

Equal Opportunities Commission calls for increased government aid to help Hong Kong's ethnic minority students learn Chinese more effectively

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- Commission asks for more funding to develop a special curriculum for ethnic minority students and training of teachers
- It says inadequate government measures have deprived ethnic minority members of a chance get better education and job opportunities



Equal opportunities officer Raymond Ho says a native Chinese teacher may not be able to understand the language requirements of a non-native student. Picture: Handout

Hong Kong's anti-discrimination watchdog has called for more government funding to develop a special curriculum for ethnic minority students and to train teachers on helping non-Chinese-speaking students learn the language more effectively.

The Equal Opportunities Commission said the inadequacies in the current government measures, which prevailed for years, had deprived many members of the ethnic minority community of better education and job opportunities, preventing their upward social mobility.

The commission's calls came as it released its latest report on education for ethnic minorities, which looked at the government's efforts in the area since 2011.

While the government had introduced some support measures, the commission said "uncertainties and inadequacies" remained in the policies and their implementation, pointing to a lack of systematic training of teachers.

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"Many schools just ask the Chinese teacher to teach the language to ethnic minority students. But teaching Chinese as a second language is a totally different thing. A native Chinese teacher may not understand what the non-Chinese-speaking students need," senior equal opportunities officer Raymond Ho Wing-keung said.

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The Equal Opportunities Commission says inadequate government measures have deprived ethnic minority members of a chance get better education and job opportunities. Photo: Felix Wong

Ho also said there was a lack of teaching materials and textbooks for both teachers and students in the market, caused by inadequate government support.

The commission asked for the development of a "full-fledged Chinese-as-a-second-language curriculum complete with specific pedagogy, corresponding teaching tools and textbooks, and systematic teacher training".

Separate and unequal? Hong Kong ethnic minorities suffer at school

After the commission's last report on the issue in 2011, the government in 2014 announced a series of measures to step up educational support for ethnic minority students, including additional funding to schools admitting 10 or more ethnic minority students. In addition, a practical Chinese test was introduced to offer them alternative Chinese language qualification.

In the 2014-15 school year, the government also introduced the "Chinese Language Curriculum Second Language Learning Framework", to encourage teachers to set targets to help ethnic minority students learn Chinese.

But concern groups have criticised the framework as useless allegedly because of a lack of a formal indicator to measure the progress of the students and standard of their proficiency.

Mandy Cheuk Man-po, a project manager at the ethnic minority concern group Hong Kong Unison, supported the idea of a special Chinese language curriculum.



Mandy Cheuk Man-po of Hong Kong Unison supports the idea of a special syllabus for non-native-Chinese students to ensure they learn the language more effectively. Photo: Handout

"We are not just asking for an easier Chinese syllabus for the ethnic minority students. They are also local students, but just that their mother language is not Chinese. There should be a special syllabus for them to ensure they can be taught the language more effectively, to eventually help them catch up with their native-Chinese classmates."

A study by the Hong Kong Policy Research Institute released in March found that ethnic minority students could understand only 70 per cent of what was being taught in class because Chinese was the major medium of instruction in schools.

The problem resulted in low university enrolment rates for such students, with ethnic minority students accounting for only 1.4 per cent of the total 2016-17 intake in Hong Kong's higher education institutes, according to the study.

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"It is a common misconception that ethnic minority students, who were born and raised in Hong Kong, have the same Chinese language standards as their native classmates. So, their requirements are often overlooked," Cheuk said.

Professional Teachers' Union president Fung Wai-wah also said there should be more training for teachers. "Sporadic one-off training workshops are far from enough," Fung said.

Rizwan Ullah, convenor of the commission's working group on education for ethnic minorities, said: "Education is a protected area of the (Racial Discrimination Ordinance). It is the government's responsibility to provide equal educational opportunities to the members of the (ethnic minority) community."

"Education issues of ethnic minorities have long been a strategic priority area for us, given that it is an effective means of empowerment," said commission's chairperson Ricky Chu Man-kin.

The commission's latest report was compiled after the working group met experts, teachers, principals, non-Chinese-speaking students and employers through group-sharing sessions, individual visits and interviews over the past 15 months.

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