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Lost for words

Advocates for the city's *ethnic minorities* have cautiously welcomed the initiative to improve Chinese language education for non-native speakers. But many doubt the latest changes to education policy will go far enough to break the cycle of poverty that has afflicted minority group members in recent years. Ming Yeung reports.

Among educators, it's been a popular cause for the last several years — to clamor against the education sector's abject failure to teach *ethnic* minority students proficiency in the Chinese language. In last month's Policy Address, Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying announced plans for the "Chinese Language Curriculum Second Language Learning Framework" to remedy the teaching problem. The news brought an apprehensive sigh of relief — but there is an ongoing concern that this new framework could be hamstrung by the set of guidelines handed to schools in 2008, about how to teach Chinese to minority students.

The 2008 guidelines — almost universally — have been pretty much judged a failure. Young people from *ethnic* communities are graduating from high school, with little or no proficiency in Chinese — either speaking or writing. So they step into the world facing a bleak employment future — especially if the student's family was not well heeled in the first place. That led the system's sharpest critics to charge that a failure in the teaching of Chinese to minority students was contributing to the continuance of the poverty cycle among poor families.

One striking example of the system's failings is Gurung Martin Raja. He'd like to be a cop or a lawyer once he completes his education. His hopes aren't very realistic, though. Martin is a second-generation Nepalese. He was born here but doesn't have enough facility with the language ever to be a lawyer or police officer. Martin struggles with the learning of Chinese — even though his father had foreseen the importance of his children learning the language long ago.

Martin's family is not poor, either. His father, nicknamed Mr Nepal, opened a Nepalese restaurant in Yuen Long. Mr Nepal saw right away his kids needed to be enrolled in mainstream schools to learn to speak and write Chinese if they were to have any future here. Nonetheless, finding a school that wished to take the kids proved challenging.

As it happened, a regular customer at the restaurant was the principal of a Chinese primary school. The principal agreed to admit Martin's second-oldest sister as the school's first non-Chinese student. That proved a hassle for

everybody. The teachers had no experience teaching non-Chinese kids — *ethnic* minority students, who were not native speakers. The teachers were at a loss.

Martin followed his sister into the school two years later. He lagged behind his Chinese classmates the whole time — and he even spoke Cantonese at home. The real snag came, however, when he hit a word he didn't know. No one at home could help him.

Thus, Martin enrolled at a tutorial center where he trundled off every day after school to undertake the intensive study of Chinese. The results proved disappointing as his examination scores clearly demonstrated. His miserable grades in Chinese got him relegated to a band-three Chinese secondary school — which was, by Martin's account, one of the worst five schools in Tin Shui Wai.

“Without the tutorial classes, my Chinese would have been even worse,” said Martin. As far as the five years at the secondary school — they were a waste of time, he says.

Language skills

He was transferred to a “designated” secondary school to study Form Three in Mei Foo, where about one third of his classmates are from South Asia.

Thanks to encouragement from his teachers, Martin improved his language skills — but passing the university entrance exams is by no means guaranteed. For him, the government's initiative to improve instruction for minority students came too late.

Fan Kwok-fai, director of service for Hong Kong Community Network, has seen many *ethnic* minority youths fail to make their way into tertiary education, ending up in low-paid jobs, suffering low self-esteem and caught in the cycle of poverty.

The 2011 census showed that around 12,000 city students are immigrants or second-generation immigrants mainly from Pakistan, Nepal, India, the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia.

Under the current system, South Asian *ethnic* minority students are placed in schools to learn the Chinese language under the “Chinese Language Education Curriculum Framework”, a program initially intended for native Chinese-speakers.

Ethnic minority students are handicapped in the study of Chinese. As was the case with Martin Raja, one leading cause is that they don't get enough support from their families. The curriculum, as set down by the government, is inadequate, say critics. There aren't enough teachers with expertise in teaching Chinese to South Asian *ethnic minorities*. To top it all off, there's no multi-exit examination policy in Hong Kong.

These shortcomings are compounded by the fact that there's no standardized support system for teaching Chinese, says Annie Li, campaign officer for Hong Kong Unison, a non-governmental organization campaigning for *ethnic* minority rights.

Li noted that with the changes announced in the Policy Address, the government at least has admitted that the existing system is not suitable for non-native speakers. On that basis, she welcomes the plan to implement the new framework. “The guidelines used by schools contain nothing concrete to tell teachers what to do to achieve the learning outcome,” said Li, pointing to the ambiguous instruction in the guidelines that says something like

“teach students according to their levels by assessing their performance and making the necessary adjustment”. “How to make the adjustment? It never shows,” she said.

Some mainstream schools admit *ethnic* minority students just to maintain the enrollment they require to keep operating. But they don’t care what the minority students need, Li argued.

The government claims it will “strengthen the Chinese-learning support for *ethnic minorities* from early childhood education to primary and secondary levels”.

“The framework could be used by teachers to plan and pitch their instructions at the appropriate level for second-language learners. The framework should also give indication of how non-Chinese speaking (NCS) students might make their way into the mainstream classroom,” says a spokesman for the Education Bureau (EDB).

“The framework is supported with learning and teaching exemplars, corresponding learning and teaching materials as well as assessment tools that have been successfully field-tested to enable teachers to more accurately detect the proficiency level of individual NCS students, identify appropriate strategies and materials to help students set up progressively attainable learning goals in improving their Chinese language proficiency.”

There are 31 designated schools where non-Chinese speaking students are taught. English is the language of instruction, while the students are taught Chinese language at an elementary level. The 31 schools get extra funding but the de facto segregation and discrimination against minority students goes on, says Annie Li. The fact that the EDB provided funding last year to all schools with more than 10 minority students hasn’t changed things.

“In the 2012-13 school year, eight schools had enrolled more than 90 percent of *ethnic* minority students. Twenty schools had enrolled more than half. These students don’t know what it’s like to live in a Chinese society, let alone speak the language. I don’t see how the change in funding will improve the situation,” Li commented.

One of the biggest ironies, Li argued, is that the government has twisted things around and is demanding that *ethnic* minority students verify their intention to stay in Hong Kong before they can become eligible for additional concessions to their education.

Minority students graduating from designated schools have only Primary Two level in Chinese when they sit for their GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) exams to qualify for university entrance.

“At present, the *ethnic* minority students are in a huge dilemma in which either designated or mainstream schools are not suitable for them. If they study in designated schools, they are trapped in their own circles; if they study in mainstream schools, they don’t get enough help to keep up with their Chinese peers,” Li said.

Bi Feeira, Irfan, and Amreen Bi are siblings from a Pakistani family, who are studying in a secondary school where they are given only elementary instruction in Chinese. When asked to read aloud a primary-three level Chinese poem about the Mid-Autumn Festival, they could barely read half way through.

“The Chinese level in our school is just so so but I know some girls studying in Chinese schools are having a hard time catching up with the class,” Bi Feeira said.

Research center

Apart from the need to introduce a standard curriculum, Fan Kwok-fai believes educating parents is just as important. Children need to speak Chinese more often than even their mother tongues to enhance their Chinese proficiency.

Hong Kong Unison advocates that the government establish a research center to study teaching Chinese as a second language. The center, comprised of stakeholders on the issue, would examine ways to teach language under a system best suited to the Hong Kong context.

The experienced designated schools could also give a hand, Li suggested, as they have developed a set of relatively strong teaching materials that are useful to non-Chinese speaking students. “Their valuable experience can be shared with all schools. We expect the plight of *ethnic* minority students to vanish if the government and the industry are determined to make it work,” Li said.

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