EDUCATION FOR ETHNIC MINORITY STUDENTS IN HONG KONG: CHALLENGES FACING THE TEACHERS

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Abstract- Although there has been an increase in the number of local studies targeting ethnic minorities in the last decade in Hong Kong, research which is centered on educational support and services from the perspective of teachers is rare. The objective of this study is to investigate teachers' challenges in delivering education to the ethnic minority students within the education system in Hong Kong. Their perspectives are important because they are the front line service providers and key change agents. This study employs a qualitative research method, through the use of in-depth interviews. The study concludes that, based on their experiences, most of them hold a negative view in delivering inclusive education to ethnic minority students successfully in Hong Kong.

Keywords- Ethnic minority, inclusive education, challenges, educational support, Hong Kong

Introduction

Studies of the educational concerns of ethnic minorities in Hong Kong have been undertaken in recent years, addressing issues such as language barriers and education needs [1], emotional and behavioral issues for ethnic minority students [2], education of South Asian ethnic minority groups [3], inequality faced by ethnic minority students in the educational system [4-6], and school life adaptation of school-age ethnic minorities [7,8]. Previous studies focused on revealing the challenges faced by minority ethnic groups at different stages of the education system in Hong Kong in the areas of access to educational opportunities, educational provisions and curriculum design. All of these are interrelated and inter-affected but the challenges faced by teachers in providing inclusive education for ethnic minority students were rarely discussed before. The perspective of teachers is the focus of this study because they are the front line service providers and key change agents.

Ethnic Minority Students in Hong Kong Education System

According to the 'Thematic Report - Ethnic Minorities' published by the Census and Statistics Department in December 2002, the term ethnic minority applies to people of non-Chinese ethnicity in Hong Kong. 'Ethnic minorities' is the term used by government departments and non-government organizations (NGOs) in Hong Kong [9-15]. Ethnic minorities may include Caucasians who are English-speaking [9] but are more often used to refer to South Asians [3,5,8,15]. "As far as EMB is concerned, children of ethnic minorities generally refer to South Asian children who are residing in Hong Kong" [16], where Education and Manpower Bureau (EMB) was re-organised as Education Bureau (EDB) in 2007. Ethnic minority students are thus the students of non-Chinese ethnicity.

On the other hand, as interpreted by the EDB, non-Chinese speaking (NCS) students are also referred to as ethnic minority students in Hong Kong. NCS students are students whose mother tongue is not Chinese and do not possess the necessary level of Chinese for everyday communication. In this study, the terms ethnic minority students and NCS students are interchangeable.

School Attendance

Among the population undertaking full time study in primary, secondary and tertiary education in Hong Kong, there were 1,245,809 (97.75%) Chinese students and 28,722 (2.25%) ethnic minority students. These were South Asians (including Filipinos, Indonesians, Nepalese, Vietnamese, Thais, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Sri-Lankans, Indians), other Asians (Korean and Japanese), Westerners (British, Americans, Canadians), mixed and others [10].

Placement Arrangement

In Hong Kong, the educational system can be categorized into four types of school: mainstream school, designated school, designated class in mainstream school and others. In mainstream schools, the Government has introduced an Initiation Programme, which is available to newly-arrived NCS students. This is full-time of six-months' duration, and provides appropriate and timely support educational and community integration. For those using the Government's placement service for direct entry into mainstream schools, a 60-hour Induction Programme is provided through commissioned non-governmental organizations. After completion of the programme, the students are assisted with placement into a mainstream school. The mainstream schools admitting NCS students are provided with an additional grant through School-based Support Scheme (SBSS) programmes [17]. Designated Schools are those schools which have enrolled significant numbers of NCS children are invited to join the growing number of designated schools, which are provided with focused support for learning and teaching, especially with respect to Chinese language studies. There are now over 20 of such schools, with the majority in the primary sector [18].

The government's supportive mechanisms have been designed for the ethnic minority students as a group, the South Asians, without consideration of inter-ethnic differences, their diverse culture and needs. Statistics [9,12,13] have shown that there are basic differences in age structure, education attainment, occupation, income, and language competence among the minority groups. The EDB seems to identify language as the single major barrier to their

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achievement. This suggests that their supportive mechanisms may be limited in scope. In order to formulate plans that can better cater for them, studies on the educational needs and barriers to achievement of separate ethnic groups are required.

Research Methodology

This was a qualitative study, analyzing the data collected from 20 in-depth individual interviews with teachers who had experience with ethnic minority students in Hong Kong. These teachers were from various types of schools: designated and non-designated, primary and secondary. The research study focused on creating conceptual frameworks through applying inductive analysis to the data. The in-depth interviews were conducted in Cantonese, and then transcribed in Chinese for data analysis. The collected interview data were coded into 'text units', comprising at most a few sentences, expressing a particular view. The transcripts were further content-analyzed. This analysis of comments and views led to the development of an analytical framework. This framework, made up of categories and sub-categories, was thus directly derived from the interview data. It underwent several iterations of modification and revision to ensure that it reflected an accurate and comprehensive coverage of the expressed views. Selected coded transcripts were finally translated into English and are discussed in this paper.

Profile of Participants

The recruitment process of participants aimed at finding a sample comprised of a diverse group of participants to enable efficient and effective data collection. Two types of data were sought: common experiences among participants and enlightening case studies [19]. Investigating areas that were both common to participants and diverse within the population made selection of this approach to sampling appropriate. In the context of Hong Kong, fundamental dimensions of diversity were discussed which can affect teachers' experiences. Five dimensions [Table-1] of diversity were introduced: teaching experience; teaching experience with ethnic minority students; inclusive education training; school type; and school level. These identified areas of diversity are non-exclusive.

Table 1- Profile of Participants

Participant Number	Teaching experience (Years)	TEEMS (Years)	Designated / Mainstream Schools	Primary / Secondary Schools	Took Inclusive Education (IE) Training
1	4	4	Mainstream	Primary	Yes (SEN)
2	6	6	Mainstream	Secondary	Yes (SEN)
3	3	3	Mainstream	Primary	Yes (SEN)
4	12	12	Mainstream	Primary	Yes (SEN)
5	1	1	Mainstream	Secondary	No
6	2	2	Designated	Primary	No
7	1	1	Mainstream	Secondary	No
8	10	10	Mainstream	Primary	Yes (SEN)
9	9	9	Designated	Primary	No
10	10	10	Mainstream	Secondary	No
11	5	2	Designated	Secondary	No
12	5	5	Mainstream	Secondary	No
13	4	4	Mainstream	Primary	No
14	27	5	Designated	Primary	No
15	4	4	Mainstream	Primary	No
16	7	7	Designated	Secondary	No
17	20	8	Mainstream	Primary	No
18	8	8	Mainstream	Secondary	No
19	13	5	Mainstream	Primary	No
20	22	9	Mainstream	Secondary	No

TEEMS: Teaching Experience with Ethnic Minority Students

Three quarters were teaching in mainstream schools, and one quarter teaching in designated schools. Over half (65%) were teaching in primary schools, with the remaining 35% in secondary schools. A quarter of the teachers had experienced inclusive education training organized by the EDB.

Achieved Analytical Framework: Challenges Facing the Teachers

After coding the collected interview data, an analytical framework of the challenges faced by the teachers consisting of categories and sub-categories was designed. The framework was revised and the categories were re-arranged several times in order to reflect a comprehensive coverage of all the various views expressed during the interviews with teachers. The challenges were deemed to consist of four categories: Resources, Priority, Culture, and Support. Under each category, further sub-categories were identified, as shown in [Fig-1].
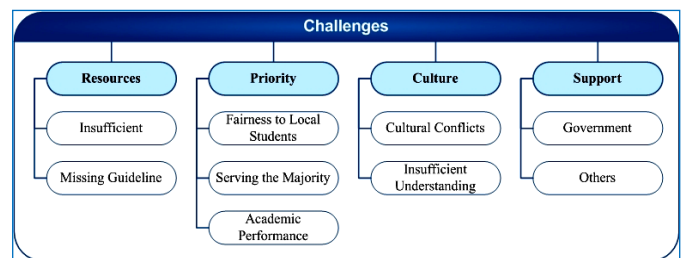

Fig. 1- Framework of Challenges Faced by the Teachers

Resources

Although all the participants agreed that the Government had increased financial support for ethnic minority students in the education sector, they thought the resources were still insufficient and not well utilized.

Insufficient

Although there is a School-based Support Scheme funded by the Government, nearly all participants thought that the resources were not enough.

"I believe extra resources are required because the ethnic minority students have their special educational needs which the local students do not have. One of the examples is to improve Chinese language."

(Participant 15, 4 years TEEMS in mainstream primary school without IE training)

"Without sufficient resources and support in mainstream school, not only the students, the teachers are the victims too. … when the teachers want to help the students, they find no time and no way to help. They may feel powerlessness. They may feel pressure. This was also my experience in teaching mainstream school before. However, with sufficient resources and support such as high teacher-to-student ratio in this school, I don't have any psychological pressure and can enjoy my teaching."

(Participant 17, 8 years TEEMS in mainstream primary school without IE training)

Missing Guideline

Moreover, the guidelines in using the School-based Support Scheme for the ethnic minority students have yet to be clearly stated.

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"From the EDB's webpage, I can find the information for teaching SEN students such as hyperactive, disability, dyslexia and so on. But I can't find any about inclusive education of ethnic minority students … … Without guidance, I feel that the students are just wasting their time and may have false hope on the policy. Even if there is extra funding, there should be some guidelines in using it."

(Participant 4, 12 years TEEMS in mainstream primary school with IE training).

"I feel that the government and EDB have put huge amount of financial resources to the schools with ethnic minority students. However, rather than the funding, I think the government or EDB should give more guidelines to the schools on how to use the extra funding. This may save some resources."

(Participant 9, 9 years TEEMS in designated primary school without IE training).

An auditing procedure was proposed to confirm that extra funding could be more effectively spent on the ethnic minority students.

"The school receives extra funding due to enrolling the ethnic minority students. However, those funding are finally and partly spent in other activities, and not completely for the ethnic minority students. I think there should be a good auditing procedure."

(Participant 4, 12 years TEEMS in mainstream primary school with IE training).

Unsurprisingly, the availability and deployment of resources emerge as an issue for most participants, with a plea for more effective utilization a common theme.

Priority

Most participants thought that there were two main dilemmas in implementing the inclusive education of ethnic minority students, especially in mainstream schools without special arrangements. These dilemmas relate to fairness and the priority to serve the majority.

Fairness to Local Students

Without a proper classroom management strategy, most participants in mainstream schools thought that this might be unfair to the local students.

"Classroom management is the first issue required to handle. The ethnic minority students don't have much sense to obey the norm of classroom. They feel free to walk around the classroom during a lesson. And their behaviour may affect the local students who want to learn."

(Participant 19, 5 years TEEMS in mainstream primary school without IE training)

The above views of participants align with some ethnic minority students' impression on teachers' stereotypical view of them as badly behaved and/or impolite [3].

Serving the Majority

Further, some participants thought that serving the majority group was the criterion in resources allocation, when the resources were not sufficient.

"I think there is a priority issue. Over 80% of students are Cantonese. So, it is normal to put the first priority to serve them first. Of course, the ethnic minority students are actually Hong Kong citizens. We should take care of them too. However, when the re-

sources are limited, we need to make decision to serve either the majority or minority."

(Participant 2, 6 years TEEMS in mainstream secondary school with IE training)

"Apart from catering to the needs of the ethnic minority students, we also need to cater the need of the local students who are the majority. If resources are available, there is no problem. Otherwise, we should not emphasize too much on catering for the needs of ethnic minority students. Resources should be allocated with priority."

(Participant 20, 9 years TEEMS in mainstream secondary school without IE training)

Participants thus demonstrated a stance somewhat at odds with other expressions of support for inclusive education when it came to hard decisions about resource allocation.

Academic Performance

Curriculum differentiation and adaptation, in order to deliver the curriculum to all, was seen as essential to make classroom teaching more meaningful and inclusion effective. However, it was also one of the biggest challenges for all schools. Nearly all teachers shared a concern for maintaining existing academic standards for all students. Heavy teaching workload was also a concern.

My challenge is on the priority between academic performance and inclusive education. If this is kindergarten, inclusive education can be placed as first priority. However, when there is a public syllabus, we can't neglect the progress and academic performance of all students. Then, we can't find time to serve their special educational needs. Even though I am willing to provide supplementary support on Chinese language subject to them, it doesn't mean all other teachers are willing to do so. Moreover, this may be unfair to the teachers. Heavy workload should not be a norm."

(Participant 8, 10 years TEEMS in mainstream primary school with IE training)

Some participants expressed that there was inherent conflict between the government and school expectation of inclusive education and academic performance. It seemed that it was very difficult to maintain the academic performance of students and the implementation of inclusive education at the same time.

"Although my school enrolls ethnic minority students, the mission of the school is on achieving high academic performance and winning in inter-school competitions. This makes me confused with the implementation of inclusive education, as it's like purely putting the students from different ethnic backgrounds to study together."

(Participant 12, 5 years TEEMS in mainstream secondary school without IE training).

Culture

The provision of mainstream schools originally met the needs of the majority of Hong Kong students, and the consequent additional resources provide opportunities for ethnic minority students. Mainstream schools which adopt inclusive education may be concerned that they will not be as attractive to parents, as examination grades may not be as high as those in neighbouring schools, which do not enroll ethnic minority students. In addition, parents may express concerns over the potentially disruptive nature of some ethnic minority students. A positive inclusive culture seems a pre-requisite for successful inclusion education. Such a positive culture can be

established through efforts to create a common community, one that respects diversity [20].

Cultural Conflicts

Different values on academic performance and school discipline are the main cultural conflicts expressed by the participants. As argued by Ogbu [21], ethnic minority students and parents may be aware that the job market in Hong Kong does not operate in their favour, and so they see little point in putting a lot of effort into academic work.

"Some of the parents have stayed in HK for many years and can speak Chinese but think there is too rigid parental control in Chinese culture. However, from our perspective, we think their parental control is too loose. The ethnic minority students don't obey the classroom discipline. Their parents never discipline their children. Moreover, they don't care about the academic performance of their children."

(Participant 5, 1 year TEEMS in mainstream secondary school without IE training)

"Cultural difference is the main challenge and it makes me feel stress in teaching the ethnic minority students. Both ethnic minority parents and students don't think there is any problem if the students don't submit assignments or home work. … Some of the parents even think it is not necessary for their children to go to school to study. Therefore, it is quite difficult to implement school-parent partnership."

(Participant 17, 8 year TEEMS in mainstream primary school without IE training)

It is not clear whether these negative perceptions with respect to parents come from direct interaction with them, or as secondary impressions from discussion with ethnic minority students. What is does reveal, though, is that at least some participants had little confidence in the parents concerning their support for education. A similar finding from the UK was reported by Tikly [20], who found that low teacher expectations could be reinforced by indifferent parental attitudes, as well as lack of future aspirations and low academic expectations of students. This was tempered with a recognition of the need for greater understanding of cultural differences.

Insufficient Understanding

Some participants expressed that they, including their students, did not know much about the cultures of ethnic minority students and thus the teaching and learning experiences of ethnic minority students were negatively affected. Insufficient understanding about the cultures of counter ethnic groups can cause misunderstanding with each others [3,22,23].

"I think we know too little about the culture and background of those ethnic minorities. ... On the contrary, they also need to understand our culture. Otherwise, they may also use the wrong perspective to interpret our behaviour. Finally, misunderstanding will be caused."

(Participant 2, 6 years TEEMS in mainstream secondary school with IE training)

Communication with the ethnic minority students could be one way to improve the understanding about their cultures, but this was limited to those students who were more mature and can express themselves effectively.

"The school hasn't introduced and given briefings about the cultures of different ethnic minorities. The teachers can only find out the answers by asking the ethnic minority students, as there is no official information for them to study. However, this may only be applicable to the secondary school students. The primary school students may not be able to explain too much."

(Participant 3, 3 years TEEMS in mainstream primary school with IE training)

Additionally, there can also be misunderstandings among different ethnic minority students and parents in designated schools, because they do not know much about each others' culture. Inclusive education should also be promoted in designated schools.

"Actually, the ethnic minorities and their children also don't know much about the cultures of other ethnic groups. There are also some arguments among the students and their parents of different ethnic backgrounds."

(Participant 9, 9 years TEEMS in designated primary school without IE training)

Support

Major responsibility for the co-ordination of support may rest with a limited number of people, but in determining how support is organized it is important to link student support, for both individuals and groups, with staff and curriculum development activities [24].

Lack of Government Commitment

Most participants responded negatively to the Government's level of commitment to the principle of inclusive education of ethnic minority students and to its determination to achieve positive change. Without the support from the Government, it would be very difficult to implement the inclusive education of ethnic minority students.

"I don't find any support from the government or EDB to help us implement inclusive education of ethnic minority students, except some training about inclusive education of SEN students. In my school, we have arranged extra support groups such as translating test and examination papers and providing extra-curricular activities for them. It seems there is no support on teaching and learning for them. After telling you that there will be five ethnic minority students in your class in this academic year, the school won't tell you how to teach the ethnic minority students with local students in mainstream classroom."

(Participant 1, 4 years TEEMS in mainstream primary school with IE training)

"I feel that EDB has paid more attention to NCS students by assessing the suitability of Chinese language curriculum for the students. But then, I don't see any further support, especially on inclusive education, has been provided by EDB."

(Participant 8, 10 years TEEMS in mainstream primary school with IE training)

The support from government is not just about funding, but is needed in other forms such as changing the class size and providing a sample curriculum of some subjects for inclusive classes with ethnic minority students.

"I think the government has provided financial support to the schools. If ten marks are the maximum, I will give 8 marks on this. However, whether the funding is used efficiently is another question. … the government can provide a set of curriculum of some subjects for ethnic minority students to use in mainstream schools."

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(Participant 9, 9 years TEEMS in designated primary school without IE training)

"Normal class size is 44 students a class. Therefore, if the government wants to show support, the class should be allowed to adjust to less than 22. This may be the easiest way for the government to support the implementation of inclusive education."

(Participant 11, 2 years TEEMS in designated secondary school without IE training)

Non-Holistic Plan

As argued by Mittler [25], apart from the financial support from the Government, the success of inclusive education depends to a large extent on the ways in which the Government, schools, teachers, parents and communities respond to the challenges and opportunities that are now available. A holistic plan of support is required.

"Inclusive education is a very complicated process. It is not only about placing the students from different ethnic backgrounds to study together in the same school, but also about the support of their school lives such as academic performance, extra-activities participation, friendship with other students, teacher trainings, awareness and understanding of cultural differences, and so on. Apart from extra support, a good plan of support is also required."

(Participant 12, 5 years TEEMS in mainstream secondary school without IE training)

Most participants observed that family support for the ethnic minority students was insufficient.

"We can't expect their family support, as they can't support them due to their educational level, language ability and occupation limitation. We find that no matter how many extra supplementary classes provided for the students, the outcomes are not obvious. All support can only be done during school time."

(Participant 3, 3 years TEEMS in mainstream primary school with IE training)

Moreover, it was considered insufficient for only the teachers to be making the effort to implement inclusive education without any other support. Without such additional help, the outcome is not as effective and efficient.

"Before talking about teaching and learning, the ethnic minority students' attitudes to education should be guided by extra support such as counseling and mentorship. Otherwise, only the efforts paid by the teachers will not gain any good returns. Teachers can't talk too much on the non-syllabus content in the mainstream class, when the local students don't have such problem."

(Participant 13, 4 years TEEMS in mainstream primary school without IE training)

Conclusion

This study has provided details of the challenges faced by teachers of ethnic minority students in Hong Kong schools, which are perceived by participants as relating to resources, priorities, culture and support. Not only are resources considered insufficient, but what resources that were provided were not used well, because of insufficient or absent guidelines for their effective use in the classroom. The issue of priorities raised the difficulty of balance with respect to the trade-off between efforts on behalf of the ethnic minority students and the legitimate needs of local students. The examination system with its specific standards and requirements served to focus these concerns, as there was a belief that many ethnic minority students could not and should not be expected to reach the same norms, especially in language education. Participants recognised the challenges raised by cultural differences, which can lead to conflict, with some making specific efforts to increase cultural understanding through classroom activities. The call for increased support was made not just to Government, but to all involved in the education system, with the importance of family support highlighted.

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