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Minorities ‘cut off’ from learning

Most subsidised kindergartens hold interviews in Chinese only, shutting out many applicants

Seventy per cent of kindergartens that take part in the government’s pre-primary education voucher scheme conduct their application interviews and print parent notices only in Chinese, effectively cutting them off as choices for ethnic minority children whose families may not speak the language.

Of 239 kindergartens surveyed over the phone by ethnic minority rights charity Unison from December last year to April this year, 170 were covered by the government’s voucher scheme and 69 were not.

The scheme provides subsidies for parents who lack the financial means to send their infants to nurseries or not-for-profit kindergartens.

More than 75 per cent of those covered by the scheme indicated they only provided school notices in Chinese. Among those not under the scheme, 20 per cent had notices only in Chinese while 43 provided bilingual notices if they were important.

The charity also conducted 14 interviews with ethnic minority families, many of whom said they experienced discrimination and rejection when trying to apply to local kindergartens.

“My father was trying to obtain an application form for a local kindergarten, but he was denied. The teacher there just said: ‘We don’t take people like you,’ even after my father had spoken in Cantonese,” said Shamaila Khan, the eldest of seven siblings in a Pakistani family.

“We wanted our youngest sister to attend a Chinese kindergarten so she could learn better Chinese, because we know how important that is.”

Khan said she knew from first-hand experience that without good Chinese, it was extremely hard to find a job.

“In the end we didn’t apply to that school. The attitude the teacher had ... was very racially discriminatory,” Khan said.

While many kindergartens were unable or unwilling to say how many ethnic minority children were in their schools, the charity found that some had almost 90 per cent ethnic minority children while others had none, creating “de facto segregation”.

The Education Bureau was “evading responsibility”, said Unison’s executive director, Phyllis Cheung

Fung-mei.

Cheung said while the bureau claimed to care about ethnic minorities learning Chinese, it also said kindergarten education was not within its jurisdiction.

A spokesman for the Education Bureau said there were 7,000 non-Chinese-speaking children in local kindergartens, with 5,000 of them in kindergartens accepting the vouchers. He said the bureau provided ethnic minority parents with information on Hong Kong's education system on its website, including pamphlets and school information.

"The bureau has reminded kindergartens ... they should follow the law, that all children – no matter their race, gender and ability – should be given an equal chance," he said.

Curriculum details and other information about schools on the bureau's website are also only available in Chinese.

Cheung encouraged kindergartens to take ethnic minorities.

"Hong Kong is a multicultural and diverse society. Early integration is valuable education for the children," Cheung said.

The Equal Opportunities Commission urged anyone who felt they had received unequal treatment to lodge a complaint.

EDUCATION

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SHAMAILA KHAN

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