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## Racism in the classroom ?

Posted: 25 Oct 2011

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Hong Kong’s education system is increasingly being accused of racial segregation for its treatment of minority students. **Shirley Zhao** explores the controversial accusations

Pauline Angela Trasadas Sitchon is an 11-year-old Hong Kong-born Filipino. She is studying in a primary school where 90 percent of the students are from ethnic minority backgrounds, mostly from Southeast Asia.

“I want to study with more local students,” says Pauline. “I want to learn more about Hong Kong. My mum told me that she wants me to go back to Philippines, but I said I want to stay here because this is the place I love.”

Pauline’s school, Li Sing Tai Hang School in Causeway Bay, is one of 28 designated schools in Hong Kong that receive additional funds and resources from the government to help minority students. During the central allocation process, where the Education Bureau divvies up pupils according to the ‘school nets’ they are located in, most minority students end up being assigned to a designated school even if it isn’t located within their net. According to the Education Bureau, at present, among some 12,000 non-Chinese speaking students, about 60 percent are studying in designated schools.

“It’s racial segregation,” says Fermi Wong Wai-fun, executive director of Hong Kong Unison, a non-governmental organisation focusing on helping minority groups. Wong says up to 80 percent of minority students attend designated schools – but, she claims, some Hong Kong parents become unwilling to choose these schools for their children. “They [minority students] have been living and studying in a very narrow social circle and have become disconnected with the mainstream society.

It will harm social integration," says Wong.

Pauline used to study with her Hong Kong friends in a Chinese language kindergarten. Now she is in an English speaking environment. She did not perform exceptionally well in her Chinese studies, so this year her mother hired a tutor for her to improve her Chinese. "I was speaking Chinese in kindergarten, but I don't know how I forgot it," says Pauline with a perplexed smile.

"Students of designated schools are in a weak Chinese learning environment," adds Wong. "Not being able to speak Chinese well will affect minority students' secondary and higher education and subsequently their employment." Wong says only a few minority students are able to go to English language secondary schools. The majority who attend mainstream Chinese language schools can't keep up with their studies because of the language difficulty, so it will be hard for them to get into universities or vocational training institutes. "Their career choice will be limited due to insufficient education. They'll also be less competitive for positions that require lower education because they can't speak Chinese well."

But Shirley Yip Siu-lai, principal of Li Sing Tai Hang School, thinks it is necessary to have designated schools. "We were invited to become a designated school in 2003. Before, our school was a mainstream Chinese speaking school. From my experience, I feel that these [minority] students are at a disadvantage learning all subjects in Chinese, because their mother tongue is their first language, English is the second and Chinese the third. They can really perform better studying in English. Most of our minority students before 2003 couldn't keep up with all the subjects other than English."

While admitting that minority students in designated schools are less likely to integrate into Hong Kong society, Yip says it is their parents' choice, as they are free to choose between designated schools and mainstream schools.

Teresita Trumpo Failano comes from the Philippines and has a daughter studying in a designated primary school. "When we were applying to schools, the education bureau told us it's better to send her to this kind of school so that we don't have to send her to an international school. I can't speak Chinese well, so if her homework was all in Chinese, I couldn't help her. She's not pure Chinese and she must learn English as well."

Interestingly, according to Failano, her daughter performs better in Chinese than English. "Learning Chinese is her interest, not my interest," says Failano. "I really don't care [whether she can speak Chinese well], but at least she can speak it."

Calling designated schools 'public international schools', Failano says being able to speak Chinese fluently is not a necessity in a multicultural society like Hong Kong, and that her daughter could find a position in an English language company in the future.

But according to Wong, designated schools are different from international schools because while internationals have higher teaching qualities, most designated ones have 'survival problems due to bad management' as well as lower teaching qualities; hence they have to accept more minority students 'to keep them from being closed

