

**The government should review existing education policies to enhance
the Chinese proficiency of students of South Asian ethnic origin**

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Introduction

A mastery of the local language and script is a prerequisite for social integration. Cantonese and Traditional Chinese characters are used in Hong Kong as the medium for communication. Owing to the considerable difference between Chinese and other language families, and to the fact that students of South Asian ethnic origin (i.e. the school children from India, Pakistan, Nepal and other ethnic groups) studying in Hong Kong have non-Chinese mother tongues, it is difficult for them to adapt, learn and use the local language. This leads to a series of issues concerning their studies and integration into society.

According to Article 2 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Hong Kong community should ensure that no child is deprived of their entitled rights as stipulated in the Convention because of the child's or his or her or parent's or legal guardian's race, colour, religion, social origin, etc. However, it seems that the problems caused by the differences between ethnic origins have become more and more serious, and this is directly affecting these students' psychological stability and their prospects. Therefore, we urge the government to review existing education policies to enhance the Chinese proficiency of students of South Asian ethnic origin in order to solve their problems with social integration and academic competitiveness.

Current Situation

The findings in 2010, through interviews by the Hong Kong Society for the Protection of Children, show that less than 20 per cent of the students of South Asian ethnic origin can read Chinese books. Among those interviewed, nearly 60 per cent of these students' Chinese language competence cannot meet their basic daily needs. Although the Panel on Education of the Legislative Council has announced several plans since 2006 to address the study problems of the students of South Asian ethnic origin, little has been achieved. In a survey conducted by the Hong Kong Christian Service in 2010, 70 per cent of the student respondents of South Asian ethnic origin had difficulty learning Chinese and half of the respondents felt that the local people were unfriendly to them. This situation shows that, whether students of South Asian ethnic origin are enrolled in mainstream or designated schools, they all face various and unnecessary learning obstacles.

When students of South Asian ethnic origin enroll in mainstream schools, they will undoubtedly have more opportunities to interact with local students. However, due to lack of a Chinese cultural background and concepts in their up-bringing, they often lag behind local students in learning Chinese. Moreover, they have to learn many different languages from a young age which makes it difficult for them to cope. The result is that generally they are unable to reach the required standard in their Chinese, and this in turn affects their performances in other subjects which use Chinese as the medium of instruction. In fact, there is a shortage of additional resources to care for the special needs of the students of South Asian ethnic origin in government-subsidised schools. A questionnaire designed by our group shows that

language is the single biggest obstacle for non-Chinese speaking students in communicating with and integrating into Chinese students, surpassing 6 other factors that include religion, culture and lifestyle. It demonstrates that their Chinese language deficiency makes it difficult for the students of South Asian ethnic origin to integrate into mainstream education.

Currently only 7 designated schools in Hong Kong receive government subsidies. The lack of choice results in a shortage of places available. These schools would adjust their curriculum (often making it less difficult) to accommodate students who have limited proficiency in Chinese. The questionnaire, however, shows that over 80 per cent of respondents think that the school should raise the level of their Chinese courses. On the other hand, although studying among their peers help students of South Asian ethnic origin adapt more readily to campus life, the language environment in designated schools reduces their chances to learn Chinese. As a result, they cannot really integrate into the Hong Kong mainstream learning environment and their prospects for further education are adversely affected.

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child sets out in detail that any child is entitled to the right to development. However, given a lack of training for Chinese as a non-first language teaching medium, the students of South Asian ethnic origin to consolidate their Chinese language abilities, and their right to development is therefore overlooked. It is also difficult for teachers to acquire the suitable teaching skills for those students. Almost 60 per cent of the students did not receive any help in their learning, which produces yet more problems.

Deficiencies in the Current Policies

(1) Unclear curriculum guidelines and the policies for teaching and learning

In 2008, the Curriculum Development Council compiled a "Supplementary Guide to the Chinese Language Curriculum for Non-Chinese Speaking Students" for non-Chinese speaking students, incorporating guidelines for the Chinese language education orientation. However, given insufficient consultation, its contents are not comprehensive. It lacks clear guidance for improving the teaching models and thus cannot meet the needs of students of South Asian ethnic origin and help them overcome obstacles in learning Chinese.

(2) Lack of channels for providing information on pre-school education

The golden period for language development in young children began from infancy to the age of 5. Therefore, pre-school education can effectively consolidate the Chinese language foundation of the students of South Asian ethnic origin and thus increase their future opportunities for entering university as well as employment prospects in Hong Kong. However, at present in Hong Kong, there is a shortage of official channels for imparting information on pre-school education. As a result, their parents are unaware and uninformed of our pre-school education. Also, many families are unable to pay kindergarten

fees and do not understand how to apply for Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme, and are consequently ignorant as to how pre-school education can enhance the students' motivations and their level of competence in Chinese. Furthermore, the majority of the parents' levels of Chinese have not reached the mainstream standard and therefore they cannot supervise their children in learning Chinese.

(3) Lack of aid given by NGOs

Even though various institutions provide students of South Asian ethnic origin tutoring on Chinese subjects, some of them do not benefit from these services owing to a lack of resources and publicity as well as geographic constraints. In addition, these tutoring classes act only as a "safety net", and tend to focus on schoolwork. With their mediocre knowledge of Chinese, tutors can only just manage to help students make up for the deficiencies they suffer in the education system but cannot effectively enhance the Chinese proficiency of students of South Asian ethnic origin.

(4) Inadequate funding guidelines and insufficient supervision at the designated schools

At present, each year the government allocates HK\$600,000 in subsidies to each of the designated schools. However, there are no clear guidelines about the use of these funds, and little transparency in the monitoring process. The learning outcomes are not apparent from the annual financial reports from the schools, and thus revisions and improvements cannot be made. Also the government does not appoint any monitoring staff or undertake any subsequent evaluations and so fails to ensure that the funds are well spent.

Suggestions

(1) The Chinese curriculum guidelines and teaching materials

The lack of a unified Chinese course and system of teaching subjects in Chinese for non-native speakers of Chinese results in the incapability of the students of South Asian ethnic origin to study Chinese effectively. We, therefore, propose that the government should make the following adjustments:

i. Coordination with designated schools in order to unify their Chinese language curriculum

For those students of South Asian ethnic origin and whose mother tongue is not Chinese, the teaching staff needs to invest a vast amount of resources and time on developing a suitable school-based curriculum. In order to improve the teaching and learning outcomes, the Education Bureau should communicate regularly with the designated schools over the difficulties which the students currently face in learning Chinese. They should institute unified guidelines for the Chinese curriculum of the designated schools in order to narrow the gap between the differences in the levels of Chinese resulting from each school's different curriculum.

ii. Addition of facilities to teach Chinese as a non-first language medium

According to a survey conducted by Hong Kong Christian Service, the average English competency among students of South Asian ethnic origin is as high as 70 to 80 per cent. Therefore, the Education Bureau should set up teacher training programme for teaching Chinese bilingually. They should compile bilingual textbooks for these students to learn Chinese more effectively. Furthermore, the Education Bureau should establish a teaching system in which Chinese is not the first language medium in order to meet the needs of these non-native Chinese students. These will assist schools to facilitate these students' learning and their use of Chinese more effectively.

iii. Addition of Chinese as a non-first language course

The government may refer to the curriculum used in America and Canada and add Chinese to the curriculum as a non-first language course, providing an equal studying opportunity and environment for students of South Asian ethnic origin. This course includes a test and an assessment point. If students fail to reach the standard in the first test, arrangements will be made for them to receive a course in Chinese as a non-first language as well as intensive training. If they still have not reached the required standard at the point of assessment, they will continue their training. Those students who are successful will return to the mainstream classes. In this way, students of South Asian ethnic origin can improve their proficiency in Chinese more efficiently.

(2) Co-operation between home and school

Seeing that some parents of students of South Asian ethnic origin do not acknowledge the importance of the Chinese language, schools should take greater initiative to provide these parents with information on further studies and employment opportunities in Hong Kong. They should establish communication channels for the parents to know more about their children's learning, the education system and the opportunities for moving on to higher level studies in Hong Kong, as well as the importance of the Chinese language, and thereby encourage their children to study it.

(3) Allocation of community resources

As providers of additional support, community organizations should be aware of the current circumstances of students of South Asian ethnic origin and their parents, and provide them with comprehensive information. They can also provide additional Chinese language support to these students.

i. Providing parents of students of South Asian ethnic origin with information on kindergarten enrolments

As the majority of the parents of students of South Asian ethnic origin are unaware of the importance of kindergarten education to their children, the service providers should offer the parents information about kindergarten enrolment and the Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme. This would enhance the children's opportunities for a pre-school education and ensure that they have a Chinese language foundation from a young age.

ii. Investing more in supporting resources

Currently there are only 4 NGOs receiving sponsorship from the government. Students of South Asian ethnic origin in some districts do not receive sufficient support owing to location constraints. In view of this, the government should offer the service providers more resources, and set up more support centres, in order to increase these students' opportunities to learn Chinese and to receive assistance with their homework thereby improving their Chinese proficiency. In addition, the government should also distribute guidelines to NGOs so that they may be able to design more systematic courses. They should offer regular training for the people in charge, as well as for the volunteers, in order for them to acquire the skills for teaching students of South Asian ethnic origin.

(4) Providing after-class tutorials for students of South Asian ethnic origin

To effectively improve the level of Chinese for students of South Asian ethnic origin requires the schools' cooperation in providing them with after-class tutorials. As the teachers understand the learning difficulties of these students, they are in a better position to design more suitable teaching methods to supplement the conventional curriculum. In addition, having after-class tutorials at school can offer these students a more convenient learning environment, saving them from having to look for other means of paid tuition which would cost extra time and money.

(5) Strengthening the monitoring of the school's use of funds

To ensure that the government's annually allocated resources for the designated schools are well spent, the Education Bureau must stipulate provisions for the allocation of funds and clearly indicate the proportion for each purpose. They should also send staff to schools for evaluating the work and making appraisals and adjustments in order to ensure that the amount of funding is appropriate.

Conclusion

Although the government has carried out a number of policies concerning the Chinese language learning of students of South Asian ethnic origin, these policies lack focus and the students are still facing inherent difficulties. There are as many as 120,000 students of South Asian ethnic origin in Hong Kong, whose prospects and rights to development cannot be ignored. Therefore, regarding the 3 aspects of improving the Chinese curriculum guidelines and educational facilities; making the best use of both community and school resources; and providing after-class tutorials, our group aims through this motion to urge the government to review existing education policies and thereby enhance the Chinese proficiency of students of South Asian ethnic origin so as to give them equal opportunities for development.

On behalf of the child councilors in my group, I move that the motion "The government should review existing education policies to enhance the Chinese proficiency of students of South Asian ethnic origin" be passed.

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