

Reflecting on Human Rights Day: Ethnic minorities still face unfairness in education

FP www.hongkongfp.com/2016/12/12/reflecting-on-human-rights-day-ethnic-minorities-still-face-unfairness-in-education/

Hong Kong Unison

By Phyllis Cheung

Saturday was Human Rights Day. In a resourceful and free society like Hong Kong, human rights violations seem to be a distant concern. Yet inequality happens and the most basic human rights are blatantly neglected in our city. For Hong Kong Unison, this inequality takes the form of poor Chinese education for ethnic minority students in Hong Kong.



A 2015 protest. File photo: Hong Kong Unison.

This year marks our 15th anniversary and also over a decade of effort by students, parents, teachers and Unison fighting for more equitable education opportunity for ethnic minority children.

With a Chinese language curriculum designed for Chinese native speakers and the mother tongue policy, our education policy assumes every student's mother tongue is Chinese and – it would not be a stretch to say – assumes every student to be Chinese. It overlooks Hong Kong's diversity and the education rights of ethnic minorities. Sadly, the remedial measures have been slow a-coming.

Unison has been calling on the government to implement a Chinese as a Second Language (CSL) education policy and to formulate a real CSL curriculum to ensure students are well-supported in their Chinese learning.

Yet this move has been interpreted by some as asking for “special treatment” for ethnic minorities. Some think non-Chinese students should just accept the current system, flaws and all as it is or leave it.

Others have commented that Chinese children who have migrated to English-speaking countries such as the US or the UK can acquire near-native English abilities, so the only reason ethnic minorities in Hong Kong can't learn Chinese well must be due to their reluctance to learn or integrate into the community.



Photo: Hong Kong Unison.

Let's make no mistake that equal rights to education doesn't just mean making sure every child has a school to go to. It goes beyond that. If Hong Kong's education system decides that Chinese is the language everyone must learn, then the system has a responsibility to make sure every student regardless of racial background or learning abilities learns the language well enough to benefit equally from education.

This is the spirit behind equal rights to education. The equivalent of a Chinese as Second Language curriculum in English-speaking countries – English as a Second Language – is the reason why many immigrants in these countries can become fluent in English. It is only because these policies are mature and well-formulated that they are invisible to outside observers.

And meanwhile, children are getting left behind and talents are being wasted because they cannot master a language that is key to their success in subjects other than Chinese, and this is not for want of trying or ambition from students or from parents.

When whole communities of bright eager children can't learn the language well and generations of them fall through the cracks, we can't turn a blind eye to the system and instead choose to point our fingers at the community.



In observance of Human Rights Day, Unison organized our 6th Hikathon to hike for racial equality and ethnic minorities' equal right to education. Almost 300 people came out to support the cause.

But as the United Nations message for Human Rights Day 2016 says, what is needed is all of us standing up for each other's rights all the time. So let's all stand up for ethnic minorities' right to education, and make sure our education policies reflect our value as an inclusive and diverse society.

Phyllis Cheung is the Executive Director of Hong Kong Unison



Comments