



**Comparative Study on Language Education Policies to Support
Second Language Learners from K1 to P3**

Executive Summary

Education equity is more than fairness. Every child, regardless of race and ethnicity, has the right to access free education. They may be subjected to educational models, programmes, and strategies that are considered equal, but not necessarily equitable. The public education system in Hong Kong is a case in point. Discrepancy in Chinese proficiency between non-Chinese and Chinese students is an outcome of the inequities in the education system. Many schools in the public sector uses Cantonese as the medium of instruction but without adequate support to students whose mother tongue is not Chinese. The absence of a comprehensive second-language learning policy renders the Chinese proficiency of most ethnic minority students at the level of mainstream primary two level after twelve years of primary and secondary education. Hong Kong has failed to give ethnic minority children the chance to fulfil their potential in education. The purpose of this paper is to review the language education policy in three countries with the aim to collate some good practices and consider possible directions for a language education policy in Hong Kong and to support ethnic minority children to learn the language of instruction in school at an early age.

1. Objectives of the study

- 1.1 To explore and analyze (early childhood) language education policies in three countries – Ontario Canada, Finland and Germany.
- 1.2 To present commonalities in language education policies and procedures in the above three countries, that promote academic achievement among second language learners to the level expected of all learners.
- 1.3 To suggest a Chinese language learner policy for non-Chinese speaking students to the Hong Kong government drawing good practices and lessons across the studied countries.

2. Commonalities in language education policies and procedures

2.1 Legislation

All three studied countries have education and relevant legislation to ensure full participation in society in their respective national languages and to assist individuals overcome and eliminate discrimination in education.

2.2 Policies and strategies

All three studied countries have policies and procedures in place for the development and implementation of programmes and supports for second language learners in early childhood. In Ontario, the Ministry of Education has developed and updated practical guides and curriculum resources guides for English language learners from Kindergarten to Grade 12 to



“help all English language learners in the province by engaging them in learning that enables them to develop their talents, meet their goals, and acquire the knowledge and skills they will need to achieve personal success and to participate in and contribute to Ontario society” (Ministry of Education, 2007). Both Finland and Germany made references to the European Commission’s *Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care* (2014) and the *Action Plan on the Integration of Third-country Nationals* (2016) to ensure early integration of immigrant children into mainstream education structures to prevent underachievement among migrants and social exclusion. In Finland, the goals of the federal policies for pre-primary immigrant children are to safeguard an equitable early childhood education and the development of uniform pre-primary education instruction to ensure that all children have equal prerequisites.

2.3 Reception and orientation

Orientation procedures are important for the welcoming of second-language-learners and their families in early childhood education. In Ontario, school boards are obligatory to develop protocols to define inclusive and non-discriminatory welcoming and orientation procedures and practices. In Finland, top-level regulations are in place to ensure schools keep parents informed and actively engage them in the education process, e.g. training programmes for parents and regularly informing parents about the coverage of the school curriculum so that they are more aware and in a better position to guide and support their children. In Germany, the federal programme *Early-Years Language Learning: Because Language is the Key to the World* supports development of language skills in daycare centers and kindergartens. In Bavaria, parents are invited to join their children at the pre-school language-promotion programmes to understand the pedagogy and provide support at home. Like Ontario and Finland, parents are regularly informed on the language development of their children.

2.4 Assessment and placement

Kindergarten teachers should be culturally sensitive; assessment tools and strategies on oral communication skills, reading comprehension and writing should align with the linguistic and characteristics of the children. In Ontario, English proficiency does not influence the choice of grade placement and final decisions regarding placement are made in consultation with the student, staff, and parents. In Finland, the *National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care* (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2018), stipulates that in circumstances where students reading and writing skills are not sufficient to partake in basic education, adequate time should be reserved for acquisition and consolidation with appropriate support measures to enhance the progress of students’ studies. In addition to the language of instruction and prior learning, Finland is the only country studied which assesses students’ social and emotional well-being. In Germany, children are expected to converse in German and follow or read a story in German by the time they reach primary school age. Children whose knowledge of German is not sufficient must either continue to join a language-promotion group at the local kindergarten or at the local primary school during the months between registration



and school attendance. Immigrant kindergarten children can usually integrate into mainstream education within a period of six months to two years.

2.5 Curriculum

In Ontario, school boards are required to develop curriculum and services to enable English language learners continue their education while learning English and the curriculum should be reflective of the changing needs of the students. In Finland, the *National Core Curriculum for Pre-Primary Education* (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2014) defines the criteria for pre-primary curriculum with a focus in the development of the Finnish or Swedish language for immigrant children. While municipalities may adopt school-specific policies, the majority of students follow a roughly equivalent programmes of instruction (Holm and Londen 2010) which aims to integrate immigrants in education. In Germany, the curriculum of preparatory class for early childhood immigrant students aims to enhance their German proficiency since German as a second language is only available in elementary school; secondary schools in most Länders use German as the medium of instruction.

2.6 Monitoring, evaluation and reporting

In Ontario, information on each English language learner's level of English language acquisition is summarized and included in the Ontario Student Record at least once in each school year for tracking student progress, monitoring the academic achievement, and supporting public accountability. The Ontario Ministry of Education uses the information to set benchmarks for English language learners in Ontario. In Finland, the *Act on Early Childhood Education and Care* (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2018) stipulates inspection, monitoring, evaluation and data repository and teachers are provided with monitoring support such as continuous assessment tools developed specifically for assessing students' language knowledge and skills, and performance and progress.

3. Discussion

3.1 Briefing and engaging ethnic minority parents

In Hong Kong, since the 2017/18 school year, the Education Bureau (EDB) in collaboration with NGOs, runs about six to seven seminars every year to brief parents on admission arrangements for nursery (K1) classes. These sessions are conducted in English with simultaneous interpretation services in Urdu, Hindi, and Nepali to inform parents on kindergarten application and admission procedures; but total participation rate is usually less than 2.5% of all K1 non-Chinese speaking student (NCS) population. Information such as what to expect in kindergartens, and how kindergartens support their children however, is only available in pamphlets and videos. According to a survey by Hong Kong Unison (2019), 73% of the interviewed parents were not aware of leaflets published by the EDB or the Equal Opportunities Commission on kindergarten support measures for non-Chinese speaking children. Pamphlets and videos are certainly not as effective as face-to-face briefings and meetings.



Starting from the 2020/21 school year, the EDB provides a series of parent education programmes for parents of NCS students, including parent education talks cum exhibitions and community activities, supposedly to help them support their children’s learning, encourage their children to master the Chinese language, and enable them to have a more comprehensive understanding of the multiple pathways available to their children. The effectiveness of the programme is yet to be seen.

3.2 Early immersion and preparatory teaching

As noted in the EDB Kindergarten Curriculum Guide (2017), “the opportunity for non-Chinese speaking children to be exposed to the Chinese Language before admission to kindergarten or outside the classroom is relatively limited.” Yet, there is no pre-kindergarten government supported Chinese learning programmes for NCS children; nor does every kindergarten that receive the NCS Grant actually provide Chinese learning support. In fact, the Director of Audit’s Report (2021) found that in 2018/19, 3% of the kindergartens utilized less than half of the Grant provided and 15% utilized less than 70% of the Grant provided. The Report urged the EDB to improve the timeliness of supervisory visits to monitor kindergartens’ use of the Grant.

The EDB runs an “Initiation Programme” for newly arrived children prior to enrolling in primary and secondary schools. It is a six-month programme that commences in September and March each year. The Programme includes both academic and non-academic elements such as English and Chinese languages, learning / study skills, personal development, social adaptation, and cultural subjects with the aim to help children integrate into the local education system and community. The “Induction Programme” is a 60-hour Programme run by non-governmental organizations with a subsidy from the EDB for children age 6 to 18 on personal development, social adaptation, basic learning skills, as well as Chinese learning. A four-week “Summer Bridging Programme” is available for NCS students progressing to Primary 1 to 4 on Chinese learning. But as reported by the Audit Commission, the participation rate has decreased continuously from 2013 to 2019. Unfortunately, there is no outcome evaluation to ascertain participants of the above programmes have acquire Chinese to a level which enable them to smoothly learn other subjects in Chinese, the medium of instruction in the majority primary schools.

3.3 Data collection and reporting

A kindergarten opinion study (Unison, 2019) revealed that 22% of the interviewed parents did not know about the Chinese level their children learn in school and 16.8% of them were not able to find out their children’s Chinese ability. More than half of the parents indicated that they were not confident to put their children in mainstream primary school because they “perceived” their children’s Chinese ability is not adequate for a smooth transition in a mainstream primary school. This situation is unsatisfactory given the fact that kindergartens are required to submit to the EDB an annual school report at the end of the school year (by August) on the deployment of the NCS Grant and the support measures, summarising the implementation and the evaluation on the effectiveness of the measures. Kindergartens should



improve home-school communication as effective home-school communication not only help children adapt to and integrate into school life at an early stage, it enhances parents' understanding of the school curriculum.

3.4 Goal of the language education policies for ethnic minority students

In Hong Kong, the language education policy for all students is “biliteracy and trilingualism” However, there is no clear policy on the medium of instruction for Chinese language subject in primary schools and most schools do not have an agreed approach or method for implementing trilingual education (Wang and Kirkpatrick, 2015). The Chinese language subject in is taught in Putonghua in some primary schools in some grades. Consistent approach is lacking; using Putonghua as a medium of instruction for teaching the Chinese language subject (PMIC) is a school-based decision. Many schools overlook the learning needs of ethnic minority children by adopting PMIC and using Cantonese to teach other subjects.

There is no dedicated education policy for ethnic minority immigrant students; “Chinese Learning for non-Chinese Speaking Children” of the *Kindergarten Education Curriculum Guide* (2017) and the *Chinese Language Curriculum Second Language Learning Framework* (2014) (the Learning Framework) for primary and secondary schools are likely the only guiding documents on Chinese learning for ethnic minority students. The implementation of the Learning Framework aims to help non-Chinese speaking students overcome the difficulties of learning Chinese as a second language “with a view’ to enabling them to bridge over to mainstream Chinese Language classes and master the Chinese language”. However, in reality, most ethnic minority students do not bridge over to mainstream Chinese class and their Chinese ability regressed when they enter secondary school. The majority of ethnic minority students are only taught to the level of Chinese GCSE or IGCSE, which is equivalent to the mainstream Primary 2 level, despite spending 15 years of education in Hong Kong.

3.5 Multi-disciplinary approach and support

There is no particular psycho-social support to ethnic minority students in Hong Kong; however, language acquisition planning is multifaceted, and involves a continuum of issues from psychological to the societal (Siiner, Hult, and Kupisch, 2018). Currently, the teaching and learning of Chinese as a second language is not based on social justice and respect for human rights. Rather, many schools and teachers view it as a burden. From the experience of Hong Kong Unison, school social workers do not yet seem to be aware of the psycho-social needs of ethnic minority students.

3.6 Teacher professional development

In Hong Kong, teachers do not need relevant professional qualifications to teach ethnic minorities. According to the Director of Audit’s Report (2021), from 2014/15 to 2019/20, there were 13,794 teachers teaching Chinese Language at 988 schools. 9,986 teachers in 252 schools (157 of them had more than 230 NCS students) did not attend EDB’s training. Training hours attended by the 3,808 teachers were on the low side, 46% of whom attended 5 hours or less.



The Education Bureau offers professional development programmes and commission a local university to conduct teacher workshops for Chinese language teachers who teach ethnic minority students. However, these training courses were viewed to be too theoretical and most instructors delivering the courses did not have prior experience teaching ethnic minorities, hence would not understand the actual needs of teachers. Most programmes are limited to supporting teachers on the Chinese language subject only and are deemed not effective in improving teaching efficacy (Oxfam et al., 2020).

Although the Education Bureau has launched the "Professional Enhancement Grant Scheme for Chinese Language Teachers (Teaching Chinese as a Second Language)" since 2014/15 school year to encourage Chinese Language teachers to pursue part-time programmes on teaching Chinese to immigrant students (including the acquisition of the pedagogical knowledge and skills), the Direct Investigation Report on 'Government's support for non-Chinese speaking students' (Office of The Ombudsman Hong Kong, 2019) pointed out that this Scheme was not well received by the teachers. In the four school years 2014/15 to 2017/18, only 68 Chinese Language subject teachers had been approved the grant, and among them 24 of them has completed the programmes.

4. Policy Recommendations

Upon studying the legislation for immigrant students and the language education policies of Ontario (Canada), Finland and Germany, we realize inclusion and respect for diversity are obligatory conditions for an equitable education system. Unlike Ontario Canada, Finland, and Germany, there is currently no legal mandate on language education for ethnic minority students in Hong Kong. To improve the quality and equity of education for ethnic minority students, the government should consider adopting some good practices from other countries and provide an inclusive policy and procedure to enable positive and measurable differences in education outcomes and increased student achievement for ethnic minority children. It is not only about funding resources; some key components which are currently suggested in other jurisdictions, should be made mandatory in the policy:

4.1 Planning and orientation for ethnic minority families

The Education Bureau should require schools to brief ethnic minority parents on what to expect in kindergarten and primary education; how students' performance is generally assessed, evaluated, and reported; homework policies; and how parents can support their children's learning at home; with simultaneous interpretation if needed. As Chinese learning is a major concern for parents, support measures should be explained in detail so that they are able to choose schools that can best support their children's learning needs.

4.2 Preparatory classes

Research found that preparatory teaching can provide more time and space for the teaching and learning of the language of instruction than full integration into mainstream education right from the start (Koehler, 2017). The Education Bureau should consider extending the initiation



program to pre-primary children and require kindergartens to organize preparatory classes for ethnic minority children whose Chinese language skills are not strong enough to follow mainstream teaching. To provide a head start in Chinese learning, the Education Bureau can take reference from Germany's "Early-Years Language Learning" programs in day-care centres for pre-kindergarten children whereby centre staff receive guidance, counselling and on the job training to provide language stimulation, linguistic and literacy education through play.

4.3 Welcoming procedures and reception

Welcoming process involves helping ethnic minority children adapt to their new school environment and ensuring that they make good progress in their learning. Every student should feel comfortable, well-taken care of, and valued in the classroom, as well as supported and inspired to succeed. Both home room teacher and the Chinese as a second language teacher should meet with parents. If parents cannot communicate well in Chinese or English, schools should arrange interpreters. The Education Bureau should allow more effective use of community resources to assist schools during the registration and the welcoming process.

4.4 Family engagement and community involvement

Family and community involvement play an important role in children's education process, especially in early childhood education. The policy should ensure that schools have put into place measures to keep ethnic minority parents informed about the school curriculum, their children's progress, and especially their children's ability in Chinese so that they can guide and support their children outside of school. The Education Bureau can reference Finland's parent training program to enhance their capacities to support their children. The training however, should not be limited to academic support only, but also on physical, cognitive, social and emotional development of their children. The Steering Committee of Ethnic Minority Affairs is encouraged to coordinate a multi-disciplinary team to work closely with schools and local organizations (such as NGOs, libraries, cultural and religious societies, etc.) to implement the parent training program.

To engage parental involvement in schools, the Education Bureau should encourage kindergartens to develop a rigorous home-school cooperation program, e.g. invite Chinese and ethnic minority parents to volunteer in the classrooms participate in parent sharing sessions. Involving family members in the classroom provides children with positive role models and affirms the connection between home and school.

4.5 Initial assessment and data collection

Initial assessment and data collection are crucial for understanding children's learning characteristics. Hence information such as first language, country of origin, birth place, number of years in Hong Kong, religion, socioeconomic status, and prior learning and/or program joined should be collected upon admission to kindergarten and primary school respectively. These elements do not only contribute to decisions on how to place the students, but also how to provide the appropriate learning support to meet their needs and bridge their gaps.



4.6 Curriculum

Chinese language acquisition programs must have long-term goals and continuity in the curriculum as students move up through the grade levels. Defining objectives and competence level is a necessary first step in raising the quality of second language teaching. The Education Bureau should define objectives and competence levels on Chinese language learning in kindergarten and primary education so that schools, parents, school advisors, inspectors and education policymakers can make objective judgments about the quality of teaching, adjust or optimize the curriculum and support measures, and refine performance benchmarks.

For children who have not caught up with the expected competencies, additional support should be provided through intensive and/or remedial program to ‘accelerate’ the student’s acquisition of proficiency in everyday and academic Chinese. Remedial classes should also be considered for children who lag behind in other subjects taught in Chinese.

4.7 Ongoing assessment, evaluation, and reporting to parents

To better understand what ethnic minority children are able to do with the Chinese language at specific points in their development, the Education Bureau should develop metrics to track their outcomes in Chinese language proficiency and literacy.

Parents should be informed about schools’ assessment and evaluation policies and practices. Information about the learning expectations and the student’s academic progress should be communicated to parents on a regular basis. Schools should encourage and welcome active participation of parents to discuss assessment results and program placement options for their children.

4.8 Initial teaching training and professional development for teachers

Teachers matter more than any other single factor in learning and in improving learners’ achievements. Teaching to satisfy standards and core learning content is no longer enough; cultural sensitivity should be enhanced. Teachers should have professional preparation in how to use appropriate curricular materials and teaching strategies to promote achievement of ethnic minority children. Teachers who specialize (either pre-service or in-service training) in second-language acquisition and cross-linguistic should be given professional recognition.

4.9 Addressing social and emotional needs

Students' academic development and potential cannot be fully realised without supporting their social and emotional needs (Krachman, LaRocca & Gabrieli, 2018), in particular to students from immigrant backgrounds who may face additional challenges, such as social and cultural obstacles, barriers to full participation in schools, segregation and/or hostility and bullying. In-house social workers are encouraged to support ethnic minority children personal, social and emotional development while education staff focus on developing their language skills and learning in general.

Cultural competence should be included in the core competences for social workers and training in cultural awareness, sensitivity, and responsiveness should be made mandatory for



pre-service and in-service social workers so that they can address the needs of ethnic minority children and their families.

4.10 Allocation of resources

Allocating resources to support ethnic minority children should be perceived as an investment rather than a cost as they also are the future of Hong Kong. The government should review the current funding mode and grant amount to determine whether funding is adequate to implement the support measures mandated by the policy. Resources need to be targeted on outcomes and the facilitation of learning.

4.11 Monitoring of the policy

Evaluation of the language education policy provides valuable information to monitor equity within the education system. Hence a rigorous monitoring and evaluation framework with transparent procedures on compliance monitoring, diagnostic monitoring, and performance monitoring must be developed.

- End -

References

Director of Audit's Report, 2021. Education Support Measures for non-Chinese Speaking Students. https://www.aud.gov.hk/eng/pubpr_arpt/aud_Educat.htm

EDB, 2014. Chinese Language Curriculum Second Language Learning Framework. <https://www.edb.gov.hk/tc/curriculum-development/kla/chi-edu/second-lang/resource.html>

EDB Kindergarten Curriculum Guide, 2017. Education Bureau. https://www.edb.gov.hk/attachment/en/curriculum-development/major-level-of-edu/preprimary/ENG_KGECG_2017.pdf

European Commission, 2014. Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care.

European Commission, 2016. Action Plan on the Integration of Third-country Nationals https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/default/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/proposal-implementation-package/docs/20160607/communication_action_plan_integration_third-country_nationals_en.pdf

Finnish National Agency for Education, 2014. National Core Curriculum for Pre-Primary Education. <https://verkkokauppa.oph.fi/EN/page/product/national-core-curriculum-for-pre-primary-education-2014/2453040>

Finnish National Agency for Education, 2018. National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care. <https://www.oph.fi/en/statistics-and-publications/publications/national-core-curriculum-early-childhood-education-and>



Holm and Londen 2010 Holm, G., & Londen, M. (2010). The discourse on multicultural education in Finland: education for whom? *Intercultural Education*, 21(2), 107-120. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14675981003696222>

Koehler, 2017. Continuity of learning for newly arrived refugee children in Europe. NESET II ad hoc question No. 1/2017. https://www.sirius-migrationeducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/2017-2-Continuity-of-learning-for-newly-arrived-refugee-children-in-Europe_Claudia.pdf

Krachman, LaRocca & Gabrieli, 2018. Accounting for the Whole Child. *Educational Leadership*, v75 n5 p28-34 Feb 2018. <https://www.ascd.org/el/articles/accounting-for-the-whole-child>

MOE, 2007. English Language Learners ESL and ELD Programs and Services. Policies and Procedures for Ontario Elementary and Secondary Schools, Kindergarten to Grade 12. Ontario Ministry of Education. <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/esleldprograms/esleldprograms.pdf>

Ministry of Education and Culture, 2018. Act on Early Childhood Education and Care. <https://okm.fi/en/legislation-ecec>

Office of The Ombudsman Hong Kong, 2019. Direct Investigation Report. Government's support for non-Chinese speaking students. https://ofomb.ombudsman.hk/abc/files/2019-2_FR_DI422_Governments_support_for_non-Chinese_speaking_students.pdf

Oxfam et al. (2020). A Study on the Challenges Faced by Mainstream Schools in Educating Ethnic Minorities in Hong Kong. Oxfam Hong Kong, Dr. Loh Ka Yee Elizabeth and Dr. Hung On Ying (The University of Hong Kong). https://www.eoc.org.hk/eoc/upload/ResearchReport/researchreport_20200115_e.pdf

M. Sinner et al., 2018. Siiner, M., Hult F.M., Kupisch, T. (eds) *Language Policy and Language Acquisition Planning*. *Language Policy*, vol 15. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-75963-0_15

Unison, 2019. Ethnic Minority Parent's Opinions on Existing Support Measures in the Kindergarten Education Scheme, June, 2019. Hong Kong Unison. <http://www.unison.org.hk/DocumentDownload/Researches/R201906%20Unison%20KG%20Opinion%20Study%20Report.pdf>

Wang and Kirkpatrick, 2015. Trilingual education in Hong Kong primary schools: an overview. Lixun Wang and Andy Kirkpatrick. *Multilingual Education* (2015) 5:3.