

## South China Morning Post

2013-05-06

CITY6| LIFE| By Linda Yeung

### Lost for words

Local primary students have no problem reading and writing the Chinese characters for common words such as “mushroom”, “pumpkin” or even “universal suffrage”. Not so for Pakistani girl Igra Khan, who is in Form Three.

Although she followed her mother to Hong Kong when she was 10 months old, Khan is lagging behind her local peers in Chinese-language skills. She can speak the language fluently owing to her mingling with local children in school, but her reading and writing is weak. The importance of the language in Hong Kong means *ethnic minority* students like her have a bleak future, with little hope of getting into local universities.

A survey carried out by the Equal Opportunities Commission last year showed that students from South Asia, such as Pakistanis and Nepalis, accounted for 3.2 per cent of primary school pupils, but only 1.1 per cent of senior secondary students and 0.59 per cent of tertiary education students.

Their under-representation in local higher education has caught the attention of the United Nations Human Rights Committee. At a meeting in March, it urged the Hong Kong government to implement the recommendation of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination to “intensify its efforts to encourage the integration of students of *ethnic* minorities in public school education” and to report back within one year.

More than 10,000 *ethnic minority* pupils study at mainstream primary and secondary schools, and at schools that cater specifically to them. The 31 “designated” schools offer a much simpler Chinese curriculum than mainstream schools because of students’ diverse Chinese-language levels. Local families often shun these schools, worried that their children will be exposed to negative influences from, for example, perceived behavioural problems of children from *ethnic minority* families.

The large curricular gap, many believe, keeps South Asians at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder.

Khan’s 18-year-old sister, who moved to the territory at the age of 10, had so much trouble learning Chinese that she quit school altogether. She now works at a laundry.

Many believe in the necessity of a more advanced curriculum that offers systematic training in Chinese, backed by proper assessments and clear learning objectives, to help students like Igra and her sister come to grips with the language. But that requires support from the government, including the provision of teacher training.

“Many schools like ours want to see a curriculum that reaches the level of Form Three. That would allow students to understand newspapers and office documents. The standard of Chinese in the Hong Kong Diploma

of Secondary Education examination is too high for non-Chinese speakers,” says Ho Sau-yin, principal of Islamic Kasim Tuet Memorial College.

Her school prepares students for the British General Certificate of Education (GCE) examination in Chinese – the level of which is only equivalent to Primary Six to Form One in mainstream schools. Such a standard is hardly enough to get one into university or qualify for a job as a civil servant.

At present, the teaching of Chinese varies among designated schools owing to limited resources, adds Fermi Wong Wai-fun, the founder of rights organisation Unison. Some South Asian students, frustrated with their lack of competency, have dropped out of school.

“Many have come to us seeking help in finding jobs,” she says. “They have only finished Form One or Two but have lost interest in learning. They lacked support in learning Chinese even when they were in primary school. Some came to the conclusion that they are not fit to be educated, but that is not true. There is a problem with the system. Talent is being wasted. The provision of Chinese learning in some schools is illogical, sometimes giving K3 material to students at P4 level.”

Thas Mohamed – a second-year Indian student at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology who attended an international school and a local private primary school – had his recent application for internship at Microsoft rejected because of his lack of Chinese-language skills. At primary school, he took Chinese as a third language.

“There was not much reading to do,” he says. “I did not really think much about whether I needed it before, but now I’m at university, I am trying to learn Putonghua by taking courses.”

In Igra’s case, lacking support from her family, she failed at Chinese dictation at a mainstream primary school. At the end of Primary Six, she had the option of going to a Band Three government school (the poorest in academic standards in the government sector) but decided to attend a designated school instead as her mother was worried about discipline problems there.

Wong and others have warned about lingering inter-generational poverty among South Asians and resulting social problems if there is no remedy to the situation. Some Indian women dropouts, she says, get married at a young age and face an even heavier burden from their new families and, in some cases, abuse by their husbands.

Census statistics from 2011 show that among all working non-Chinese males, Pakistanis and Nepalis had the lowest median monthly income – of HK\$10,000 and HK\$12,000 respectively – against a median of HK\$13,000 for the general Hong Kong working population.

Director-general of Oxfam Hong Kong, Stephen Fisher, says about one in seven South Asians are on social security. “Many of those who work are construction workers, security guards or goods deliverers. The girls work in restaurants.”

He echoes Wong’s call for the government to help *ethnic minority* students get equal footing in their pursuit of further education and, eventually, gainful employment. “Many of them can speak but not read or write the language. Since the handover, the government has upheld the bilingual language policy requiring all civil servants to be proficient in both Chinese and English. But the GCE A-level score obtained by *ethnic minority* students does not reach the standard required.”

He also lambasts the government for failing to acknowledge the need to help the students overcome their handicap. "In most cases they are concentrated in designated schools; occasionally there are one or two who make it to a Band One school. Overall, many in secondary schools drop out in Form Three. The current system is not just and is creating poverty," he says, calling the existence of designated schools a form of discrimination.

Wong, the veteran rights campaigner, urges the EOC to investigate the problem. "What is lacking now is political will and an equal concern for all," she says.

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Schools are failing South Asian students by not teaching them the Chinese-language skills needed for higher education, says **Linda Yeung**

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DOCUMENT ID: 20130506270028

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