

# EdUHK Forum on Inclusive and Equitable Education for All in Hong Kong

## Briefing Paper No. 1

**The Education University of Hong Kong**

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EdUHK UNESCO Chair  
Minorities Project

## Summary

Minority language students face a number of challenges from the current education system. Whilst the number of minority language students, including South Asians (e.g. Pakistani, Nepalese and Indian) and Southeast Asians (e.g. Filipino, Thai, Indonesian) attending school full-time in Hong Kong has increased since 1997, the number of schools offering English as a medium of instruction has reduced.

Many minority language students attend government schools where Cantonese is the medium of instruction or attend schools (formerly known as “designated” schools) where they are streamed into English-medium of instruction classes. Provision for learning Cantonese as a second language at such schools is often limited. This places minority language students at a disadvantage when applying for jobs and higher education (academic and vocational) in Hong Kong.

This forum series was developed by the EdUHK as a way for stakeholders to meet to discuss how education can be improved for minority language students and the role of the University as the trainer of many of Hong Kong’s teachers.

This series of Briefing Papers presents the findings of these Forums.

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Views expressed are those of the authors.

# **Prioritization of issues relating to the education of minority language students in Hong Kong**

## **Introduction**

This Forum is the first in a proposed series organized by the UNESCO Chair in TVET and Lifelong learning of the Education University of Hong Kong (EdUHK). It was co-organised with the EdUHK Centre for Governance and Citizenship and Yew Chung Community College. It took place on 30<sup>th</sup> October 2015 at the EdUHK.

One key area was the role of the EdUHK in enhancing pre-service and in-service teachers' cultural sensitivity and competence in handling classes of students with diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds.

The Forum brought together fifteen relevant stakeholders and specialists from the EdUHK and minority and concern groups.

The Forum began with a keynote presentation by Professor Kerry Kennedy (EdUHK).

## **Background**

The number of minority language students, including South Asians (e.g. Pakistani, Nepalese and Indian) and Southeast Asians (e.g. Filipino, Thai, Indonesian) attending school full-time in Hong Kong has increased since 1997. However, minority language students face a number of challenges from the current education system, including access and language barriers. For instance, the number of schools offering English as a medium of instruction has reduced.

Many minority language students who do not have the socioeconomic means to attend private international schools instead attend government schools where Cantonese is the medium of instruction or attend schools with large concentrations of ethnic minority students. Provisions for learning Cantonese as a second language at such schools are limited. Despite the introduction of the Chinese Language Curriculum Second Language Learning Framework by the Education Bureau in 2014, there are concerns that minority language students do not have enough language support to achieve sufficient levels of Cantonese. This places these students at a disadvantage when applying for jobs and higher education (academic and vocational) courses in Hong Kong, which frequently require a high level of Cantonese.

Aside from Cantonese language proficiency, there are also concerns that these students are further disadvantaged by institutional factors, such as having separate classes from Chinese students. There are also reports of students facing discrimination, feeling isolated and high drop-out rates.

This forum therefore sought to uncover the main concerns surrounding minorities, particularly in education, not only in policy and practice, but in teacher education. Given the Education University of Hong Kong's focus upon teacher training, the forum was a means through which these issues could begin to be addressed, and subsequently feed into teacher education at the University.

## Outcomes

Topics of discussion in the forum focused around language policies in Hong Kong, the need for a policy on multiculturalism by the government, teacher training and sensitivity, and recognition of children's right to education. Areas of consensus amongst the group included the importance of involving the community, embedding diversity within the curriculum, the need for positive student role models, and for greater attention to be paid to students failing. Informal education, such as through sports, was also suggested as a means of boosting interaction and language skills.

Moving forward, the group suggested the need for similar forums in the future with more stakeholders, including the Education Bureau, along with further research investigating factors affecting education for ethnic minority students. This report begins with key points from Professor Kerry Kennedy's keynote presentation, before moving on to key areas of consensus amongst participants.

## Keynote presentation

**Prof. Kerry Kennedy, Director of the Centre for Governance and Citizenship, the Education University of Hong Kong**

### Key points:

- Universities can contribute to the area of ethnic minority education by bringing together research and advocacy, particularly when researchers have a commitment to social justice and equity. This can have an impact on the way that we live and work together.
- There are two ways of exploring issues facing ethnic minority students – looking at students in school and those out of school
- For students in school, policy has tended to focus on Chinese Language education. However research has identified that there are problems not only with Chinese Language education but also with school policy, school practices and schooling processes. There are also ‘move on’ policies where ethnic minority students who do not achieve certain grades are then moved on to other schools, and if they do not achieve certain grades at their next school, they can also be moved on again. These ‘move on’ policies can be quite destructive on the education of young people.
- Ethnic minority students in school often report being more harshly treated (from their perspectives) and punished more by teachers. Many students feel quite isolated and neglected, often because of the way they are allowed to fail. One concern is that students who are dissatisfied with school leave early to start work.
- Schools often find it very difficult to liaise with ethnic minority parents. Despite efforts from the Education Bureau and many committed teachers, many educators do not understand the specific problems facing ethnic minority students, such as why long working hours at a construction site may prevent a father from attending parental meetings.
- Schools and students are embedded in social and institutional contexts. It is crucial to understand how these contexts influence schools and students.
- The first very large institutional context is that ethnic minorities in Hong Kong in general are neither immigrants nor citizens. The term “immigrant” in education policy literature is only applied to immigrants from China and is never applied to ethnic minorities in Hong Kong except when they are illegal, at which point they are then called illegal immigrants.
- The second major institutional context is that multiculturalism is missing from Hong Kong’s policy discourse. The Education Bureau

mentions inclusion, but there is the need to first recognize diversity as a basis for policy on inclusion.

- The third institutional context is that racism is part of Hong Kong's social fabric

#### **How do we move forward?**

- Research in the area of ethnic minority education in Hong Kong is currently under theorised and we need a more sophisticated framework
- Researchers must stop essentialising 'ethnic minorities'; there are many differences between ethnic groups, however there are also enough commonalities amongst groups
- Recognising community, and communities. There is a very close set of connections between different communities, associations and groups, which offer a lot of support to ethnic minorities.
- Establishing research partnerships – with groups represented at the forum, so that we can do research *with* ethnic minority students, not *to* them. It may be that researchers identify different issues to what communities see. For instance, some research within communities show that they have more concerns with the labour market and job transitions, rather than education per se.

## Key areas of consensus

### Curriculum and policy

#### 1. Curriculum relevance

How teachers could be guided to make curriculum more relevant for ethnic minority students was discussed. The advantages of the Hong Kong Diploma for Secondary Education (HKDSE) were extolled by Chura Bahadur Thapa, who had previously taught ethnic minority students. Chura commented upon how well designed the HKDSE is and the flexibility it offered for teachers. Despite this though, the HKDSE Chinese exam remains challenging for students and he believed there needed to be a separate curriculum and language assessment framework for ethnic minority students.

#### 2. Embedding diversity in the curriculum

Chura mentioned that many schools have one-off ‘multicultural days’ where students wear traditional dress, but said that these practices were not considered knowledge in the classroom. There is therefore the need to embed diversity deeply into the curriculum, rather than just ‘showing’ culture through such displays. He also mentioned the various means through which teachers could use the curriculum for students from different communities, such as through movies and books, instead of relying solely on textbooks.

Jan Yumul, who formed a Filipino youth group, Section Juan, also mentioned the role of engaging consulates in developing cultural knowledge and understanding. She cited the Consulate of the Philippines as having tried to break stereotypes regarding domestic helpers and had organized a Hong Kong Philippine film festival, which had shown Filipino films and translated them into Chinese. Her youth group was also collaborating with the Consulate to arrange talks on Filipino culture and to write a book tracing Filipino history, particularly in Hong Kong. The role that other consulates could play in embedding diversity into school curriculum was discussed. Jan felt that consulates would help youth “have a three-dimensional way of looking at their own community”.

#### 3. Revive institutional knowledge that has been lost

Schools such as Delia Memorial School were cited as having developed a lot of experience teaching ethnic minority students. Chura however expressed concern that many similar schools had begun developing specific knowledge and practices for ethnic minorities but that these were beginning to be lost with policy changes.

#### 4. Ideology of assimilation

All participants shared concerns over a lack of multiculturalism in Hong Kong and the prevailing ideology of assimilation. Holing Yip, of UNISON, mentioned that Hong Kong’s educational policy aimed to make all students as similar as possible. Likewise, Chura raised concerns that the Education Bureau’s policy

referred numerous times to ‘migrating’ ethnic minority students into classes with mainstream Chinese students.

How best to address assimilation was discussed, along with the need to research other models that might promote the kind of multiculturalism that could be adapted and learnt from. Jan Yumul mentioned the importance of students maintaining and having a sense of pride over their ethnic identity, as well as being proud of being in Hong Kong, rather than forcing everyone to assimilate.

Many participants hoped that Hong Kong would embrace multiculturalism, but others such as Dr Victor Ng, of the Education University, mentioned that multiculturalism was seen to be less important in the public discourse, compared to other topics such as relations between Hong Kong and Mainland China. Holing concluded by asking if multiculturalism was not possible, what could be done within the current framework, without jeopardizing the ultimate goal of a diverse Hong Kong.

#### 5. Affirmative action programmes

The need to explore affirmative action programmes was discussed, particularly ones that create consistent standards that allow opportunities for the diversity of individuals, rather than creating a ‘subclass’ or categorising some individuals as ‘lower’ in status.

### Language

#### 6. The issues around identity and language

The issues around identity and language were seen to be crucial by all participants, particularly with regards to parental choice for medium of instruction and schools. The rights of the child to their sense of identity, access to their own language and access to languages of power was agreed to be essential. All felt that children should have the right to access languages of power and high status, which includes English, Cantonese and Putonghua. Acknowledging the diversity of each child was key to Paul Tarrant, Chairman of the Yuen Long Minorities Parents’ Concern Group, who cautioned against the current approach of creating policies and teaching based upon fear.

Concerns that ethnic minority students were being pushed to learn Chinese and to attend schools using Chinese as their medium of instruction were discussed, particularly for primary schools, along with the difficulties many ethnic minority students face from learning in Chinese.

#### 7. The lack of sophistication regarding language policies in Hong Kong

Participants in the forum referred to a lack of clarity and sophistication in language policies in Hong Kong. The need for biliteracy and trilingualism was emphasized, but that instead of aiming for total trilingualism, there should be a balance of languages to suit individual lifestyles, situations and experiences.



Holing in particular felt there had been a lack of a serious discussion in Hong Kong on the status of English, Cantonese and Putonghua. UNISON had observed that there is an expectation in Hong Kong that individuals know Cantonese and if they do not, they frequently miss out. Whilst Jan Gube, the research officer for Section Juan, believed that many ethnic minorities could be successful without knowing Cantonese or Putonghua and that other skills were more important, Deepen Nebhwani, an ethnic minority student, argued that that was only the case for well-established individuals.

There was discussion over how language policies should be implemented and how languages should be taught within schools, for instance over the use of Cantonese pinyin. Deepen Nebhwani cited the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages as one model to borrow from to enable students to be proficient at a particular language level.

### **Working with communities and parents**

#### **8. Working on ways to build engagement with local communities**

This was mentioned throughout the forum, and reflected Professor Kennedy's point regarding establishing research partnerships with communities, so that research can be done with ethnic minorities rather than to them.

As Chura mentioned, this also means acknowledging the diversity within each community. He cited the Nepalese community as having very diverse views, expectations and beliefs, particularly about what language children should learn and what language to learn in.

#### **9. Acknowledging the role of parents in the education pathways of their children**

Paul Tarrant stated that before making educational changes, the government and schools should consult parents as to whether such changes are acceptable. He firmly believed in the right of the parent to such information and to choose their child's education. Many participants also agreed that there was little to no dissemination of information to parents and that better communication between schools and parents was necessary.

Phyllis Cheung, the director of UNISON, felt that many ethnic minority parents did not understand the Hong Kong education system well and many did not realise the importance of learning Cantonese. UNISON had conducted a lot of parent outreach and workshops to explain to parents about the different educational systems, as Phyllis felt that many did not realise that once a school had been chosen, a particular path had been set for their child and it would be hard to change. Jan Gube also agreed with this and argued parents needed to know what paths their children could follow afterwards, including possible career paths.

## Student and teachers

### 10. Paying greater attention to students who are failing

This reflected Professor Kennedy's concern that poor records were kept in schools, particularly for students who had been 'moved on' from other schools. Participants agreed there was a need to ensure that every child received the kind of help that they require. One such help is providing encouragement to ethnic minority students who may have been separated into lower classes. Deepen mentioned at his previous school, students were categorised in A to D classes, with Class A and B students going on to further education whereas D class students having very low scores. Such students he said received little encouragement and were not told of the importance of learning.

### 11. Giving a voice to marginalised teachers

Dr Celeste Yuen, from the Education University, and Chura, both mentioned that many teachers of ethnic minority students in Hong Kong had difficult jobs, facing different student needs. Holing added that many teachers felt overwhelmed and overworked. All participants agreed on the importance of examining ethnic minority education from a classroom perspective, and to give a voice to marginalized teachers, particularly to those advocating for diversity within schools. Dr Manynooch Faming of Yew Chung Community College, mentioned that time constraints meant many teachers had to focus more on giving tests and exams, rather than teaching towards diversity.

### 12. Presenting and celebrating positive student role models

Dr Celeste Yuen commented that Deepen Nebhwani served as an excellent role model to other ethnic minority students. He spent nine years at a school with a high concentration of ethnic minority students, before moving to Diocesan Boys School (DBS). Deepen mentioned that at his previous school, he had little chance to interact with classmates from different nationalities, particularly local Chinese students. He felt that he had never understood the importance of learning, particularly of learning Putonghua, until he moved schools. Deepen suggested encouraging students to be involved at schools. He also mentioned the importance of helping to break glass ceilings that ethnic minority children are given, and to inspire them to value education and succeed. He felt this also included explaining different educational options to students and to give them the power to choose between such options

Dr Celeste Yuen agreed these steps were key to encouraging ethnic minority youth to have a future in Hong Kong. She had encountered ethnic minority students who were content with their life and felt that if they didn't have a future in Hong Kong, that they could go overseas. Yet she felt it was crucial for such children to be encouraged to nurture their specific talents and to create a future for them in Hong Kong, through Deepen's example.

13. Using informal education to break down barriers between ethnic minority and Chinese students

Sports were one such means discussed to help boost integration between ethnic minority and Chinese students and form friendships between different cultural groups. Holing Yip said that there were some institutional barriers to doing this, and that UNISON had initiated programs such as basketball, pen pal programs and marathons, which had varying degrees of success. A few participants mentioned how ethnic minority students tended to be isolated from Chinese students and that it was only after secondary school did students begin to have Chinese peers and so sports could provide a platform for students to meet after secondary school.

14. The role of the Education University to enhance teacher education and cultural sensitivity

Dr Celeste Yuen mentioned the role of the Education University as a teacher education institute, to implement measures to improve teacher education for ethnic minorities, including cultural sensitivity and helping trainee teachers to build relevant cultural knowledge within their classrooms. This was echoed by Dr Manynooch Faming who stated the importance of educating trainee teachers about issues such as multiculturalism and racism. Jan Gube also called on the need for educators to look inward and try to situate themselves in the social world of ethnic minority children, beginning by confronting their own Chinese ethnic identity.

Holing Yip, from UNISON, cautioned the need to examine cultural sensitivity training carefully. She cited research from Puja Kapai, of HKU, who found that there were stereotypes within cultural sensitivity training itself. She also called into question where such cultural sensitivity training courses were currently taking place, the type of services being offered and whether isolated training was enough.

Phyllis Cheung, Director of UNISON, also expressed some concerns that the lack of cultural sensitivity and multiculturalism within schools might be hard to change if educators were not accustomed to teaching different nationalities. For example, UNISON had received calls from schools asking if they could get ethnic minority students 'to behave'. However, Dr Celeste Yuen argued that it would not be too late to improve cultural sensitivity and cited her service learning and cultural awareness courses that Education University students participated in. She believed that placing individuals within an intercultural environment was the first step to creating cultural sensitivity. She also pointed out that from a Hong Kong Chinese perspective, it could be hard without hands on experience to understand different ethnicities but that "misunderstanding happens when there isn't dialogue".

Holing was also concerned that educators teaching Cantonese have no experience teaching it as a second language or for ethnic minorities, and in some cases were only teaching Cantonese for hospitality and services. Broadening educators' cultural perspectives would then create more opportunities and choices for ethnic minority students.

## 15. Involving the Education Bureau in future forums

Many participants pointed out that it would be beneficial for the Education Bureau (EDB) to attend similar forums in the future. Dr Celeste Yuen pointed out the importance of each stakeholder being on an equal footing, including individuals from different ethnic minority communities, and subcommittees of the EDB for curriculum development.

Holing expressed concerns that the EDB had held meetings before introducing the Chinese Language Curriculum Second Language Learning Framework, yet some of the invited minority representatives did not have children attending local schools and so were unaware of many of the issues facing ethnic minority children. The question of who represents the ethnic minority community is key.

There were calls for a holistic approach to education for ethnic minorities and to examine different perspectives, including from students, parents, schools and policy makers. Jan Yumul mentioned also including the Labour Department in the future as she was concerned that job fairs marketed towards ethnic minority students were focused on jobs in the service industry such as at restaurants, cleaning services and supermarkets.

## Conclusion

This forum provided 15 key areas of consensus amongst stakeholders on priority areas for education for ethnic minority students in Hong Kong. It is hoped that this forum provides the beginnings of the next steps for improving educational pathways and opportunities for ethnic minority students.

## Contact details:

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## Appendix One: Forum programme

### Forum on Inclusive and Equitable Education for All in Hong Kong

The Education University of Hong Kong  
30<sup>th</sup> October 2015. 9:00am-12:45pm

#### PROGRAMME

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08:30 – 09:00am	<b>Arrival</b>
09:00am	<b>Welcome Speech</b>  Professor Bob Adamson, Director of Centre for Lifelong Learning Research and Development, EdUHK
9:30-10:00am	<b>Keynote Presentation</b>  Professor Kerry Kennedy, Director of the Centre for Governance and Citizenship, EdUHK
10:00-11:00am	<b>Discussion Session One</b>  What are the key issues in education for ethnic minority students?
11:00am- 11:30am	<b>Group Photo Session – Short Break</b>
11:30-12:30pm	<b>Discussion Session Two</b>  Exploration of key issues in further detail
12:30pm	<b>Summary and consensus on areas of focus for further workshops</b>
12:45pm	Way forward. Thanks to participants (Professor Bob Adamson). End Forum.

## Appendix Two: Forum attendees

Professor Bob Adamson (EdUHK)  
Ms Phyllis Cheung (UNISON)  
Dr Manynooch Faming (Yew Chung Community College)  
Mr Jan Gube (Section Juan)  
Professor Kerry Kennedy (EdUHK)  
Dr Joanna Lijuan Li (EdUHK)  
Mr Deepen Nebhwani (ethnic minority student)  
Dr Victor Hoi Yu Ng (EdUHK)  
Ms Lucinda Pike (EdUHK)  
Mr Paul Tarrant (Yuen Long Minorities Parents' Concern Group)  
Mr Chura Bahadur Thapa (Yuen Long Minorities Parent's Concern Group)  
Dr Linnie Koon Li Wong (EdUHK)  
Ms Holing Yip (Research Officer, UNISON)  
Dr Celeste Yuen (EdUHK)  
Mr Jan Yumul (Section Juan)