

Early Childhood Education for Ethnic Minorities in Hong Kong: Parent Experience and Policy Support

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Abstract

Although the language needs of ethnic minorities in the Hong Kong primary and secondary education sectors have been addressed, the needs of language diverse pre-primary students have not. Nine parents of South Asian ethnicity were interviewed regarding their experience of pre-primary education in Hong Kong. Sixteen Hong Kong education documents were examined using a simple analysis technique of counting the number of times a word or phrase related to early childhood education or ethnic minorities appeared. Interview results indicated that families from ethnic minority backgrounds face significant challenges because of language. Few documents regarding the provision of pre-primary education to ethnic minority children and no policies to support Chinese language acquisition exist. To keep up with international developments in early childhood education and facilitate integration and/or inclusion of ethnic minorities into society, the Hong Kong education system should review its policies and provide support for language diverse children from the earliest years.

Keywords: early childhood, ethnic minority, policy, language diversity

Hong Kong currently does not provide Chinese language acquisition support for the pre-primary education sector. Pre-primary education is provided by the private sector and while there is a growing body of policy and research in support of early childhood education and care in Hong Kong (Pearson & Rao, 2006), little attention

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has been given to those children who might not be fully included in the system such as South Asian children. The purpose of this research is to understand family experiences and perceptions as well as educational policy related to pre-primary aged ethnic minority children in Hong Kong in an attempt to determine if language acquisition support is needed.

Literature Review

Early Childhood Education Policy in the International Context

UNESCO and UNICEF outlined the importance of policy questions and identified four issues that must be addressed in order for governments to develop effective policy and/or policy frameworks for early childhood education (Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood, 2008). The issues include lack of coordination among agencies and legislation, lack of access and equity among children from marginalized populations, lack of standards and monitoring, and lack of research to support practice.

The UNICEF *Innocenti Report Card 8* report on child care transition in Organization for Economic Development (OECD) countries (UNICEF, 2008) documents the importance of early childhood education for those of minority background in helping them integrate into the language and culture of their new country. It reports that the few early childhood services available in OECD countries tend to be underfunded and non-inclusive. The Report Card also notes that those who most need the critical intervention of quality early childhood education in order to reduce the economic gap are least likely to be included in quality programs, especially if the programs are provided by the private sector.

Ethnic Minority Education Policy in the International Context

In recent years, an international movement has emerged to broaden the concept of inclusive education to include children from any and all marginalized groups. Traditionally, inclusive education has referred to efforts to provide education to those with disabilities. The UNESCO website adopted the following statement from The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994, paragraph 3) which says that inclusive edu-

cation means:

... schools should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions. This should include disabled and gifted children, street and working children, children from remote or nomadic populations, *children from linguistic, ethnic or cultural minorities* [italics added] and children from other disadvantaged or marginalized areas or groups.

In “Bringing multicultural education into the mainstream: developing schools for minority and majority students” (Horst & Holmen, 2007), a Danish city reported on their efforts to develop a more inclusive educational policy. Specifically, the Danish study identified four primary issues in their schools: systematic under achievement of bilingual students lack of focus on the role of instruction in general emphasis on children’s background and social issues in the classroom insufficient training for those who teach minority students.

Similarly, The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 was passed in the United States (United States Congress, 2002) which purpose is to ensure that all students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with limited English proficiency or LEP students (i.e. those who are non-native speakers of the local language of English in the United States) have fair and equal educational opportunity. Yet the difference between equal opportunity and equity in the context of linguistically diverse students is not addressed specifically.

The Hong Kong Context

Only five studies relate to ethnic minority students and their educational needs in the Hong Kong context and none of them include pre-primary students or teachers.

First, “Race and Equality: A Study of the Ethnic Minorities in Hong Kong’s Education System” (Loper, 2004) records the experience of an ethnic minority youth with a number of interviews and uses a comparative approach that outlines international and national policy conventions regarding the rights of individuals and discriminatory practices. Loper concludes that although the government is making efforts to improve the situation of ethnic minorities, there are significant areas for further attention. In fact, Hong Kong neglected until recently the educational needs of

ethnic minority students by not providing a curriculum that effectively bridges the gap between the first language and culture of the students and the language and culture of Hong Kong society. These students could be said to be *excluded* because their educational needs were not addressed. Educational services that include linguistically diverse student populations and support their learning needs would truly provide quality education for all (UNESCO, 2010).

Second, “Towards Unity in Diversity?” (Aubourg, 2005) is a position paper on racial discrimination and access to primary and secondary education in Hong Kong. Aubourg proposes a number of pro-active approaches to reduce discriminatory practices and promote social inclusion. Aubourg (2005) also concluded that Hong Kong had not established a conceptual framework from which to develop policy that would effectively meet the needs of ethnic minority students. Examining the Education Bureau’s materials for non-Chinese speaking children provides insight into Hong Kong’s education conceptual framework. In the November 2008 EDB website document *Education for non-Chinese speaking children* (Education Bureau, 2008), the following statement is found: ‘Non-Chinese speaking children are encouraged to study the local curriculum to *integrate* [italics added] into the community as early as possible.’ And while the 2008 *Supplementary Guide to Chinese language curriculum for non-Chinese speaking students* (Curriculum Development Council, 2008) for primary and secondary students (pre-primary sector is excluded) is progress, it could be argued Hong Kong education policy makers have yet to make significant progress in meeting the needs of ethnic minority students because they lack a conceptual framework.

Third, “A Research Report on the Education of South Asian Ethnic Minority Groups in Hong Kong” (Ku, 2005) uses a series of questionnaires and in-depth interviews to identify issues for ethnic youths in secondary schools in Hong Kong. Ku proposes a series of social policy recommendations, including specifically the development of a Chinese curriculum for non-Chinese students and a mother tongue multicultural language policy, as well as more sensitive cultural practices in general. No mention is made of young children or the issues their families face in the pre-primary education sector.

Fourth, a longitudinal research project specifically focusing on the needs of non-Chinese speaking (NCS) children and their transition into Primary 1 (P1), with follow up into their P2 and P3 performance has been completed (Hau, 2008). The study noted that those NCS children who attended a local Cantonese-speaking kindergarten did integrate more easily but failed to answer the question: what kind of kindergarten experience did these children have? At least one local organization has gone on record questioning the report as it only emphasized the good points, failed to fully examine the causality of the results and made no suggestions for improved support of language diverse students (Unison, 2008).

The fifth study, “少數族裔學童學習中文情況：前線老師意見調查” [English translation “The Situation of Ethnic Minority Students Studying Chinese: Investigation of Frontline Teacher’s Opinions”] (Hong Kong Professional Teacher’s Union, 2007), was a questionnaire given to Chinese language teachers in mainstream Chinese medium-of-instruction (MOI) primary and secondary schools to express their opinions and describe their experiences of teaching Chinese to students from ethnic minority backgrounds. The study urged the Education Bureau (EDB) to take a leadership role to examine the situation of ethnic minority students studying Chinese and made specific recommendations.

No literature or related research was found which indicated that the Hong Kong government or its education leaders had examined the philosophy of integrative versus inclusive educational policies, nor made any serious attempt to deal with the hard questions of what a truly multicultural education system would look like. As noted in the international literature, integrating is merely ensuring access without supporting academic success of language diverse students.

Second Language Acquisition in the Early Years

As summarized by Clarke (2009), Shin (2005), and Clark (2000), research regarding first language acquisition in the early years emphasizes the importance that language plays in providing a foundation for future cognitive and social development and Cummins (as cited in Clarke, 2009) maintains it is related to the potential level of competence in a second language. In fact, harm can be done if education and service

providers do not provide sufficient support to young children as they acquire bilingual ability. According to Lambert (as cited in McGroarty, 1988), if care is not given to support continued development of the first language, “subtractive bilingualism” results and is associated with slower acquisition of the second language. Another result of subtractive bilingualism is that as peers continue to build upon their first language in school, children who are learning their second language may be falling behind (Clarke, 2009).

Additionally, social and political forces can enhance or limit a child’s opportunity to successfully acquire a second language (Robinson & Diaz, 2005). In “Orientations in Language Planning” (Ruiz, 1988) the case is made that a society’s attitude toward language and its role impacts educational planning for language diversity. Is language seen as a problem? Is language seen as a right? Is language seen as a resource? The authors suggest seeing language as a resource might be a way to integrate language-as-problem versus language-as-right orientations and defuse the debate on bilingual education in the US.

In *Supporting Children Learning English as a Second Language in the Early Years (birth to six years)* (Clarke, 2009), the stages of second language acquisition for young children are outlined and guidelines for inclusive learning environments are provided for teachers in the Australian state of Victoria. No such document was found to be provided to Hong Kong early childhood teachers or care providers to support young learners of Chinese as second language learners.

Cummins (as cited in McGroarty, 1988; Shin, 2005; Clark, 2000) also documents that children from middle class backgrounds whose parents value a second language and place children in immersion environments do better than immigrant or migrant children who are from language minority backgrounds and find themselves immersed in a second language environment through no choice of their own. The evidence suggests that there are social values at play as well as what kind of second language support (transition versus maintenance programs) is provided.

In short, the international community is paying increased attention not only to early childhood policy, but also to the inclusion of marginalized groups. A review of the Hong Kong context indicates that more attention should be focused on early

childhood policy needs, in particular as it relates to marginalized groups. Finally, first and second language acquisition for young learners is well-researched and indicates that supportive language environments are important for children to become bilingual speakers. In order for a more complete understanding of the current experiences of South Asian families in the pre-primary education system, this research presents interview data to further illuminate the Hong Kong context.

Method

Parent Interviews

Semi-structured interviews of individual parents supplemented document analysis and were chosen because of the goal of this research: to understand the experiences and perceptions of South Asians in the Hong Kong pre-primary education system. Phenomenological research typically relies on personal, in-depth interviews to understand individual experiences (McMillan, 2008). Semi-structured and unstructured interviews are particularly useful in providing illumination of the experiences and perceptions of individuals sharing the same experience. Although this is not a phenomenological study, the methodology engaged herein is roughly equivalent with the phenomenological method in that in-depth interviews from participants are used to gather data.

The particular ethnic minority groups chosen are South Asian. South Asians constitute approximately 1% of the Hong Kong population (Hong Kong SAR Government, 2007), and one-third of the South Asian population is Nepalese, one-third is Indian, and one-third is Pakistani, Bangladeshi, or Sri Lankan. Informal friendship and semi-professional networks provided introductions to the interviewees. Due to the challenge of locating families of the desired ethnic minority background who would agree to be interviewed and/or availability of a suitable interpreter, only four criteria were controlled for in the selection of the interviewees: South Asian ethnicity, low socio-economic status; kindergarten-aged child attending a local kindergarten or child care center. Consequently, the families had different numbers of children, with ages ranging from 3 to 6 years, of both genders, and some had educational voucher support while others were on welfare. Over a period of eight weeks nine sub-

jects were interviewed. All interviewees were mothers; only one husband joined his wife for the interview. All interviewees signed an English consent form and retained a letter explaining the purpose of the interview and how the data would be used.

The semi-structured interview protocol had 22 questions (see Appendix A) and was designed to gain an understanding of the parents' experiences and perceptions of educational services provided their children: one question for the family background, two questions regarding the specific kindergarten chosen by the family, three questions regarding the parents' perceptions of their child's experiences in kindergarten, eight questions regarding the kinds of language and culture services received by their child, four questions asking suggestions for better support or partnership between home and school, and four questions ranking the quality of Hong Kong kindergartens and the Education Bureau's provision of educational services to ethnic minority children in general and their child in particular. The individual responses of the nine interviewees to the 22 questions were placed in chart form to identify common experiences or perceptions.

The interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and validated as reliable by an independent reader. A reading of the interview transcripts determined the commonalities of parent experience and perceptions and whether these experiences and perceptions were reflected in the results of the document analysis. All interviews except one were conducted in English. One Nepalese mother had a Nepalese interpreter. Each interview took 30-45 minutes and occurred at a time and place convenient to the interviewee: one in the evening in a restaurant, one in the morning at a job site, two in the morning at home, five at various times of the day at a local community center that provides services to the South Asian community.

Policy Review

Sixteen education-related documents produced over the past 46 years by the Hong Kong government were selected (Table 1). Three criteria guided document selection: 1) significance in the education system, e.g. education reform 2) related in particular to pre-primary education 3) related in particular to ethnic minority or non-Chinese speaking children. All government documents were collected in elec-

tronic versions. The 16 documents were subjected to a simple word or phrase count analysis in an attempt to understand implied values or positions.

Table 1. *Hong Kong Documents*

Year	Document Name	Abbreviation
1965	Education policy	EdP
1981	Primary Education and Pre-Primary Services	PEPPS
1986	Education Commission Report #2	ECR2
1995	The report of the reconstituted working party on kindergarten education	WPKed
1996	The guide to pre-primary curriculum	GPC1996
1998	Education Commission Report #7	ECR7
2000	Learning for life, learning through life: Review of education system: Reform and proposals: Excel and grow: Educational blueprint for 21st century	EdR
2001	Quality Education Report	QER2001
2002	The working party on harmonization of pre-primary services report	HPPS
2004	The study needs of non-Chinese speaking children [Chinese version]	NCS (Chinese)
2006	The guide to pre-primary curriculum	GPC2006
2007	“Do’s & Don’ts” for kindergartens	D&D
2007: EMB	Leaflet on education support for non-Chinese speaking students (unrevised)	LNCS(unr)
2007: EDB	Leaflet on education and support services for non-Chinese speaking children (revised)	LNCS(rev)
2008	Consultation paper on developing a “Supplementary guide to Chinese language curriculum for non-Chinese speaking students”	SuppG
2008	Education for non-Chinese speaking children	EdNCS

A list of 16 terms (Table 2) related to ethnicity or language, special education and pre-primary education, and educational principles was compiled prior to selecting the government documents and all 16 documents were analyzed in electronic form. A separate word list in Chinese was used for the one document in Chinese. The number

of times each term appeared in each of the documents was counted. The context was also noted on three words to eliminate unrelated usage. Otherwise, all words were counted as they appeared in the documents. For the Chinese translation of the word list, back-translation was used by locating the words used in Education Bureau English documents and then checking the Chinese version to find the accepted Chinese usage.

Table 2. *Words used to Analyze Documents*

	English documents	Chinese document
1	ethnic	民族, 族裔, 種族
2	minority	少數
3	multicultural	多元文化
4	non-Chinese speaking	非華語兒童
5	NCS	x
6	NAC, newly arrived child, new arrival	新來的
7	South Asians	南兒(人)
8	special education	特殊教育
9	special needs	特殊教育需要
10	marginalized	弱勢群體
11	kindergarten	幼兒園, 幼稚園
12	pre-primary	學前, 入學前
13	preschool, pre-school	學前教育
14	early childhood	幼兒教育
15	integrate (education or into society)	融合, 融入, 融和, 共融(教育或適應社會)
16	inclusion, inclusive (education)	全納(教育)

Results

Parent Interviews

In summary, the majority of parents cited language learning and making friends as the primary benefits their children received by attending kindergarten. When asked to describe the specific challenges faced by their child in kindergarten, three out of the nine cited language issues: one mother and father were unable to help their child

with Chinese homework, another reported that lack of Cantonese language ability was a problem, and a third said that because neither Chinese nor English was their mother tongue, the child had difficulty in kindergarten. One mother stated, “[It is] the language problem because the Cantonese we don’t understand, we do not speak it at home.”

When questioned about language and culture support provided to them and their children, the majority of the interviewees said they had difficulty communicating with teachers and helping their children with Chinese homework. A Pakistani mom shared, “You know because sometimes I tell them I don’t understand how to read it in Chinese, you please translate it into English, then most times they write, and sometimes they help babies do homework, Chinese homework, in the school.” The Sri Lankan father reported, “It is the homework that is the problem, it is in Chinese.” All parents reported that there was no curriculum support to help their children learn Chinese as a second language. One Nepalese mother responded, “Because like the English, they can catch that no problem, but the Chinese is difficult so there needs to be more Chinese tuition [in the kindergarten].” The majority of parents reported some language assistance from teaching staff, most often using English to communicate with parents or by adapting homework assignments. Yet the support was not sufficient as all but one of the parents suggested more language assistance is needed.

When asked to rank the educational services provided their child and other South Asian children by their kindergarten and by the Education Bureau, the responses averaged “poor” and “acceptable”, ranged from “very poor” to “excellent”, and had a median response of “acceptable”. But there was some confusion as some of the interviewees did not understand the idea of ranking the services provided and others who were reluctant to say anything critical, possibly because they view the Education Bureau as the Government or because they did not want to displease the teachers at the kindergarten their child attended should their criticism become known — one interviewee refused to name the kindergarten their child attended and another asked that the information not be shared.

Document Analysis

The document analysis results are divided into three tables based on whether they were related to ethnicity or language, special education or pre-primary education, or educational principles. The tables indicate the number of times a word or phrase appeared in a specific document.

In 1965, the Hong Kong government moved to improve educational services and there port issued that year stated that it would be necessary to depend on private or voluntary initiatives to provide early childhood education (Education Commission, 1965). There are no words related to ethnic minorities and the document only mentions early childhood-related words five times. This general pattern of neglecting early childhood education in major educational documents continued for the next 30 years.

The document prepared by the Task Force on Language Support (2004) entitled “The study needs of non-Chinese speaking children” assisted primary and secondary teachers with ethnic minority children in their classrooms. This document is only available in Chinese. It recognizes the special needs of ethnic minority students and provides guidance in multi-cultural issues for primary and secondary teachers, but not pre-primary teachers.

The analysis of the 2006 *Guide to the Pre-Primary Curriculum* (Curriculum Development Council, 2006) found a definition of special needs and guidelines for inclusive practices, but it excludes any reference to need based on ethnic, culture, or language minority status.

The revised 2008 document, “Education for non-Chinese speaking children” (Education Bureau, 2008) is an update of earlier leaflets. Kindergarten and pre-primary education are mentioned in the context of urging parents to enroll children in local Cantonese MOI kindergartens for quicker integration into the local community. Assistance or language learning support for the language minority child in local kindergartens is not mentioned.

The 2008 *Consultation paper on developing a supplementary guide to Chinese language curriculum for non-Chinese speaking students* (Curriculum Development Council, 2008) is the government’s response to the needs of non-Chinese speaking

students in primary or secondary schools. The word *kindergarten* is found 7 times in the document, but only in a discussion of background experiences for non-Chinese students. The Paper mentions that studies show students who attend local Chinese MOI kindergartens have better Chinese skills, but does not source these studies. There is no curriculum or staff support offered to kindergartens that enroll non-Chinese speaking children or to ethnic minority parents who enroll their children in local kindergartens.

Discussion

Research results indicate that language diverse students in the pre-primary sector need more supportive measures in order to bring this sector into line with international standards and facilitate not just integration, but inclusion of ethnic minorities in Hong Kong society. The importance of policy and the issue of second language acquisition in the early years are each addressed in light of data collected through parent interviews and document analysis.

Importance of Policy

In 1986, the government's ambivalence toward the value of pre-primary education was fully evidenced by the question asked in that year's *Education Commission Report No 2* (Education Commission, 1986): "Is kindergarten education essential?" The Commission concluded, "No." Why? Because there was a noted lack of local research which the panel felt was needed in order for them to consider the development of a fully aided pre-primary education sector within the Hong Kong cultural context. Yet in the same report, it was also noted that kindergarten had *almost* become a requisite for P1 (Primary 1) as the percentage of children enrolled in kindergarten was 88%, so the Commission decided to continue the policy of financial assistance to parents. The policy ensured access but not quality.

If kindergarten is a requisite for P1, the policy question that needs to be answered is: how are the non-Chinese speaking children supposed to be ready and performing at the same level as their Chinese speaking peers if language acquisition support is not provided, and there are no accountability measures for ensuring that non-Chinese

speaking children are in fact ready to begin P1?

Issue of Second Language Acquisition

The parent interviews revealed that in Hong Kong there are currently no systemic language support measures in place for the pre-primary sector. It is in fact a de facto immersion policy. But it is a misconception that children just “pick up” a language. In “Two or more languages in early childhood: Some general points and practical recommendations” (De Houwer, 1999), it is maintained that contrary to popular belief children “need a strongly supportive” language environment in order to become effective bilingual communicators.

What does a supportive environment in an early years classroom look like? Clarke (2009) and Clark (2000) emphasize the importance of maintaining the child’s first language and suggest the following: a stimulating linguistic environment with bilingual and multicultural materials easily available to children; bilingual staff; programs that are child-centered rather than teacher centered; a balance between structured and unstructured play; activities that reflect and include the diverse cultures of the families; good communication with parents, with quality interpreters rather than depending on children, friends, or untrained individuals to provide the service.

In the review of policy documents, no mention was made for providing a supportive environment for linguistically diverse students in the early years. Rather, parents are urged to immerse their children in local kindergartens where Chinese is the medium of instruction in order to hasten integration (Educational Bureau, 2008). Two parents mentioned extra Chinese (both Mandarin and Cantonese) tuition available for a fee. None of the parents knew of any curriculum used by the local kindergarten to help their pre-primary child learn Cantonese as a second language. The evidence suggests that South Asian pre-primary children are not receiving adequate educational support for acquiring Cantonese as a second language in the early years.

In the parent interviews, only one parent mentioned that support for her child’s first language was offered at school, and that was in the form of extra tuition after school and it required extra transport fees as well. If first language acquisition is important for future social and cognitive development, as well as successful acquis-

ition of a second language, where is the educational support for maintaining the first language of the child? Clarke (2009) suggests that educating parents is important, and materials should be made available in the family's first language to help them understand the importance of maintaining their child's first language and give guidance on how to do that effectively. Robinson and Diaz (2005) suggest the use of community teachers to provide enrichment experiences in the first languages of the children. Yet none of the parents reported materials available to them in their first language to give guidance on helping them maintain their child's mother tongue and no one reported the use of native speakers of their first language in their child's kindergarten. Where is the support for maintaining a child's first language? The first language provides the foundation for future learning and it is evident from the data that this concern has not yet emerged in Hong Kong, as there are no first language support measures in place at this time for language minority pre-primary students.

Clarke (2009) also provides a framework for monitoring the progress of second language acquisition in children birth to six years. No such framework for monitoring Chinese as a second language acquisition was found in the *Guide to the Pre-Primary Curriculum* (2006) nor did any parents mention that Chinese language assessment was provided their child in the kindergarten. How will a kindergarten teacher know if a Cantonese as a second language young learner is ready for P1 (Primary 1)? If the young learner has not developed a proficiency in Cantonese, then he or she will be at risk for falling behind in the transition to primary education.

Conclusion

According to Taylor (1997), governments must go beyond insuring access with their educational policies. Governments must ask the hard questions about what a supportive language environment would look like within their cultural and social context.

It is recommended that studies similar to those that have been conducted to understand the experiences and needs of Hong Kong ethnic minority youths be conducted to understand the pre-primary population. Invaluable perspectives and input could also be obtained from a survey to investigate the attitudes and experiences of

kindergarten teachers and principals who have linguistically different children in their classrooms. As this research provides only a sampling of South Asian families, more in-depth ethnographic or phenomenology research would provide increased understanding of this population's experience of pre-primary education in Hong Kong.

In fact, research and policy for the pre-primary sector in Hong Kong is generally lacking. More than 20 years ago the Education Commission asked the question, "Is kindergarten education essential?" That question has been answered positively by the international community in the intervening years. There is ample international evidence to support the benefits to individual children and societies if governments include early childhood education in its education policy (UNICEF, 2007). But as was noted in the *Education Commission Report No 2* (1986), research was lacking that would provide a local answer to the question and which could legitimately shape Hong Kong pre-primary policy. First, the pre-primary sector needs to be fully included in the Hong Kong education system, with relevant and effective research and policy. Then perhaps the needs of linguistically diverse children could be more systematically and equitably addressed, which just has been done in the primary and secondary sectors.

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