

Language issues plague outstanding minority students

By ANDREA DENG

China Daily

Hong Kong's aspirations to become recognized as a focal point for top quality education may be impeded by the absence of effective measures regarding gifted students of ethnic minorities.

In 2010, the number of ethnic students enrolled in university degree programs in **Hong Kong** was zero, despite the fact that there were many bright and even gifted students from ethnic minorities.

The major issue is that many of these high-calibre students are unable to gain sufficient mastery over the Chinese language. Thus, they are unable to advance scholastically.

Arjun Singh, the 12-year-old Indian prodigy, with an IQ of 129, who scored almost straight A's in the International General Certificate of Secondary Education, would not have been out of school for more than two years, if the Education Bureau (EDB) had referred him to one of the city's English schools that offer gifted programs.

"All I needed from the EDB was just the information on what kind of gifted schools are out there, and a recommendation letter from the EDB. I can take the assessment tests myself. The EDB could be more flexible," said Singh.

Fermi Wong Wai-fun, executive director of **Hong Kong Unison**, who has been assisting Singh, said she was once told by an EDB officer that Singh's case "is a very new case for the bureau — because Arjun is a member of an ethnic minority."

"We don't have the experience to handle the case," Wong quoted the officer.

The Indian boy is indeed a special case. Although there have been criticisms of the facilities for gifted students, local students can more or less obtain "enrichment classes" to pursue deeper levels of math or science, either at their own school or the courses provided by the **Hong Kong Academy for Gifted Education**. But nearly all are taught in Chinese.

James Lung Wai-man, an activist for minority children, said that there is no gifted program or facilities in the city's 20-odd ethnic minority schools. Meanwhile, only very few minority children attend local schools that supply enrichment classes.

At the crux of the issue, Lung noted, is the EDB's pedagogical fallacy that "if they (minority children) do not learn Chinese, they are seriously in trouble", because most universities require students to have Chinese capability through the Joint University Programmes Admissions System.

Most minority children fail to learn Chinese well. Their overall scholastic performance is

overshadowed by bad grades in Chinese, no matter how well they do in other subjects.

Lung gave an example of a 9-year-old Nepalese boy who loves to write English essays. The boy used to send some of his writing to Chief Executive Donald Tsang and Chief Secretary for Administration Stephen Lam, when Lam was secretary for constitutional and mainland affairs.

But when the boy's father asked the class teacher to help advance the boy in his pursuits, the father was told that the boy should improve his Chinese because he'd been doing poorly in that subject.

"It's ridiculous that a child who is good at English writing is required to be good at Chinese," Lung said.

In Singh's case, he exhibits outstanding caliber in math and has a strong affection for physics, and it does not make much sense to require the boy to be capable of reading Chinese, not to mention that he is fully capable of handling English.

The result of that fallacy is that many minority children being buried by the inability to reading Chinese, Lung said.

"Ironically, there are Indian students who don't speak Chinese as well, but can be enrolled in **Hong Kong's** universities," Lung said.

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