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Struggling to understand

Young members of *ethnic* minorities breaking into the job market are finding career goals blocked and hopes dimmed, because of an educational system that placed low emphasis on teaching them the Chinese language. Li Yao reports.

Faisal, 22, a third-generation Pakistani in Hong Kong, regrets going to a secondary school designated for *ethnic* minorities and missing out on the opportunity to attend a Chinese language school.

Faisal attended Delia Memorial School (Broadway) in Lai Chi Kok. There were 15 Pakistanis, making up the largest *ethnic* group, followed by Indians and Filipinos. There was no Chinese-speaking students in his class for the first four years. In Primary 5, two Chinese-speaking students transferred into the class.

Delia Memorial delivers its lessons in English, though the students speak their native languages. Faisal thought it would be fun to go to school with kids from cultural backgrounds similar to his.

In 2010, Faisal graduated with an A standing in General Certification of Secondary Education. The high grade didn't do him much good in the job market, especially after he hit the language barrier. His Chinese wasn't very good.

He applied for a clerical job first. He went to the interview — was asked to write something. He'd have to write, as a clerk. It's part of the job. The simple self-introduction he handed in fell flat with the prospective new boss who told him he needed better writing skills.

After applying for several more jobs, Faisal got an offer from a delivery company but his triumph didn't last long. A few weeks after he started, his supervisors started finding fault with him. He was expected to be able to read the addresses, and everything on the invoice when he picked up goods for delivery. Again, his lack of proficiency in Chinese rose up to defeat him. Like most graduates of *ethnic minority* schools, his Chinese proficiency was equivalent to Primary 3 or 4.

A month later, the disapproving scowls of his supervisors broke through his personal barrier and he quit. He began to wish that his parents had chosen a different school.

“If I had attended a Chinese language school, I would have had better chances of finding jobs,” he said. Faisal’s younger brother, 18, learned the lesson of the older brother’s experience and went directly to a Chinese school. “My brother is taking training courses so he can join the police force,” Faisal said. Faisal, in the meantime, got a job with a non-governmental organization providing community services. He likes the job, likes meeting different people, playing with kids, organizing activities, and practicing Chinese. Some of his colleagues are helping him with his language skills.

“If employers show some patience or give *ethnic minority* applicants a chance, applicants are willing to improve their Chinese and pull out their best work performance,” Faisal said, “but the reality is the door is rarely opened to *ethnic minority* applicants, and they usually find jobs in the construction industry, or as security guards.”

An overdue opportunity

Jeff Andrews, 28, was born in Hong Kong and raised in an Indian family. His Cantonese is flawless, sounds very local, but he can’t read or write Chinese. He’s found learning to read and write Chinese a struggle from his first day of school. Andrews said he was never given a chance to study Chinese. The school he attended used French as its medium of instruction.

Poor Chinese proficiency limits career prospects for *ethnic minority* students. “Many of my friends want to serve in the police force, the fire service, but they can’t because of their Chinese,” he said.

Andrews gave up the dream of becoming a professional football player, because he could not fill in the application form in Cantonese. He asked a security guard to translate and explain the requirements on the form. Years later, he considered becoming a football coach. He went to the Hong Kong Football Association, and learned he needed to pass an exam in Chinese.

“*Ethnic minority* students need the chance to study Chinese at school. Otherwise they will fall into a vicious cycle. We don’t want to continue the struggle, and continue claiming Comprehensive Social Security Assistance,” he said.

The language education system in Hong Kong, say critics, is producing semi-illiterate *ethnic minority* students, who struggle to learn their native language, then English and Chinese, said Louisa Castro, a liberal studies teacher at the Islamic Kasim Tuet Memorial College. The secondary school located in Chai Wan is a designated school for non-Chinese speaking students, mostly South Asians.

Castro has seen students enroll at the college, year after year, because of lack of support from their primary schools. “They are semi-illiterate, in their own language, in English, and especially in Chinese. They can’t even write their schools’ names in Chinese after six years’ studies. Why, what happened to them?” she asked.

Castro’s daughter is learning Chinese, but finds it extremely difficult. Castro speaks fluent English, Cantonese, and Mandarin, but has very limited proficiency in written Chinese to tutor her daughter.

In the case of Cantonese, it really comes to learning two languages. Parents don’t realize at first that Cantonese is only a spoken dialect, and the written language is different from the spoken. South Asian children usually have no problem conversing in Cantonese. It is the written characters that defeat them, Castro said.

“How is it possible for these students to go up the social ladder in Hong Kong, given that there is no really good

support for them to learn Chinese?”, she added.

In July 2010, the Equal Opportunities Commission set up a working group on the education of *ethnic* minorities to explore policy adjustments, to provide students with an even chance. The commission issued its report in July 2011, “Education for All”, which pointed out that the number of *ethnic minority* students attaining to higher education is disproportionately low compared with the majority, *ethnic* Chinese.

In the 2011 Census, *ethnic minority* students going to university accounted for only 1.5 percent as compared with the predominant Chinese students (1,461 *ethnic minority* university students out of 91,546 in total in Hong Kong).

Teaching Chinese

as a second language

Gerard Postiglione, chair professor of sociology and education policy at the Faculty of Education, the University of Hong Kong, believes young South Asians can learn Chinese well if they have a good curriculum and good teachers. What failed them is the language policy. “Clearly it is not working, neither the segregated schools nor the designated ones for *ethnic minority* students. In the past, it was easy to ignore the problem,” he said. “Some of the Chinese teachers I met are of the mentality that the ability to learn Chinese is in your blood. If you don’t have Chinese blood, you can’t learn it well.”

He said the society at large has to change and push *ethnic minority* students to learn Cantonese. Hong Kong people will speak English to a person who does not look like a Chinese, even if that person speaks good Cantonese. The *ethnic minority* students need more chances to practice Cantonese and build their confidence, he said.

Annie Li, campaign officer at Hong Kong Unison, a charitable organization advocating policy reforms for *ethnic minority* residents, said the group is continuing to press the chief executive to fulfill the promise he made in his election manifesto to improve Chinese language education for *ethnic* minorities and facilitate their integration to the mainstream society.

Hong Kong Unison calls for the Education Bureau to teach Chinese as a second language as a matter of policy, to allocate resources for developing an alternative curriculum and assessment criteria to assist *ethnic minority* students to move forward in education and into the employment market.

Contact the writer at

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Language Fund for after-school extended Chinese learning for non-Chinese speaking students

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faisal

locally born pakistani

Opportunity to receive university education for young people aged 19 to 22

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HONG KONG

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ETHNIC MINORITIES

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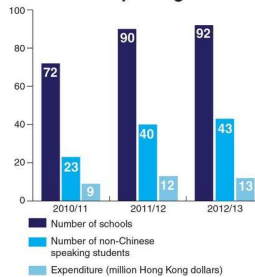
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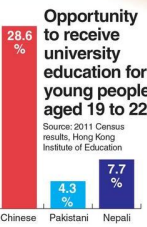
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FAISAL, LOCALLY BORN PAKISTANI



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GERARD POSTIGLIONE
CHAIR PROFESSOR OF SOCIOLOGY & EDUCATION POLICY,
THE UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG



Lawmakers and members of the public taking part in a march organized by Hong Kong Union to request government subsidy in Chinese language examination fees for ethnic minorities.

Expenditure of grants to designated schools for non-Chinese speaking students

