)

Anita's recognition of the importance of her own language, on the one hand, and its discursive de-legitimisation on the other, represents another form of inequity that the language policy context creates. All the respondents expressed reservations about learning Cantonese, especially if it meant losing their heritage language.

Sheya: Because it's our mother tongue and Chinese, we might move to some other country. Then Chinese won't be that useful.

Researcher A: Yea.

Sheya: But then, for us Nepali, it's our mother tongue. So we should learn it.

(Interaction with Sheya, Ming Hing School, 5 July 2013)

One student, Sarda, mentioned that teachers often shout at them if they use Nepali in the classroom:

Sarda: We speak in Nepali a lot [laughs], [...] English is when we speak with our teachers and when we go to shops we speak in English or when we have to do some inquiries, then we speak in English. With friends, we speak in Nepali.

Researcher A: How much Nepali do you use during your lessons?

Sarda: Uh, sometimes we speak in Nepali, then the teacher says, 'Hey I am here' and we start to speak in English [laughs].

(Interview with Sarda, Chung Hing School, 24 May 2013)

Kina labelled the policy of the Hong Kong government a 'dehumanising' process:

We don't get opportunity to choose the language that we want to study. Yea, we are just focusing on Chinese and English but then they need, like, Chinese. ... [I]f we are spending our life in Hong Kong, then it's important, but we also want to learn Nepali. It's like causing or dehumanising people. Language itself is ok but people are forcing us.

(Interaction with Kina, Ming Hing School, 2 July 2014)

Other participants were outspoken in recognising the importance of their language, and demanded their rights to learn it:

Researcher A: If you have to ask the school to teach you another language in addition to English and Cantonese, which one would you prefer?

Jankee: Mother language.

Researcher A: Why?

Jankee: Because, look, Cantonese people in Hong Kong are learning their Cantonese mother tongue. We are here and can we also not learn our own mother language? We should, because they think that their mother tongue is important and that's why they are learning it, and Nepali is our mother language and we should also be given chance to learn it, right? That's why this school should also provide lessons of Nepali language subject. [...] For example, they should not force people to learn Chinese/ English or Nepali.

(Interview with Jankee, Ming Hing School, 6 April 2014)

Sumi reported that Nepalese students might ridicule their friends who used Chinese or English:

Nepalese boys and girls, they can speak Chinese very well. Sometime when other friends speak Chinese, it makes me laugh, like if there are two Nepalese friends. If they communicate in Chinese, it looks funny because I feel like, if

they know their mother tongue, then why should they use other language? And sometime they speak in English, so sometimes, it makes me laugh.

(Interview with Sumi, Chung Hing School, 23 May 2013)

Sumi's comment suggests that ethnolinguistic identity is strongly related to everyday language practices. The majority of respondents said that they used Nepali, probably mixed codes, predominantly with their friends inside and outside of the school, and with their family members.

Researcher A: Which language do you prefer when you talk with your friends?

Yoja: Uh, Nepali

Researcher A: What may be the proportion of various languages used by you?

Yoja: Nepali 85 %. We talk in English sometimes with friends and sisters like 10% and Chinese around 5%.

Researcher A: Which language do you use with your parents?

Yoja: I talk in Nepali only.

(Interview with Yoja, Ming Hing School, 2 July 2013)

Redressing the balance

Our findings, albeit based on a small study and the perceptions of one group of respondents, point to three different forms of inequities created by the language-in-education policy in Hong Kong: educational, interpersonal and linguistic. The policy, supported by an excision from the Race Discrimination Ordinance, appears to be guided more by the motive of imposing a Chinese ethnolinguistic identity on the ethnic and linguistic minority students than creating conducive environments for equitable yet diverse learning opportunities for all students in Hong Kong. The impacts were reported by the participants as negatively affecting their general educational development, their right to equal treatment, and the maintenance of their cultural heritage and identity.

How could the situation be rebalanced? One approach could be to develop a different model of multilingual education. At present, Hong Kong's mainstream schools provide two options, learning through the medium of either Chinese or English, with little space for other languages to be taught or used as the MoI. For the Nepalese students, this model is akin to an amalgamation of the Depreciative and Balanced Models in Table 1. The Depreciative Model is the more powerful, in that Nepali (the L1) is rarely present in the official discourse of the classroom and school community, Chinese (L2 or L3) is predominant and English (L3 or L2) is provided according to the (limited) resources at the school's disposal. The Balanced Model is evident in the offering of two strands, CMI and EMI, although this choice does not permit the option of Nepali as a medium of instruction (other than some contributions from a teaching assistant). A better accommodation of the students' aspirations might be achieved by offering a combination of the Accretive and Balanced Models. A school with ethnic minority students could provide a choice in primary years between Chinese as the MoI (with the minority language and English taught as a language) and the minority language as the MoI (with English, Cantonese and the written form of Modern Standard Chinese taught as subjects). Students could then move to CMI or EMI secondary schools, which might also offer their minority language and culture as a subject. Such a model would open up different pathways for the students and would address, to some extent, the three areas of challenges identified in this study. It would allow learning opportunities through their ethnic language, at least in the early phases of schooling, thereby facilitating the accrual of the cognitive and affective benefits of multilingualism (Adamson & Feng, 2015). An environment that encourages multilingualism has potential for enhancing intercultural understanding and might lessen the potential for

miscommunication or unfair treatment. It would also allow the ethnic minority students to maintain their language and heritage.

Changing the model would need significant corresponding shifts in mindset, investment of resources and systemic support, as well as some difficult decisions as to which ethnic minority language(s) can be offered by a school. Involvement from the ethnic minority community would be very important. Systemic support includes the preparation of well-trained teachers (including teachers from the ethnic minority communities) to work in multilingual contexts, and the development of the requisite curriculum materials. Political support could also be given by an amendment to the relevant clause in the Race Discrimination Ordinance. It may be optimistic to expect such moves to take place in the near future, but it is desirable to have evidence-based alternatives in mind should the government and other stakeholders wish to promote more inclusive approaches to multilingual education that value ethnic minority students, their language and cultural heritage, rather than portraying them as a problem.

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Table 1. Summary of the major models found in the trilingualism-in-China project (adapted from Adamson & Feng (2014))

Models	Aims	Key Features	Likely Outcomes
Accretive	<p>Maintain strong first language (L1) and ethnic identity</p> <p>Develop strong second language (L2) competence</p> <p>Strive for peer-appropriate competence in third language (L3)</p>	<p>Strong ethnolinguistic vitality in L1 and minority student domination in school</p> <p>L1 as MoI for all or most school subjects at least in primary years</p> <p>Strong presence of L1 culture in school environment</p> <p>L2 and L3 are promoted robustly as school subjects</p>	<p>Strong competence in L1 and strong sense of ethnic identity</p> <p>Where favourable conditions exist: strong performance in all school subjects; additive trilingualism</p>
Balanced	<p>Develop both strong L1 and L2</p> <p>Promote ethnic harmony</p>	<p>Mixed majority and minority groups</p> <p>L1 and L2 as MoI in primary years</p> <p>Strong presence of L1 and L2 cultures in school environment</p> <p>L3 is less stressed but could be introduced depending on resources</p>	<p>Strong competence in L1 and L2</p> <p>Strong performance in school subjects</p> <p>More likely to foster balanced bilingualism than balanced trilingualism</p>
Transitional	<p>Shift to L2 as MoI</p> <p>Assimilate pupils into the mainstream</p>	<p>May be mixed majority and minority groups or a single minority group where ethnolinguistic vitality is weak</p> <p>L2 emphasised in curricula and in classrooms</p> <p>L1 only deemed useful as a stepping stone</p> <p>L3 may be offered where conditions exist.</p>	<p>Acquiring (limited) competence in L2 at the expense of L1 (leading to subtractive bi- or trilingualism)</p> <p>Poor performance in school subjects including L3 because no strong language can be used for academic thinking</p>
Depreciative	<p>Establish (usually covertly) monolingualism in L2 with maybe a small amount of L3</p> <p>Linguistic and cultural assimilation</p>	<p>Remote places with weak ethnolinguistic vitality</p> <p>L1 ignored and L2 used as the only MoI</p> <p>Minority school with mixed minority groups or a single minority group of pupils</p> <p>Difficult to offer L3</p>	<p>Competence in L2 at the expense of L1 (leading to subtractive bi- or trilingualism)</p> <p>Little chance to develop bilingual or trilingual competence</p>

NB: Apart from L1, L2 and L3, the ethnic minority students may also be competent in other languages and dialects.