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Education nightmare for *ethnic* minorities

A failure to teach Chinese as a second language in Hong Kong's public schools is holding back pupils who don't speak it at home

For the 15,000 pupils in Hong Kong's public schools who don't speak Chinese, not knowing the local language doesn't just hold back their education.

Forced into one of a handful of schools with scarce resources and no classes offering Chinese as a second language, advocates say not enough is being done to help *ethnic minority* pupils integrate and break a cycle of poverty.

And, campaigners say, the problems in the education system reflect a wider social issue: the question of whether the government considers the city's *ethnic-minority* residents to be true Hongkongers.

"The government's major problem is it still views Hong Kong's non-Chinese population as transient, and that they have another place to call home," says Puja Kapai, a fourth-generation Hongkonger whose family came from India. "It's nonsensical to tell us to go back home ... and this [mentality] feeds government policies today.

"It's disconcerting."

Kapai began her education at a school designated for *ethnic minority* pupils before her parents scrimped and saved to put her through international and English Schools Foundation schools. She went on to graduate from the University of Hong Kong with a law degree before earning a master's on a scholarship at Harvard. She is now back at HKU as an associate professor of law.

But her growing frustration with a number of government policies – most notably the education system and the failure to offer classes in Chinese as a second language – leads her to believe that *ethnic minority* people are not considered part of the city's long-term future.

"Where else do I belong if not here?" she says. "If the government doesn't want to treat us as their people, just tell us.

“It upsets me that we are not part of the vision of Hong Kong’s future.”

Ironically, the Education Bureau has emerged as the leading opponent of offering classes in Chinese as a second language, according to Fermi Wong Wai-fun, a long-time campaigner for *minority* rights as director of lobby group Unison. The government is well aware of the segregation in local schools but has allowed it to happen, Wong says.

“I have heard officials saying that it is [*ethnic minority* people’s] laziness which keeps them from learning Chinese, or that their parents prefer them to stick to their own culture,” Wong says.

“There is still blatant denial of any problems, or even blaming of *ethnic minority* pupils and parents for today’s situation,” she says.

Stephen Fisher, director general of the charity Oxfam in Hong Kong and a former director of the Social Welfare Department, sees bureaucracy and the lack of strong voices for *ethnic minority* communities as barriers to change in education.

“Because the Education Bureau doesn’t feel a lot of political pressure from the community on the issue, they don’t feel like there is a need, nor the will to do this,” Fisher says. “But if society is a fair and compassionate one, we need to help the most vulnerable.”

For Kapai, education should be an equalising factor which offers young people the hope of a better life. But *ethnic-minority* children are hitting barriers – for example, it is virtually impossible to pass public exams needed for a university place without strong Chinese-language skills.

She is making efforts to secure change. Together with businesswoman Shalini Mahtani, she has joined the board of Unison. Both hope to take part in more rights advocacy work.

Mahtani’s family, originally from India, have called Hong Kong home for five generations now. Trained as an accountant, Mahtani knew Unison through her husband, who has been heavily involved in advocacy work since the 1980s.

“Part of the problem is because we haven’t shouted and screamed,” said Mahtani. “Most immigrant communities don’t want to ask for anything, not even help when they need it.”

But Mahtani says the number of locally born and bred non-Chinese, dark-skinned Hongkongers is growing, and they are well aware of their rights as citizens.

Mahtani said the situation for Hong Kong’s minorities was easier in the colonial era, although her limited Cantonese made life harder for her as a trainee accountant. Today, however, being able to speak, read and write Chinese is a prerequisite for most jobs.

“Without the support at home, it is almost impossible to learn Chinese,” Mahtani says. “Many cannot grasp the difficulty of learning Chinese. Sometimes I get ashamed, too, that I can’t speak Cantonese fluently.”

While the government insists there is no segregation, up to 80 per cent of *ethnic minority* pupils in public schools attend one of just 31 primary and secondary schools which have few Chinese students. Locked out of the better public schools due to their poor language skills, *ethnic minority* children have little choice but to go

to schools that struggle for pupils.

Fisher believes that, if the problem of language skills is not solved, members of ethnic minority communities will continue to be held back.

“Hong Kong has a relatively big South Asian community – including three *ethnic* groups: Pakistanis, Nepalese and Indian,” Fisher says. Many of them are second- or even third-generation Hongkongers, but they still face the problem of being unable to learn Chinese. Some may know how to speak it, but cannot read nor write.”

Since the handover in 1997, a growing number of jobs once open to English speakers have added a Chinese-language requirement. In the past, many Indians and Pakistanis worked in the disciplined services, as police or immigration officers, Fisher says, but the requirement for Cantonese and even Putonghua knowledge has ruled that out for most.

“The new language requirement was not reflected in our education system – no changes were made to help students cope with the new demands,” Fisher says. “It is a policy failure that made [*ethnic-minority* pupils] unable to learn Chinese well enough.”

Fisher says the best way to help non-Chinese-speaking children catch up with their Chinese peers is to offer a curriculum, spanning no more than 24 months in Primary One and Primary Two, offering extra support in Chinese.

“An *ethnic minority* student’s learning curve is much steeper,” Fisher says. “But if given enough help in the first 12 months, or at most 24 months, it could help them catch up, and continue their Chinese lessons with the rest of their peers.”

To begin with, Fisher suggests that each of Hong Kong’s 18 districts should have one primary school offering a class in Chinese as a second language. Children in the class would share other lessons with peers, allowing them to interact early on with peers of different races.

“We need to start changing our mindset,” he says, adding that good education is not about offering each child exactly the same amount of help, regardless of whether they need it or not, but allocating resources where they are needed. “And right now, *ethnic minority* children need support in learning Chinese.”

Not only will the children benefit from better educational and work opportunities, Fisher says, but the government will benefit too as it will have fewer people relying on welfare for support.

“The classroom should be a laboratory, a place where pure-minded children who have blank slates ... can learn to experience the world the way it is,” said Kapai. “The opportunity [provided by education] has been squandered and made a mess of.”

Separated throughout their school years and social circles, local Chinese and non-Chinese communities often do not interact until they meet in the workplace, where misunderstandings are inevitable and stereotypes are already in place, she says.

Many of the students she teaches at HKU are surprised to learn that she is a local, rather than an expatriate. “Most of my students had little experience of meeting *ethnic* minorities, let alone a successful *ethnic minority* person,” she said. “It’s still shocking to me, but it is easily explained, considering the education system in Hong

Kong.”

For both Mahtani and Kapai, the demands are simple: teach Chinese as a second language in schools; end segregation; absorb *ethnic minority* rights and views in all aspects of policymaking.

The Education Bureau argues that there is no need for change.

“The curriculum policy of Hong Kong is in support of equal opportunity, social and economic integration for all local students,” a spokeswoman said. “We are now collecting evidence in a professional view of developing [sic] a more systematic Chinese language learning framework to facilitate teachers’ work, as a way forward.”

Government support measures for *minority* pupils include a supplementary guide for teaching Chinese and after-school support, as well as additional funding of between HK\$300,000 and HK\$600,000 for schools with 10 or more *ethnic minority* children.

EDUCATION NIGHTMARE FOR ethnic minorities

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Businesswoman Shalini Mahantani (left), associate law professor Pooja Kapai and Oxfam director Stephen Fisher are critical of education barriers. Photos: Nora Tam, Edward Wong

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Jennifer Ng
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And, campaigners say, the problems in the education system reflect a wider social issue: the question of whether the government considers the city's ethnic-minority residents to be true Hongkongers.

"The government's major problem is it still views Hong Kong's non-Chinese population as transient, and that they have another place to call home," says Pooja Kapai, a fourth-generation Hongkonger whose family came from India. "It's monumental to tell us to go back home... and this [mentally] feeds government policies today."

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But her growing frustration with a number of government policies — most notably the education system and the failure to offer classes in Chinese as a second language — leads her to believe that ethnic minority people are not considered part of the city's long-term future.

"When else do I belong if not here?" she says. "If the government doesn't want to treat us as their people, just tell us."

It upsets me that we are not part of the vision of Hong Kong's future. Ironically, the Education Bureau has emerged as the leading exponent of offering classes in Chinese as a second language, according to Ferni Wong Wai-



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While the government insists there is no segregation, up to 80 per cent of ethnic minority pupils in public schools attend one of just 31 primary and secondary schools which have few Chinese students. Locked out of the better public schools due to their poor language skills, ethnic minority children have little choice but to go to schools that struggle for pupils.

Fisher believes that, if the problem of language skills is not solved, members of ethnic-minority communities will continue to be held back.

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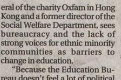
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Not only will the children benefit from better educational and work opportunities, Fisher says, but the government will benefit too as well have fewer people in the classroom should be a laboratory, a place where pampered children who have blank slates ... can learn to experience the world the way it is," said Kapai. "The opportunity [provided by education] has been squandered and made a mess of."

Separated throughout their school years and social circles, local Chinese and non-Chinese communities often do not intersect until they meet in the workplace, where misunderstandings are inevitable and stereotypes are already in place, she says.

Many of the students she teaches at HKU are surprised to learn that she is a local, rather than an expatriate. "Most of my students had little experience of meeting ethnic minorities, let alone a successful ethnic minority person," she said. "It is still shocking to me, but it is easily explained, considering the education system in Hong Kong."

For both Mahantani and Kapai, the demands are simple: teach Chinese as a second language in schools and segregate about ethnic minority rights and views in all aspects of policymaking.

The Education Bureau argues that there is no need for change.

"The curriculum policy of Hong Kong is in support of equal opportunity, social and economic integration for all local students," a spokeswoman said. "We are now collecting evidence [to see] if a more systematic Chinese language learning framework to facilitate teachers' work, as a way forward."

Government support measures for minority pupils include supplementary guides for teaching Chinese and after-school support, as well as additional funding of between HK\$300,000 and HK\$500,000 for schools with 10 or more ethnic minority children.

To begin with, Fisher suggests that each of Hong Kong's 18 districts should have one primary school offering a class in Chinese as a second language. Children in the class would share other lessons with peers, allowing

them to interact early on with peers of different races.

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