

Equality in schools has a long way to go in Hong Kong

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A new set of guidelines to help schools deal with the needs of ethnic minorities is just a start, writes Katelyn Chan

On the surface, ethnic minority children in Hong Kong have been given more attention in recent years. A Chinese-language curriculum targeting them is rolling out in September and last year the "designated schools" label attached to schools attended by these children was removed.

But integrating into the local community is fraught with difficulties for ethnic minority families. Their children have griped about schools not understanding their culture and needs. Last month, the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) released a set of guidelines in response to inquiries over uniform policies and racial equality.

"The inquiries are about whether they could wear culture or religion-related items such as headscarves and bangles," says EOC spokeswoman Mariana Law.

The guidelines state that uniform rules should respect and take into account students' cultural, religious and racial practices, or they may infringe racial discrimination law.

However, schools are allowed to impose restrictions to maintain school identity and ethos, or for the purposes of education. For example, to facilitate social interaction and class assessments, students should not have their face covered, the guidelines state.

But there may be room for tighter monitoring of schools' practices.

Holing Yip, acting executive director (advocacy) of rights organisation Unison, is disappointed with the EOC guidelines, which she says were too general.

"Mainstream schools have not had enough experience in dealing with race-related issues. They do not know how to flexibly handle situations," she says. "It is hard [for the schools] to know how they can balance the opinions of different parents. While the guidelines say that schools should consult different groups of pupils and parents in an inclusive, transparent manner, schools might not be professional negotiators and lack the experience in balancing opinions."

Yip also thinks that the EOC should have cited more foreign cases. Included in the

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A lot of work has
to be done to
achieve racial
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guidelines was a case in England in 2007 of a girl who had been wearing a form of Muslim dress with approval from her school. One day, she changed into another form of Muslim dress and was advised to return home to change. The student filed a discrimination claim, but the court ruled that the school was justified as it had previously consulted the Muslim community on the accepted outfit.

In Hong Kong, ethnic minority students are generally allowed to match their ethnic or religious outfits with school uniform. Muslim girls can wear trousers underneath their skirts. Some schools allow them to wear veils how they like - meaning they can choose to cover their faces.

Susan (not her real name) is a 21-year-old third-generation Hongkonger, whose Muslim family came from Pakistan. Susan has just finished her studies, but she has six siblings, aged three to 18, who are still attending school.

She prefers clearer rules on how students can dress. In her school, which was formerly "designated" for ethnic minorities, she wore ethnic items together with the standard school uniform, while her Muslim classmates from more traditional families wore full sleeves and trousers, and head scarves that covered much of their faces. Her own parents felt pressured by other Muslim families to have her dress more conservatively, Susan says.

"The school might think it was no big deal. Or it simply did not acknowledge the problem," says Susan. "There should be a balance between [the interests of] the people who want to be more conservative, and those who want to be less conservative. This was exactly what was missing in the guidelines issued by the EOC."

Many parents prefer schools that are more liberal, yet they tend to be academically weaker, meaning their children might have less of a chance of entering a top school later.

Both Yip and Susan think that the school uniform issue is only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the protection of rights and respect for minority students. Both prefer a holistic code of practice.

In the formerly designated school attended by Susan, school meals were another issue.

"We do not eat pork. And we only eat meat that is halal," she says. "Sometimes the snacks contain animal fat."

The EOC's Law concedes that "a lot of work has to be done to achieve racial equality in Hong Kong".

She says they want to pitch the booklet as general guidelines at this initial stage. "We will exchange experiences with schools to enrich the booklet in due course," she says, also emphasising the importance of respecting school autonomy.

Yuen Kwok-ming is the principal of Caritas Tuen Mun Marden Foundation Secondary School, which is a former designated school. More than 60 per cent of its students are ethnic minorities from 15 countries.

While Yuen welcomes the EOC guidelines, he says that they could only serve as a general policy framework.

"It is surely essential for the public and educators to understand the issue," he says.

"However, as school-based management is under way, we often need to consider [the issues] under different contexts. Each school also has their own specific cases and it would be hard for the EOC to offer guidelines that cover all situations."

Yuen says that language barriers undermine schools' understanding of the cultural and religious needs of students.

"They would like to give respect, but sometimes might not know what to do. A lot of Pakistani families cannot speak Chinese or English. However, the schools might not have interpreters to explain the school rules," he says. "As more schools are taking on minority students, they will have to shoulder the costs of hiring the right staff to communicate with parents."

Now helping other schools to deal with minority students, Yuen has called for a support group or a consultation service to be set up by the Education Bureau to address issues such as uniform guidelines or diet for ethnic minority students.

"As the Education Bureau understands school management more than the EOC does, they should set up a support group for this," he says.

At the moment, the Education Bureau is coordinating a network to promote mutual support among schools through the sharing of experience and raising the interest of non-Chinese speaking students in learning Chinese. There are 71 schools in this network, including 58 primary and 13 secondary schools.

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