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Multicultural education: How are ethnic minorities labelled and educated in post-handover Hong Kong?



FANG GAO ^a

JAN GUBE ^b

^a *The Education University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong*
fgao@eduhk.hk

^b *The Education University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong*
cgube@eduhk.hk

Abstract

Using multicultural education as a lens, this article details the discursive formation of Hong Kong's linguistic landscape with a focus on policy arrangements around teaching Chinese as a second language for non-Chinese ethnic minorities since the early 2000s. We pose two research questions: What are the identifiable policy trends in education for ethnic minorities? And how effective are the policy provisions in managing diversity and social justice for ethnic minorities in Hong Kong? The study draws upon documentary analysis to review existing local literature, which highlight the school admission, curriculum design, language teachers' professional development practices, and assessment pertaining to the education of ethnic minority students. Our analysis reveals a narrow concentration of policies that focus exclusively on supporting ethnic minority students' Chinese language learning regarded as the barrier to their advancement in education and an omission of other nonlinguistic, structural and ideological challenges and barriers. This barrier contributes to prejudices in school access, curriculum and assessment that function within an assimilationist integration framework. We call for policy measures that broaden the focus of multicultural education for ethnic minorities and that seek to manage ethnolinguistic diversity for equal citizenship rights in the Asian context.

Keywords: multicultural education, ethnic minorities, Hong Kong handover

Introduction

The presence of diverse ethnicities in post-handover Hong Kong (since its return of sovereignty to China in 1997) has been a ground for discussion about its multicultural status. This discussion is important in the context of the need to confront exclusionary politics, aggressive xenophobia and serious social upheavals (i.e., Black Lives Matter protests) (Sun, 2020) across the globe arising from the flows of migrants and refugees and growth of populism in host cultures. Multicultural education,

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according to Banks (2009), is a holistic approach of restructuring “schools so that all students acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to function in ethnically and racially diverse communities.” It aims to “actualize educational equality for students from diverse groups, and...facilitate their participation...in an inclusive national civic culture” (p. 14), or, more generally, a *modus operandi* in managing diversity, equity and inclusion. In post-handover Hong Kong, except for its diversity in population, there is a paucity of either an ideology and/or policy of multicultural education or scholarship on multicultural education (Kennedy & Hue, 2011).

Multicultural education is pivotal for drawing policy attention to the extent in which minorities navigate the public education system. This paper adopts multicultural education as a lens to examine the discursive discourses among Hong Kong’s minority population and policy arrangements mainly upon teaching Chinese (Cantonese and written Chinese, spoken and daily used by more than 90% of the city’s population) as a second language since the early 2000s when the previously masked ethnic minority students and their educational experiences came to the fore. We ask: 1) What are the identifiable policy trends in education for ethnic minorities? And 2) How effective are the policy provisions in managing diversity and social justice for ethnic minorities in Hong Kong? Analyzing important historical and contemporary educational policies over time will help reveal policy developments in post-handover Hong Kong when the government only recently rolled out tailor-made social services including education to its minority population (Gao, Park, Ki & Tsung, 2011).

In this connection, this study employs documentary analysis to identify the nature of educational policy provision and to evaluate the policy initiatives pertaining to minority students’ learning. Policy statements, legislations, government publications and press releases were reviewed to elucidate changes to, and developments of, landmark legal mandates concerning minority students. Collected documentary sources of data mainly included: Legislative Council (LegCo) reports and press releases; files from government bureaus including Census and Statistics Department (CSD) and Education Bureau (EDB); local NGOs; relevant media reports; and policy-relevant findings from government commissioned studies and other studies. The analysis of document data involved understanding: 1) the information included and conveyed, 2) the underlying values and assumptions made by its producer(s), and 3) any arguments or debates developed thereof (Atkinson & Coffey, 2004). Each text’s meaning was comprehended and set in its immediate organizational setting and the wider social context to critically examine and appraise what it was, what it was used to accomplish, and what its impact was upon minority students’ educational opportunities.

Ethnic Minorities in Post-Handover Hong Kong – The Label of “Non-Chinese Speaking”

Hong Kong—both before and after the handover—has a sizeable multilingual and multiethnic population. As of mid-2016, 92% of Hong Kong’s 7.34 million population were Chinese and 8% were of non-Chinese ethnicity (CSD, 2017). Statistically, non-Chinese are represented in four categories, comprising of Asian (other than Chinese), “White” (Caucasians), Mixed, and Others. Excluding foreign domestic helpers who reside in the city on short-term contracts, non-Chinese made up 3.6% of the total population, mainly from countries such as Nepal, India, Pakistan, and the Philippines (CSD, 2017). Although small in figures, they represent the fastest-growing demographic in the city with an increase of 70.8% between 2006 and 2016 (CSD, 2017). By the same token, the number of full-time minority students aged under 15, who report not speaking Chinese as their primary language at home, increased by an average of nearly 6.4% each year between 2006-16 (LegCo, 2017).

These South and Southeast Asians have migrated to Hong Kong since the commencement of British colonization in 1841 to facilitate colonial governance and trade (White, 1994). In the colonial period

of British rule, language policy was diglossic, with English being treated as the “high” language, while Chinese was a low-status subordinate language. During this period, the first-generation South and Southeast Asians were perceived as “alien and transient” by locals, and they had the social status of British subjects, not citizens. They worked mostly in police and British army-related jobs and enjoyed a certain degree of social mobility in terms of work-related English (Kapai, 2015). Their children from both advantaged and less-advantaged backgrounds attended schools created for them or studied in English-medium local schools, in which their mother languages (i.e. Hindi or Urdu) or other languages (i.e. French) rather than Chinese were offered as the second language (Gao & Lai, 2018).

With Hong Kong’s new status as Special Administrative Region of China, its complex linguistic landscape and post-handover language-in-education policies have had a significant bearing on how ethnic minorities are labeled. A superimposed bilingualism valuing English as the dominant symbolic capital in the colonial times was replaced by a policy of bi-literacy and trilingualism (Poon, 2010). This policy promotes Chinese as the standard and formal language in school education and civic matters, and as a cultural marker closely associated with local culture and identity. The ensuing launch of a policy mandating Chinese-medium instruction (CMI) in the majority of schools further cemented the Chinese language’s prestigious status, satisfying educational arguments predating 1997 that children learn best in their mother tongue, as well as reflecting the political change. For the second and later generations of South and Southeast Asians, many of whom have sought to naturalize as Hong Kong Chinese nationals, the dominance of the Chinese language requirement in competitive school and post-secondary education admissions processes, and more widely in society, presented a new challenge. With limited oral proficiency and literacy in written Chinese, South and Southeast Asian minorities found themselves categorized as “non-Chinese speaking” (“NCS”) (Education Department, 2001), a label used in policy until this day. This label, while addressing their needs that differ from those of Chinese students, appears to accentuate their perceived linguistic and academic deficits, and positions them as “others” to an imagined homogenous Chinese language community (Gao, Lai & Halse, 2019). This labeling reflects an emphasis on integration and social cohesion in the debates of assimilationist integration approach that needs minority children and youth to learn the host society’s language and culture.

Multicultural Education? Teaching Chinese as a Second Language Policy

Turning to Hong Kong’s international landscape, although diversity seems to be a phenomenon in the cosmopolitan society, the city does not practice multicultural education as a policy measure. Rather, Hong Kong privileges teaching Chinese as a second language in addressing inequality and exclusion faced by its ethno-cultural minorities. Analysis of the extant policy documents indicates that the policies and actions taken by the local government are predominantly “remedial” and presume “NCS” minority students are “lacking” in academic capacities, such as language competencies and motivation. Thus, policy initiatives prioritize enhancing their Chinese language proficiency to the level in which minorities are able to benefit from local education and employment. For example, Leung Chun-ying, the then Chief Executive of the HKSAR, in his 2014 Policy Address “Support for the disadvantaged,” stated:

There are more than 60,000 South Asian ethnic minority people living in Hong Kong, an increase of 50% over the past decade. They have much difficulty integrating fully into the community due to differences in culture, language and ethnic background... Most South Asian ethnic minority residents call Hong Kong home. To integrate into the community and develop their careers, they must improve their ability to listen to, speak, read and write Chinese. We will strengthen the Chinese learning support for ethnic minorities from early childhood education through to primary and secondary levels. (The 2014 Policy Address, p. 22)

Our analysis highlights two key themes in the policy documents. Firstly, recent and on-going policy trends approach the education of ethnic minorities with the compensatory principle, focused on increasing minority students' Chinese language proficiency. The measures include: 1) in 2004/05, integrated school allocation system was intended to allow the admission of ethnic minority students to Chinese-dominant mainstream schools and widen their school choices; in 2006/07, the designated school system was established and assumed to provide focused and extensive care of ethnic minority students; and in 2013/14, this school system was abandoned due to criticism of it segregating minority students from society, with the students instead encouraged to attend mainstream schools for academic and social integration (Hau, 2008); 2) in 2008, a supplementary guide was produced by the Curriculum Development Council that recommended four approaches to delivering the Chinese curriculum to minority students at both primary and secondary levels; in 2014/15, the Chinese Language Curriculum Second Language Learning Framework was introduced with a range of teaching materials, assessment tools and teaching guidelines given to local teachers in order to enhance the teaching quality for ethnic minority students; and in the same year, the Professional Enhancement Grant Scheme for L2 Chinese teachers was put into effect; and in 2019, the Learning Framework was revised and updated according to feedback from local schools and teachers (EDB, 2011, 2014, 2019); and 3) in 2008, international Chinese examinations began to be accepted by the local higher education institutions and subsidies were provided to eligible minority students to take part in the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) in 2010. This was later expanded to other international Chinese examinations (i.e. International General Certificate of Secondary Education – IGCSE and The General Certificate of Education – GCE) in 2012/13 (EDB, 2007).

The second key theme emerging from documentary analysis is that no compelling evidence attests to the effectiveness of language policies for ethnic minorities. Although the HKSAR government has allocated HK\$200 million annually since 2014 to support ethnic minority students learning Chinese, a review of existing government documents and local literature reveals that their Chinese language proficiency remains limited (Equal Opportunity Commission, 2019). In this sense, the policy intention to improve minority students' Chinese language is clear, at least in terms of financial provision. Yet, their daily nonlinguistic, structural and ideological challenges and barriers are left more or less untouched, thereby contributing to prejudices in school access, curriculum and assessment (Hong Kong Unison, 2015). Despite policy efforts to immerse ethnic minority students in mainstream schools and classrooms, the competitive nature of mainstream school admissions and visible racial segregation on school campuses have contributed to South and Southeast Asians from a less advantaged background continuing to retreat to a limited number of segregated schools that teach through English (Office of The Ombudsman, 2019). The result is that frequent contacts with target language speakers in an authentic and immersive language environment in either segregated or mainstream schools has proven to be difficult, if not impossible, and ethnic minority students continue to “live-apart-together” to manage their “alien” cultures and customs (Loper, 2004).

Furthermore, ethnic minorities-dominated primary and secondary schools generally develop a school-based CSL curriculum in which minority students are grouped with other CSL classmates who are learning Chinese at about the same level and oriented towards the acquisition of “Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills” (Cummins, 1981). Yet, academic acquisition in Chinese language, namely “Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency” is decontextualized, thus raising a question of how to assure quality, standardization, and consistency in the Chinese curriculum across the schools (Shum, Gao, Tsung & Ki, 2011).

Finally, the barriers facing minority students have been compounded by an education system where high-stake examinations have a long history and the public still regards testing as a necessary

component of school education. Ethnic minority students generally have had limited chances of succeeding in territory-wide examinations and advancing to higher levels of education (Chee, 2018). Empirical studies showed that the under-representation of minority students in local higher education institutions stems from the lack of Chinese language capital, limited financial resources (lack of economic capital) and inability in shaping valuable networks/relationships with important institutional agents (lack of social capital), all of which receive little policy intervention (Gao, 2017).

In aggregate, Hong Kong's policy rhetoric treats ethnic minorities as a problem. Chinese language is singled out as the greatest barrier against academic and societal integration of ethnic minorities (Gao, 2011). The policies are largely concentrated on Chinese as a second language, reflecting an integrationist ideology that aims at narrowing the differences between minorities and the native-born majority population in certain aspects of social life (i.e. labor force participation). It is presumed that the stronger ethnic minorities are in Chinese language, the better they integrate into the mainstream society (i.e. The 2018 Policy Address). As pragmatic as these policy measures are, they pay little regard to other, often cultural, lines of differences, ranging from food preferences to religious beliefs, regarding existence in the private sphere.

Such measures bring up questions about the extent to which provisioning a robust Chinese as a second language curriculum can be effective without enabling a language rich, intercultural environment through frequent interaction between ethnic minorities and Chinese students. Thus, one needs to be wary of the cultural/linguistic deficit assumptions of language policies (Ku, Chan & Sandhu, 2005). These effects are probable, for example, if students are placed (whether by allocation or preference) in classes with little opportunity for improvement in their Chinese language. This is often the case in schools with high ethnic concentration where contact with Chinese students is limited. Moreover, such deficit assumptions could be complicated by a recent proposal by government to use Putonghua as the medium of instruction for teaching the Chinese language and an overwhelming number of primary schools adopt Putonghua to teach Chinese (Loh & Hung, 2020).

Conclusion and Way Forward

Language policies are not culturally neutral regardless of the form they take (Hornberger, 2009). From a multicultural education perspective, the assimilationist tendencies of teaching Chinese as a second language in Hong Kong hardly act as an effective intervention in language learning, acquisition and minority students' adjustment and success in the mainstream education system. Bolstering the provisions in Chinese language is easily rationalized from an integrationist view. However, leaving cultural values in the policymaking processes unproblematized can perpetuate systemic barriers, such as inaccurate characterizations of students' academic capacity based on race and ethnicity (Irvine, 2003). By extension, what these barriers convey are exclusionary politics that have rendered ethnic minorities "a victimized class" (Erni & Leung, 2014, p. 214) that is "not just based on difference but inequalities based on these differences" (Foner, Duyvendak & Kasinitz, 2019, p. 9). It is thus possible to ask whether Hong Kong's claim to be Asia's world city and a tolerant, multicultural society is overstated and beneath such a claim lies the fact that the local government lacks a multicultural policy that advocates diversity, inclusion and equity (Law & Lee, 2012).

In a similar slant, multicultural education is neither neutral nor unproblematic as an applied policy lens. Its backlash in other ethnically diverse societies, often its effect in promoting ethnic communal segregation (Cantle, 2008), serves as an important lesson as Hong Kong and other Asian societies come to terms with their multicultural statuses (Cha, Ham & Lee, 2018). In the case of Hong Kong, to say that the assimilationist approach remains a salient option is not to say that Hong Kong does not offer some degree of positive recognition, accommodation and support for minorities (i.e. Chinese

language is not an official barrier to citizenship, minority groups such as Muslims rarely become the targets of physical and verbal assaults, and minorities enjoy the freedom of religion) (Gao, 2018). In parallel, public education and labor market policies are relatively conservative and tackle racial/ethnic problems with less liberal values of equity and justice. This unearths a deep-rooted culturally constructed legislation processes and views of policymakers about their roles in supporting ethnic minority students (Kymlicka & He, 2005). That is, while the Western conceptions value and mobilize “liberal multiculturalism” in the research of ethnic minority population, Confucian principles that promote the good for everyone without favoritism, lays the policy principles of Hong Kong government initiatives that require ethnic minority students to be treated like every other student – an intention to maintain social harmony of Confucianism (Kennedy & Hue, 2011). The confounding ideologies and policies towards ethnic minorities display the contestation between the democratic values and the locally contingent discourses of multicultural education (Banks, 2009).

When there are valid justifications for the government to promote a common language, at the core of the multicultural status, however, are questions about the conditions in which these policies can actually work to avoid a danger of being oppressive and unfair to minorities (Banting & Kymlicka, 2013). The Education 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 by UNESCO call for greater effort to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all,” particularly for minority students who have been defined as failures by the education system. Around 43% of ethnic minorities would consider leaving Hong Kong in 10 years (Zubin Foundation, 2018). This figure is alarming, given the potential human capital loss considering the fast growth rate of minority population and the low fertility rate in the city. Connections between SDG4 and Hong Kong’s policy developments can indicate the need for new policy lenses that promote stronger learning pathways between school and cultural backgrounds of minority families; this includes reducing prejudices that inhibit their access to rich language environments and further education (Sleeter & Grant, 2007). In keeping with its prospects and drawbacks, multicultural education nevertheless offers a steppingstone to direct policy debates towards managing ethnolinguistic diversity and to take us farther in realizing equal citizenship rights with fewer institutional barriers to a sense of belonging to the Asian society (Modood, 2013).

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Author biodata

Dr. Gao Fang is Associate Professor at the Department of International Education, The Education University of Hong Kong. Her main research interests are in minority education and sociology of education. She has published *Becoming a Model Minority: Schooling Experiences of Ethnic Koreans in China* (Lexington Books, 2010), 30 papers in international refereed journals, and 13 refereed book

chapters. She also co-edited *Education, Ethnicity and Equity in the Multilingual Asian Context* published by Springer.

Dr. Jan Gube is Assistant Professor at the Department of Curriculum and Instruction, The Education University of Hong Kong. His research is concerned with larger questions about diversity, equity, race and ethnicity with an emphasis on the nexus between schooling and cultural identities, including the implications of these for curriculum and practice. This research has appeared in journals such as *Integrative Psychological Behavioral Science, Identities, Visual Studies, Culture & Psychology*, and *Knowledge Cultures*. He also co-edited *Education, Ethnicity and Equity in the Multilingual Asian Context* published by Springer.