

C Is for Connection: School, Family and Community Collaboration in Hong Kong's Multicultural Education

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ABSTRACT : *The home-school-community collaboration is essential in advancing multicultural education for ethnic minority (EM) students in Hong Kong. Schools should move beyond viewing families as peripheral and instead recognize them as active partners in education. This essay centers on the challenges faced by EM students, especially in acquiring Chinese language proficiency, which is a key barrier to academic success and social integration. Linguistic difficulties are rooted in structural differences between Chinese and EM students' native languages, as well as the disconnect between schools and non-Chinese-speaking families. It also addresses stereotypes and institutional biases that marginalize EM students and hinder effective collaboration. By drawing on theoretical frameworks and empirical studies, a successful model, the C-for-Chinese Programme, is examined in depth. The essay, moreover, outlines how collaboration among schools, families, and communities contributes to student development, particularly in culturally diverse contexts. It highlights the need for community organizations to take on leadership roles and for schools to empower EM families through parent-teacher associations and advisory committees.*

KEYWORDS - Chinese language, ethnic minorities, Hong Kong, home-school-community collaboration, multicultural education

I. INTRODUCTION

The manner in which schools care for children is reflected in how they support children's families. When educators view children solely as students, families are often seen as separate from the school, with parents expected to handle parenting while schools focus on education. In contrast, when educators recognize students as children, families and the community can become partners in education, working together to improve programmes and opportunities for children's development.

Over the past three decades, scholars have done a substantial corpus of literature, examining parental involvement as a critical component of school reform. For example, Coleman (1987), Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) investigated family learning environments and parental roles. There are also publications that explore the general theories surrounding school, family and community collaborations. These works examine the school role and programmes implemented within the collaboration framework, as well as research on the social issues and trends related to such engagement. They also discovered different features and changes in promoting the partnership, providing practical suggestions and templates to guide instructional practices (Epstein, 2019; Grant & Ray, 2019; Epstein & Sheldon, 2023). Epstein (1992, 2019) advanced the research focus from parental involvement to exploring the ideas and practices that underpin school-family-community partnership, asserting that parental

involvement is associated with positive outcomes like enhanced academic performance, heightened readiness on homework, improved behavior and well-being, and higher aspirations.

In Hong Kong, educators examined the home-school-community collaboration within the education system and related policies. As early as the 1990s, Shen, Pang, Tsoi, Yip and Yung (1994) provided a comprehensive overview of the attitudes and behaviors of various stakeholders towards the collaboration. Pang's (1997, 1999, 2000, 2004) frameworks introduced a matrix model illustrating the functions of parent-teacher associations. He thus pointed out the perspectives and challenges when working on the collaboration. Additional studies were done by Ho (1995, 1998, 1999, 2010), who analyzed the impact of family background and school policies on the level and effectiveness of parent involvement. She applied ecological systems theory to support her argument that parent involvement is a multidimensional construct, shaped by social and cultural capital. Moreover, Ng (2001, 2003, 2011) discussed the relationship between parents' social class and their willingness in participating school activities. His work, therefore, reviewed the current home-school-community collaboration in Hong Kong, believing that meaningful cooperation should allow families to be directly involved in the school's decision-making process.

Although human diversity is a common feature in schools worldwide, many educators perceive it as a challenge to their teaching practices instead of recognizing it as an asset. The situation of ethnic minorities' education in Hong Kong has garnered attention from many organizations and scholars. Since there is a growing presence of students from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds, it has heightened the need for teachers to effectively engage with parents from varying cultural contexts. Current research shows the challenges involved in fostering engagement with ethnic minorities in their children's education, such as language barriers, socioeconomic status, and the complexities of special caring policies, hindering their integration into the local education system (Wong, 2016; Bhowmik, 2019; Elizabeth & Hung, 2020; Tse et al., 2021). Unfortunately, Hong Kong lacks intercultural teacher professional development, resulting in segregation between the local students and them (Ku et al., 2016; Yuen, 2018, p.137). To this end, this essay will examine the issues of ethnic minorities' education, then emphasize the critical role of home-school-community collaboration in creating a supportive environment that promotes mutual understanding between each other. As scholars and organizations suggested, active engagement and cooperation in such collaboration have the potential to advance social equity and inclusivity (Wong, 2016; Shi & Ye, 2017; Elizabeth & Hung, 2020). Moreover, suggestions for possible collaborations will focus on promoting the elimination of cultural biases and encouraging a multicultural horizon, including reflection on potential challenges and identifying strategies to address them effectively.

II. ETHNIC MINORITIES' EDUCATION IN HONG KONG

According to the Census and Statistics Department (2024), ethnicity is self-identified, typically based on factors, namely ethnic origin, color, descent, cultural background, nationality and language. To date, individuals of non-Chinese ethnic backgrounds, known as ethnic minorities (EM), make up approximately 8.4% of Hong Kong's population. In fact, the term "ethnic minority" was introduced after the Second World War, identifying anyone who is part of a group that maintains a distinction in language or culture from the mainstream population (Browne, 2005, p.6). Despite EM having the right to equal access to free education as protected by international instruments, studies show that dropout rates among them remain alarmingly high, often exceeding 50% (Equal Opportunities Commission, 2010, p.2). They face significant challenges in accessing education, particularly in learning the Chinese language, obtaining community support, and dealing with stereotypes and racism. These issues also affect the efficiency and effectiveness of home-school-community collaboration.

2.1 Chinese Language Learning Challenges

Without a doubt, learning Chinese is the defining challenge for EM students. People often hold the misconception that, unlike local students who grow up speaking Chinese as their first language and are immersed in a rich Chinese language environment, EM students born in Hong Kong rarely speak Chinese at home. However, most Hong Kong-born EM children are eventually fluent in Cantonese (Wong, 2016, p. 29). Their fluency is not solely a result of learning through osmosis but is also influenced by the government's educational policies.

Before the new millennium, the medium of instruction of most Secondary schools was English. In the 1980s, the government emphasized the educational benefits of teaching in Cantonese, the mother-tongue, leading over 300 secondary schools switched their medium of instruction from English to Chinese, only about a hundred of schools remain unchanged (Education Commission, 1984; Loper, 2004, p.4). Though learning through mother-tongue better facilitates their integration of knowledge into daily life, the policy is not adequately designed because some EM students struggle to function Chinese well, they cannot read or write Chinese while being able to speak Cantonese (Loper, 2004, p.5).

For EM students, the Chinese writing system is fundamentally different from the scripts used by their first language such as English, Urdu, Nepali, and Hindi. Urdu, for example, is written from right to left and bottom to top, while Chinese is the opposite (Wong, 2016, p.35). Chinese characters also differ from phonetic scripts. Instead of using letters to represent phonemes that combine to form words that often allow for immediate pronunciation like English, Chinese characters consist of intricate strokes and indexing components followed by specific writing rules. The use of the Chinese classifier between a numeral and a noun can be disturbing to EM students. A classifier is a grammatical morpheme that is mandatory when quantifying countable nouns. It functions to link numerals to the nouns they modify and categorizes entities according to semantic features, for example, we write 兩條魚 (two-classifier-fishes) rather than just two fishes. Furthermore, each Chinese character represents a single morpheme and is inherently monosyllabic. They must be combined to form meaningful words, with varying combinations producing entirely different meanings (Shi & Ye, 2017, p.49). Therefore, understanding a phrase or sentence in Chinese requires not just recognizing characters but also comprehending their pronunciation, semantics, and context. The above-mentioned are habitual errors that EM students commit when learning Chinese (Education Bureau, 2008).

Yet another challenge in learning Chinese comes from the distinction between spoken and written language. Being able to master both is tough. Cantonese retains a large number of old Chinese monosyllabic words (Shi & Ye, 2017, p.49). It also incorporates many phonetic loanwords like 𨋖 (lift or elevator), 士多啤梨 (strawberry), 貼士 (tips) and 巴士 (bus), etc. In terms of pronunciation, the dialect has nine tones, each means different characters. Since written Cantonese is different from written vernacular Chinese, EM students will have to separate listening, speaking, and reading from writing when having Chinese lessons. Reports showed that in Chinese medium of instruction schools, EM students failed to understand subject content and fell behind the learning schedule. This is one of the main reasons for dropping out. As non-Chinese-speaking parents are unable to offer academic support, these students frequently rely on teachers or peers for assistance (Bhowmik, 2019, pp. 186-187).

2.2 Parental Participation Barriers

Many people mistakenly believe that minority parents are less educated and do not value their children's education much. Ng (2011, p.104) discovered that they actually have high expectations for their children's education but rarely participate in school affairs unless invited by teachers. The most common explanation for EM families, who were largely inactive in school participation, is language barriers. Similar to their children, many parents struggle to communicate with teachers in Chinese, resulting in a more negative attitude toward involvement in school

activities. EM parents often lack knowledge of the Chinese language, making them feel completely unprepared and unable to assist their children with learning (Tse et al., 2021). Thus, the parenting style of EM is different from that of local Chinese people, who tend not to supervise their children and let them learn independently (Ho, 2010, p.19). They also lack the concept of home-school-community collaboration and are unaware of what parent-teacher associations are, so receiving a notice from the school is more likely to be seen as a sign that their children have made a mistake and need to be reprimanded (Pang, 1997).

2.3 Stereotypes and Racism

Coleman (1987) argues that different racial and ethnic groups have unique educational norms and values, which, in turn, shape the patterns of parental engagement at school. Stereotypes and racism within the school environment can impede effective collaboration among schools, families and communities, ultimately affecting the educational experiences of EM students. According to Bhowmik (2019), Hong Kong teachers have pervasive stereotypes that label EM students as lazy, less motivated and not hard-working. It was just as severe back then in 2005, 74% of the respondents believed that teachers treated them differently because of their ethnic background, which also made it hard to build friendships with classmates. Teachers at that time widely applied negative labels and stereotypes about EM students like “useless”, “misbehaving” and “impolite” (Ku et al., 2016). The Equal Opportunities Commission (2010) was concerned about schools holding views that parents of EM students were unsupportive of education and uncooperative with the school. Schools did not proactively understand the needs of minority students, so they were unable to organize activities to integrate EM into the school and community and thus failed to either eliminate discrimination or provide adequate support. This creates a segregated education system in schools. As a result, efforts should be made to strengthen home-school-community collaboration, promote acceptance, provide more learning information to help EM students and parents make choices about educational paths, as well as build a harmonious school environment.

III. SUCCESSFUL MODEL: THE C-FOR-CHINESE PROGRAMME

In the past, the roles of teachers and parents in educating children were seen as separated. By the 1990s, the Committee on Home-school Cooperation was set up to oversee and encourage collaboration between family and schools as the government started to place attention on home-school cooperation (Pang, 2004, p.110). In 1997, the Education Commission proposed that by 2000, all schools should implement school-based management. This approach aimed to enable schools to deliver quality education with increased flexibility in resource utilization, tailored to the specific needs and characteristics of their students. The committee herein stated that the involvement of parents, alumni and teachers in school management, development planning, evaluation, and decision-making are key elements in cooperation (Education Commission, 1997, p.17). School links with parents and the community soon became one of the school performance indicators, with grants distributed to schools that developed innovative strategies to improve such collaboration and enhance parental education.

It is a sine qua non to develop skills to work with those who may not speak the same mother-tongue. As suggested by Grant and Ray (2019), this begins with understanding the process of second language acquisition and the role families play in influencing it. The process of learning a second language shares similarities with learning a first language. However, as discussed above, achieving fluency in Chinese is highly affected by the microsystem which includes family, school and peers; the mesosystem, which refers to connections within the immediate environment; and the macrosystem, which encompasses the cultural background, whether of the individual or the city itself (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Wong et al., 2020, p.80).

In Hong Kong, while not common, there are successful examples of home-school-community collaboration to help minority groups learn Chinese and integrate into local culture. A notable and large-scale initiative is the C-for-Chinese Programme, organized by the Jockey Club Charities Trust in collaboration with institutions including The University of Hong Kong, The Education University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong Polytechnic University,

Hong Kong Christian Service, and Hong Kong Sheng Kung Hui Lady MacLehose Centre. The project, commenced in 2016, was originally planned as a five-year initiative only, but was later extended into a second phase until today. So far, about 5000 students from 145 schools have benefited (Tse, 2021, p.8).

The C-for-Chinese project adopted a home-school-community collaborative and evidence-based model to promote culturally responsive education in mainly kindergartens. It aims to establish a pleasurable and meaningful learning environment to enhance Chinese proficiency among EM students. The project also includes a comprehensive study of EM in the city, examining opportunities and challenges for their integration into the local community from various perspectives like education, psychology and social policies. Then, related teaching resources were printed and distributed to primary and secondary schools. These materials were framed around psychological theories and real-life examples, teaching students to appreciate cultural diversity, as well as create a harmonious and inclusive school environment together (Tsoi et al., 2019a; 2019b). They emphasize EM students' emotions and empathy to encourage all students' reflection, changing behaviors and mindset growth.

By collaborating with schools, families and communities, the project focuses on three key areas: culturally responsive classrooms, effective teaching, and joyful plus meaningful learning (Ma, 2020, p.3). First, schools take the lead in creating culturally responsive environments by incorporating cultural elements into the curriculum and providing professional development for teachers. Workshops were held for teachers to master strategies on facilitating home-school events. Over 90% of teachers found these effective, they would apply new concepts on designing appropriate and effective learning environments and teaching tools such as bilingual storybooks, multicultural on-campus classrooms for EM students (Tse, 2021, pp.223-224). Next, families support the collaboration by actively participating in home activities and their children's learning journey. EM parents are encouraged to join parent-child activities or volunteer activities. When participating in community services together, they gain a deeper understanding of their living environment and school culture. This involvement also fosters mutual support in using Chinese and helps to connect with others from the same ethnic background. Based on these efforts, communities offer resources and organize educational cultural experiences (Ma, 2020, p.3). Both EM students and parents not only gain Chinese language proficiency but also flourish in an environment that values diversity through a supportive atmosphere in the community service events.

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS, CHALLENGES AND RETHINK

When we look to the future, it is important to evaluate the successes and limitations of home-school-community collaboration for EM. For sure, significant progress has been made yet challenges also persist and require a fresh perspective for recommendations. Addressing only the challenge of Chinese language proficiency is insufficient to fully support EM through home-school-community collaboration. Hence, the following will examine the obstacles, propose actionable solutions and reconsider strategies to enhance the collaboration.

4.1 Timing and Participation Flexibility

The first challenge is timing. Most activities, such as the C-for-Chinese@JC Conference 2022, were held on weekdays, limiting parents' ability to attend and leading to low participation rates. Designing procedures that allow all families to easily and effectively share information about their children with teachers and school counselors might also be difficult (Epstein, 2019, p.200). To address this, schedules can be adjusted and a flexible participation mechanism can be introduced, offering options such as weekend or online workshops. To enable parents to participate at their convenience, seminars and talks can be changed to a webinar format, including recorded courses and offline reviews. Considering that parents might be too exhausted after long workdays to attend events, leveraging online learning platforms like Google Classroom and online meetings provide flexibility and encourage instant interactions, making participation more accessible and appealing.

Further to taking advantage of webinar mode, schools can leverage recorded videos, an online system, and digital documents refined with editing techniques to ensure key content, which is primarily in Chinese and Cantonese, is now also available with English subtitles. By doing so, EM families will better understand and engage in their children's learning, track improvements and express concerns. Consequently, schools can gain valuable feedback, allowing them to refine their strategies for catering EM students' needs.

4.2 Cultural Exchange and Stereotype Elimination

Besides, in order to address stereotypes and racism faced by EM, organizing competitions with the "respect and embrace differences" theme is recommended. The proposed initiatives encourage students to celebrate unique identities and bridge cultural gaps. Instead of involving just one school, it would be beneficial to organize a multi-school competition where local and EM students, teachers, and families all participate in groups. The content can be about testing knowledge of EM customs. The overall setup encourages teamwork and collaboration in friendly rivalry, promotes mutual understanding, cultural exchange and inclusivity. Events may sometimes include elements of local culture too, including everyday traditions such as Cantonese opera and Yum Cha, that is, a Cantonese practice of enjoying breakfast or brunch with tea and dim sum. Local students will serve as docents, introducing these cultural experiences to EM families. This not only facilitates cultural exchange but also helps students build confidence in public speaking. In fact, learning Chinese beyond the exam-oriented lessons like this is more engaging, enjoyable and practical when integrated into daily life (Hue, 2009). In turn, EM families connect with local traditions, building a sense of community.

4.3 Resource Coordination and Alliance Building

However, another challenge arises as the competition expands territory-wide, requiring the coordination of more schools, families and community resources such as corporate judges and technical mentors. This expansion brings potential issues like information asymmetry and the risk of service overload. Related idea is with reference to the Resource Dependence Theory that proposed by Pfeffer and Salancik (1978), suggesting that schools often rely on external resources, for instance, family time and corporate sponsorships. When these resources are unstable, the school has to compromise on core objectives, lowering evaluation criteria to secure sponsorship is a common way. Therefore, implementing a collaborative platform could enhance transparency regarding resource contribution. By means of blockchain technology, schools can record and track partner contributions to ensure stability. In addition, schools are recommended to collaborate by forming a regional education alliance. By uniting schools from different regions of Hong Kong, they can pool resources, including event planning teams, corporate parent volunteer networks, especially in exchanging ideas, experiences and references. A collective approach helps streamline efforts, fine-tune proposals, avoid investment duplication, and alleviate the organizational burden on individual schools, creating an efficient and cohesive collaboration.

4.4 Stakeholder Engagement and Sustainability

Home-school-community collaboration would not be successful without active participation from both families and community organizations. When community roles remain passive, the overall impact is diminished. Community organizations should be encouraged to take on leadership roles, which could significantly enhance the effectiveness of these collaborations (Epstein, 2019, p.206). Recently, an education technology company SNAILDY has launched a free app to partner schools. It is dedicated to facilitating communication between schools and families with special education needs or EM students. This app allows parents to access information about the school services such as activity reminders, attendance rates and lesson progress. On the other hand, teachers can send messages to parents. These may include suggestions for support measures at home or important reminders, enabling parents to share their observations at home with teachers, helping educators understand EM students' lives (HK01, 2024). Through redefining the responsibilities of third-party organizations, it builds a more stable resource-sharing mechanism. Those community enterprises that participate actively can be incentivized

through brand exposure opportunities, motivating them to evolve from resource providers or sponsors into co-planners.

When the collaboration comes to a school-based involvement, as suggested by Ho (2010, p. 72), the parent-teacher association is the key. It is important to encourage EM families to join the association and become committee members. The objective of empowering the family committee members is to strengthen relationships between EM families and school. Their ideas expressed during conferences will be taken into measure to create a supportive network for all stakeholders, because the school policy and decision making should balance the needs of both local and EM students. This advisory body ensures that everyone's involvement contributes to a wide range of activities, helping achieve the common goals of school improvement and student success (Epstein & Sheldon, 2023, p.257). Besides, the creation of comprehensive project archives is recommended to systematically document the entire process, including planning, execution, outcomes and feedback from periodic events. These detailed records will serve as vital tools for future refinement. Committee participants can draw on past insights to improve upcoming initiatives and strengthen home-school partnerships once a structured repository is established.

Nevertheless, the vulnerability of resource dependence should also be reflected. That is, the over-reliance on large organizations to drive home-school-community collaboration. From the above-mentioned examples, many activities and programmes are led by charitable organizations like Oxfam, Hong Kong Jockey Club, and also local universities. While these institutions undoubtedly possess abundant resources, technical expertise, and valuable experience in organizing, we must consider whether there are other organizations capable of providing equivalent funding and managing large-scale events. The C-for-Chinese programme, for example, involves funding of at least 237 million Hong Kong dollars in the first five years (Hong Kong Economic Times, 2019). Identifying organizations and businesses with the financial capacity to support such research and activity development is another challenge for home-school-community collaboration, directly impacting its sustainability. The issue, therefore, warrants careful examination in both policy and practice.

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is obvious that home-school-community partnerships are a key element in successful multicultural education for EM students. There is a very complicated picture of cross-cultural education in the city according to various literature, showing that intercultural schooling is a multifaceted process which demands educators' and student families' seamless cooperation.

Although schools are a part of the community, and communities serve as strong advocates for education, they are key partners in development. Since students and parents live within the community, schools rely on community support to enhance teaching quality and management efficiency, ensuring better student care. Ng (2011) believes that headless or disengaged leadership can be highly detrimental to the operation and development of a school. When implementing educational reforms involving parental participation, principals are responsible for aligning teachers with the commitment required for these changes, where individualistic teachers are not accepted. Again, allowing EM to participate in relevant management fosters greater innovation and practical engagement, enabling schools to serve the community better and align with its development. This positive interaction establishes a three-way channel between home, school and community, which ultimately bridges cultural gaps.

Through continuous reflection and proactive measures, these collaborations can evolve into a dynamic and lasting foundation for multicultural education. Parent education for EM is important for sure, to help them understand their roles in their children's education, thus their role in the parent-teacher association. Are they acting as supervisor, volunteer, advisor or learner? The collaboration is successful only when teachers do not see working with parents as extra work, and parents feel comfortable participating in school activities without hesitation. Under limited resources, the home-school-community collaboration must focus on creating an open environment rather than simply following trends or adopting a "keeping up with the Joneses" attitude. The compensatory support for EM should be in long-term development.

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