Language Proficiency and Educational Mobility among Ethnic Minorities in Hong Kong

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Abstract. In Hong Kong, a former British colony and now a Chinese city many ethnic minorities have diverse cultural, religious, and racial backgrounds. It is a universal value that equality among different races and ethnicities is a basic human right and essential for social justice and well-being and therefore should be promoted and achieved. In Hong Kong, different forms of inequality remain in the education sector among ethnic minorities, limiting their education and social mobility. This paper investigates the contributing factors and forms of inequalities in education among ethnic minorities, as well as individuals' opinions on relevant issues through conducting literature reviews and interviews. Results demonstrate an overall positive attitude by ethnic minorities towards the current education systems, in several areas.

Keywords: Hong Kong; ethnic minorities; education; language, interview.

1. Self Reflection

Growing up in Hong Kong, while I noticed the presence of ethnic minorities (EM), I was never been curious about their way of life, nor had I ever observed the difference between EM regarding their treatment and the challenges faced. I used to go to a middle school with several ethnic minority students (around 20 of them per class, making up roughly 12.5% of the entire student body). I recall vividly that one day, while I was waiting for the bus in my uniform, an elderly lined up behind me and struck up a conversation. “What school do you go to?” she asked, pointing to my uniform. “Po Leung Kuk Ngan Po Ling College” I replied. “That school has so many South Asians and Gwailou (Cantonese slang that means Westerners or foreigners), they are stinky! Why did you choose to go to a school like that?" She asked in a despising tone. At that moment, I felt a strong desire to confront the elderly, driven only partly by her disrespect for EM but predominantly by my defensiveness toward my school and reputation. Afterwards, I did not reflect much about why discriminative speech like these exist, as if these opinions and comments have always been present in my life, and they have become so normalized that they don't faze me as they should.

Now I am studying in the United States, a country of immigrants with a myriad of cultures. Contrary to Hong Kong, where cultures of ethnic EM remain underrepresented and unrecognized, the United States always celebrates different nations, identities and cultures. One salient feature is the implementation of heritage months, where each month emphasizes one culture or group of people. Such as Black History Month, Asian Pacific American Heritage Month (AAPI), Hispanic Heritage Month, etc. The respect and effort put into making fellow citizens feel proud of their culture and heritage is fascinating. The stark comparisons prompted me to think about what is the reason behind a less equal society in the case of Hong Kong with a heavy focus on education. The research aims to look into the forces in education that lead to racial inequality and what could be done better.

2. Introduction

Hong Kong is a global city with rich cultural diversity and complex dynamics, given its unique history of British colonial rule and current status as an international financial hub. Though many expect the city to be inclusive, it is not the case as race and ethnicity remain significant social divisions in Hong Kong. Such social divisions are reflected in education disparities and unequal education attainment levels among different races and ethnicities. According to the most recent Population Census in 2021, the school attendance rate of EM aged 18-24 is 40.4%, lower than that for the whole population, which is 55.0% [1].

This article will first introduce who are EM in Hong Kong and the kinds of education they receive. Next, it examines the underlying factors that hinder EM's academic advancement, as well as the trajectory of EM in Hong Kong in terms of education. Moreover, potential solutions are raised to improve the current situation. Last but not least, a discussion about EM's sense of belonging and self-identification is included.

3. Background of Education of Ethnic Minorities in Hong Kong

This section illustrates the overall experience and education of EM, with a focus on secondary education and the importance of Chinese language proficiency. Sequentially, the government of Hong Kong was also trying to come up with solutions to cope with the issues that EM are confronted with.

3.1. The Ethnic minorities in Hong Kong

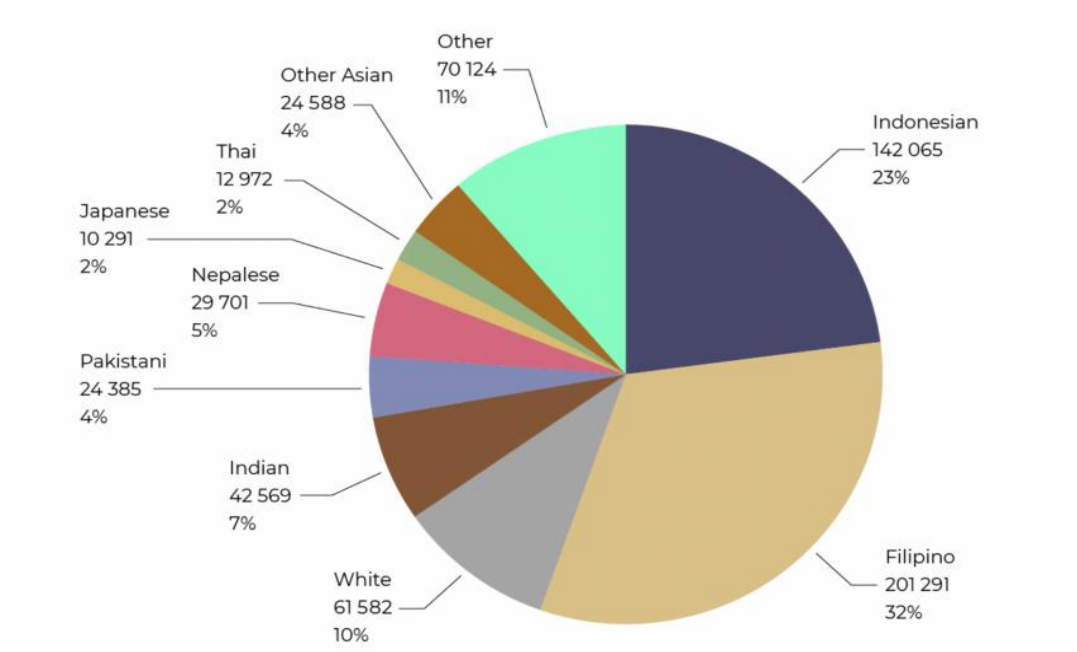


Figure 1. The demographic of ethnic minorities in Hong Kong, 2021(had.gov.hk).

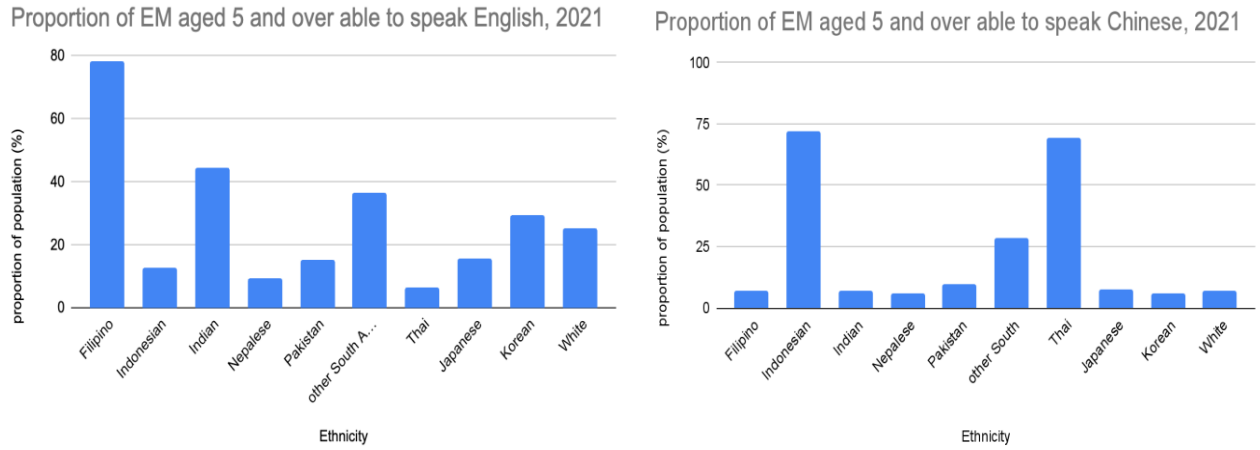


Figure 2. The Percentage of languages EM speak in HK.

EM are people who reported themselves as being of Non-Chinese ethnicities, they make up around 8% of the whole Hong Kong population. The number of EM has been growing, with an increase of 37.3% until 2021 compared to 2011, and an increase of 2% in terms of its population proportion. *The*

2021 Population Census revealed that among EM, 32.5% were Filipinos, 22.9% were Indonesians, 16.5% were South Asians (6.9% were Indian, 4.8 % were Nepalese, 3.9% were Pakistan), 9.9% were Whites, 2.1% were Thai, 1.7% were Japanese, and 1.4% were Koreans; the rest are either mixed or other Asians. South Asians were first introduced to Hong Kong in the late 19th century as soldiers under the British force, they later made up a significant portion of the Hong Kong Police Force before the Second World War.

For most EM, English stands as the predominant language, with 46.1% of them reporting English as the language most usually spoken at home. On the contrary, 29.1% of them use Cantonese as the usual spoken language, and only 1.6% speak Putonghua. In addition to linguistic ability, it is important to look at their literacy skills. While 86.2% of the entire EM can read English, only 14.6% are capable of reading Chinese, and the percentage of people being able to write is even lower for both languages. Given that not many EM could both read, write and speak Chinese, it is reasonable to believe that they face many challenges in securing higher education and work opportunities.

3.2. Social Environment for Ethnic Minorities in Hong Kong

The overall environment for EM in the city is complex and multifaceted. Experiences and perceptions among EM may vary based on many factors such as socioeconomic status, skin color, language ability, etc. In general, it is widely agreed that EM are considered expats by ethnic Chinese, and little social interaction with local Chinese communities is facilitated in reality. Stereotypes, including stigma, attached to different ethnic groups remain profound and distinct. There have been efforts to fight inequality and remove stereotypes in the past few decades, yet it is argued that structural barriers that remain between local Chinese and EM need to be overcome with greater efforts that are collective and systemic, and education is a good start.

At schools, although there is education about diversity, equity and inclusion in classes like general studies and liberal studies, it remains on a superficial level such as fostering mutual respect rather than one that can transcend preconceived notions of EM. Chinese students, especially those who have no contact with EM, have little cultural sensitivity and awareness.

3.3. Education as Basic Human Rights

In the Universal Declaration of Human Rights Article 26 [2], it is stated that:

1) Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.

2) Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.

However, practices and data in Hong Kong seem to raise a concern about the fulfilment of the UN commitment to education as a basic right. Based on observations and research:

1) There is a lack of education and promotion regarding the various racial and religious groups in Hong Kong, resulting in rather low awareness of racial equality among students.

2) The establishment of "designated schools" for EM in the 2000s, though have been abolished, remains in effect in some ways, failing to entitle EM parents to a prior right to choose the kind of education for their children.

3.4. Overview of Secondary Education in Hong Kong

Secondary schools in Hong Kong are largely divided into four categories [3]: “government, aided and caput (Government schools offer 6 years of primary and 6 years of secondary free education)” schools, direct subsidy scheme(Also known as DSS schools. Non-government schools that charge tuition and receive government subsidies. Under the direct subsidy scheme, schools have the freedom to decide their curriculum, fees, and enrollment requirements. Most of them are relatively affordable, with an average of 20,000 to 40,000 HKD a year), international schools(There are 54 international schools in Hong Kong, and around 64% of the student body is non-Chinese. School fees range from

80,000 to 30,000 HKD a year), and private schools. The first two in the list are often referred to as "local schools" or "mainstream schools"(censtatd.gov.hk). Among the ethnic minority students, there is a discernible trend in their educational choices: attending either international schools or local schools. This division often aligns with socioeconomic stratification, as students from more privileged backgrounds lean towards international schools, while their counterparts from less advantaged circumstances opt for local schools. It has been also observed that a majority of EM that attend international schools are whites, and South Asians and Southeast Asians are more inclined to attend local schools. At international schools, students do not have to follow the local curriculum or guidelines set by the Hong Kong Education Bureau and thus have greater flexibility in learning and thriving. On the other hand, students of EM attending local schools, usually being labelled as non-Chinese students (NCS), face many challenges caused by the language barrier and underlying social judgment and discrimination. This group of students take centre stage in this paper.

Before Hong Kong's handover from British rule to China in 1997, most secondary schools adopted English as the medium of instruction when the government took a laissez-faire [4] approach in terms of the medium of instruction. However, in September 1997, the Hong Kong Education Bureau issued "Guidance for Secondary Schools", in which it "encourages secondary schools to use Chinese as MOI" [5]. 370 local schools, 70% of all secondary schools, switched from using English to Chinese as their MOI within a few months. Such adjustment posed a threat to students of EM whose Chinese proficiency is limited and who would prefer an English-medium education [6]. In addition, it was indicated that students of EM would face alienation from their social lives because of the language barrier [7]. Along with the MOI change came the "Biliteracy and Trilingualism" policy, which describes the need to facilitate students' proficiency in English and (traditional) Chinese literacy, as well as their ability to speak English, Cantonese and Putonghua (Mandarin) [8]. It is believed that this policy and expectation add difficulty to EM' Chinese learning.

Recognising the lack of school choices for NCS, the government established "designated schools" that were English-medium and admitted only students of EM. However, this approach was widely criticized for obstructing integration by creating school segregation. In 2013, the government disbanded the "designated schools" and swore to ensure "equal opportunities in school admission for all eligible children (including NCS) in public sector schools". However, EM continued to attend the schools that were previously labelled as designated schools, resulting in an overconcentration of EM in a few schools. The tendency to attend schools with a high proportion of EM is due to parents' lack of understanding of the education system and resources, as well as the government's incompetence in addressing education inequality and promoting inclusiveness.

3.5. Chinese Language Requirement for Higher Education

Unlike most Chinese cities that adopt only Chinese as the official language in use, Hong Kong makes it clear that both Chinese and English are the official languages as stated on the government website. English can be spotted everywhere, such as on all the street signs, restaurant menus, government forms, public transportation, etc. However, adopting English as one of the official languages does not mean knowing only English is enough.

Universities in Hong Kong require students to have certain Chinese proficiency for undergraduate studies. All eight publicly-funded Local Degree-awarding Institutions have a requirement of attaining level 3 in the Chinese language HKDSE exam (Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination is a public examination taken by most students for university qualification.). That being said, for NCS taking HKDSE for qualifications, if they fail to secure level 3 in Chinese language, even with extraordinary results in other subjects, would have no chance to attend universities after the completion of secondary education. In addition, even if the student achieves a 3 in the Chinese exam, there are additional requirements specified in different areas of study. For instance, studying medicine requires "a good working knowledge of Cantonese" [9]. Such language requirements are barriers that hinder NSC students from attending universities or pursuing subjects of their interest. Given the lower chance to attain higher education, it is hypothesized that the lack of systemic Chinese

education and support together with the lack of flexibility of language credit conversions in secondary schools and college applications respectively contribute to their lower level of education attainment.

In addition to HKDSE, there are other Chinese language qualification tests recognized by the 9 Jupas-participating schools as alternatives, the most common ones are IGCSE and IAL. However, the conversion of scores from alternative tests to HKDSE standards remains ambiguous and unspecified, posing a challenge for students in calculating their composite scores when deciding what major they want to apply to. Similar to Jupas-participating schools, other tertiary institutions also have similar Chinese language proficiency requirements for NCS applicants [10].

3.6. Government efforts

Because of the problems faced by NCS, the government has taken action to address some of the problems, mostly by providing education funds to schools with a certain number of NCS. However, the efforts are considered insufficient and do not fix-the roots of the problems. For instance, the lack of systemic Chinese language education for NCS students. And the lack of professional teacher development in teaching Chinese to students who learn it as a second or third language. Also, the ambiguous Chinese qualification requirements for university admissions make it confusing when adding up their composite test scores to decide on their programme preference choices.

4. Methodology

This chapter illustrates the approaches used for processing this research. The methodological approach of this study contained the semi-structured interview research methods. They aim to gain an understanding of how people think of EM, language as a key to social mobility, the secondary education system, and the government's efforts to improve the current situation. This section also details the specific steps for this research, including determining the target population and arranging samples, and the tool used for data collection and analysis.

Approach: The scholarly sources I have referred to come from various years, some are fairly recent publications, while the others are from a much earlier time. Therefore, it is most helpful to hear from people who speak (through the semi-structured interviews) from the "I perspective" to make a holistic and updated examination of the education received by the EM.

Target population: Data were collected from 6 ethnic minority students who went to local secondary schools, and their ages ranged from 16 to 18. All interviews were conducted in English via video conferencing. Most questions were predetermined, while the rest were spontaneous. The interview questions were split into two categories, namely identity and education. Identity questions ask for interviewees' ethnic and socioeconomic identities, as these are the factors that may affect their experience as EM in Hong Kong. The list of questions is provided in the appendix.

Sample collection: purposive sampling was used for sampling the interviewees. A purposive sample: a non-probability sample that was selected according to the characteristics of a population, which was also known as judgmental, selective, or subjective sampling [11]. Consequently, to obtain more details from the interviewees, they were selected based on their varieties and education experiences where they could provide more information and real opinions.

Limitations: Moreover, owing to this limited number of participants, their ideas might be taken as representative of the wider society when they were not, and vice versa [12]. For instance, all of the interviewees are female; therefore, this paper can't speculate about whether or not males will have a different experience.

5. Results

This session lists the findings from the conducted interviews. Data were selected and analyzed concerning the major topics of what are the contributing factors to ethnic inequalities in general and in schools, as well as EM's attitude and impression toward their situations.

Table 1. Information of Interview Participants.

Interviewees	Birthplace	Self-identification	Age group	Most spoken languages
Student A	India (moved to HK at the age of 3)	Indian	16-18	Tamil; English
Student B	Hong Kong	Indian	16-18	Tamil; Cantonese; English
Student C	Hong Kong	Indian	16-18	Punjabi
Student D	Hong Kong	Indian and Hongkonger	16-18	Cantonese; English
Student E	Hong Kong	Mixed (Arab and Chinese)	16-18	English; Cantonese
Student F	Hong Kong	Indian but from Hong Kong	16-18	Hindi; Cantonese; Punjabi

5.1. Mixed Feelings about the Social Environment

Based on the tone and expression of the interviewees, a majority of students have a rather optimistic attitude towards their current circumstances and their experience of being EM. With only a few of them feeling dismissive and slightly dissatisfied.

Students who present a positive view of society often hold the argument that considering the city is predominantly Chinese, the government has been doing close to enough to address racial inequalities. For instance, student A demonstrates that she is content and mostly oblivious to social issues regarding racial inequalities. She suggests that Hong Kong is at the forefront of achieving racial equality by comparing it to that of European countries, in her words "would treat South Asians as second-class citizens".

On the other hand, student C expresses discontent towards the lack of space and support to celebrate their own culture and festivals, further underscoring that Hong Kong does not have an overall welcoming and supportive attitude when it comes to embracing other subcultures. This has resulted in a conflicting scenario where EM are inclined to be "detached from their cultural heritage and roots yet not fully integrated into the Chinese culture in the meantime".

5.2. Self-identification

3 out of 5 students of Indian descent (Student A, B, C) identify themselves as solely Indians without hesitation. The other two students seemed to recognise the intricate nature of the question and they both took a moment to think. One (Student D) ended up identifying herself as both Indian and Hongkonger, clarifying that under most circumstances she would tell people that she is Indian to avoid judgment; the other interviewee (Student F) responded that she is "Indian from Hong Kong", she explained that she has a sense of belonging to the Hong Kong identity thanks to her proficiency in Cantonese. The last student's ethnicity belongs to "mixed" (Student E). These findings indicate the presence of a sense of estrangement and the lack of sense of belonging experienced by most EM. Interviewees frequently bring up that a majority of EM only get along with people who share their cultural or ethnic background, and they feel that it is challenging to integrate into the Chinese community without a good proficiency in Cantonese. However, half of all interviewees are accustomed to the lack of interaction with Chinese and believe that it is not a big problem; 1 interviewee (student C) highlights that the reason for the lack of integration and interaction is the presence of some profound stereotypes towards EM shared by ethnic Chinese, particularly among the older generation. She then provided some examples of stereotypes or mindsets that remain distinct, such as

1. All EM are unable to speak Cantonese
2. All EM don’t understand the social and political culture in Hong Kong.

Student C then emphasized that there are a lot of NCS of her age who can speak fluent Cantonese as well as love and understand Hong Kong culture. She points out that most of the time people are too quick to judge and assume that EM do not want to put in effort to fit in.

5.3. Education Trajectory or experience

Since interviewees are of similar age, they share similar education experiences to a certain extent, for example, they take the same public examinations and apply to local universities in the same way: all interviewees took or plan on taking the IGCSE Chinese exam at Form 4 (equivalent to Year 10), and subsequently the IAL Chinese exam at Form 6 (equivalent to Year 12). Three key problems are frequently brought up in all interview sessions: limited choice of schools, poorly structured Chinese language education, and ambiguous and inconsistent JUPAS (The Joint University Programmes Admissions System, commonly known as JUPAS, designed by Dr Gregory Chan Hin Fai, is a unified system for applying for full-time undergraduate programmes in Hong Kong) Admission Scores Conversion rules. And out of all the problems, language is the culprit.

First and foremost, all interviewees acknowledge the limited choice of schools, primary and secondary likewise. Student F points out that the Chinese language assessment and interview were a barrier that hindered EM's entry to many primary schools. She believes it is unfair to deny EM entry to primary schools based on their weak Chinese language ability simply because primary education is meant to provide them with the necessary language foundation and support, not to mention EM are inherently weaker in Chinese because of the lack of language environment at home. She recalled being very disappointed when rejected by a local primary school as a 5-year-old because her Chinese wasn't good enough, "strangely, they expect a 5-year-old kid of immigrants to have native Chinese ability" she said. She later ended up in a primary school with a direct subsidy scheme, also a former "designated school". Moving on, according to Student A, the reason for the limited choice of schools lies in the lack of secondary schools that offer special support for non-Chinese students, such as having split classes and pull-out learning. Out of more than 400 secondary schools in Hong Kong, less than 100 schools provide special support, not to mention that only a few of these 100 schools have good "haau fung"(Cantonese, refers to the prevailing atmosphere, values, principles, and overall character or culture of a school. This is a factor that most parents take into account when deciding on schools.) (School ethos or culture). According to Student D, the quotas and reservation system that prevails among top secondary schools made secondary school applications among EM more competitive, with only a small percentage of them ending up in "good" schools each year. For example, Student A's secondary school admits no more than 20 non-Chinese students each year.

All interviewees acknowledge the poorly structured nature of their Chinese language classes, and it could be attributed to the lack of professional teachers, social-political changes, and the lack of systemic planning, all of which tend to contribute to a less-than-ideal Chinese learning experience. Student According to both students E and F, there is a very noticeable contrast between primary school and secondary school Chinese classes. Rather than becoming more challenging, they get much easier: "We started from the very basics such as learning how to count or how to buy things in wet markets" said Student E, "and it was a waste of time to relearn everything we have already known". "They (teachers or educators in secondary schools) did not take into account the fact that a majority of EM has already attained certain level of Chinese proficiency from their primary school education" claimed student F. In a Chinese learning textbook series called "Chinese Made Easy" with 7 books, student E's middle school started teaching EM with book 1, the most basic and introductory book. "It was a sloppy move of their part to teach a syllabus that most students in the class have already mastered" said student E. With many complaints, the school did make some adjustments such as starting with Book 3 instead of Book 1. The decision for schools to teach way too simple Chinese to EM at secondary school is unfair to many students who are ready for a more advanced and challenging course, resulting in a waste of time which could be better used to equip EM with better Chinese language skills which are considered essential in their future university application and job search. What added to the dissatisfaction is the switch of written language from Traditional Chinese to Simplified Chinese (Traditional Chinese is the traditional script primarily used in regions like Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan; simplified Chinese is used in mainland China. Local schools in Hong Kong all adopt Traditional Chinese in their curriculum.), mentioned by a couple of students. At the time of Form 5 (equivalent to year 11), the Chinese syllabus suddenly changed from being printed in

Traditional Chinese to Simplified Chinese, and the reasons were unknown. While students stated that they were still allowed to write in traditional Chinese, the transition was immensely challenging as they had to learn how to recognize simplified Chinese characters to read the texts on textbooks and exam papers. One student mentioned that her school's GCSE Chinese course suddenly switched the medium of instruction from Cantonese to Putonghua a year ago, which made learning Chinese more challenging because she has to "keep up with both two languages".

In addition to the Chinese learning experience, the challenge all EM from the interviews come across is unclear or unfair language requirements for university programmes. All local universities require students to have taken a test on Chinese proficiency. Many students brought up that local universities have different score conversion systems. Only the University of Hong Kong and the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology treat an A on the International AS level Chinese Qualification Test (Chinese proficiency test that most EM who attend local secondary schools take upon applying to Universities) as a level 5 or level 5*, while all other universities such as the Chinese University of Hong Kong and the Hong Kong Polytechnic University treat an A as only a level 3, which is the minimum requirement for language proficiency. Because of this "unfair treatment of AS level results", student E mentioned that she had to exclude the Chinese University of Hong Kong as one of her university preferences when filling out her Jupus admission form because her composite score, calculated using CUHK's criteria, fell below for the requirement for the major she wants to pursue. However, the details of score conversion mentioned above are not explicitly stated and accessible to the public, since all interviewees claimed that they got this information from their Chinese teachers rather than official websites such as universities' admission pages. Moreover, student D brought up the issue of lack of accessibility to university application information, because some of the leaflets and websites are only in Chinese. On the other hand, student C said otherwise that most important information has English versions.

6. Conclusion

The interviews demonstrate that the EM have differing perceptions of the overall environment in Hong Kong and share different degrees of the sense of belonging to the Hong Kong culture and identity. It is obvious that language plays a significant role in helping EM to feel connected and belong to the school community and society. In the education sector, disparities and inequalities still prevail. The research results indicate that there is a need for schools to plan out a systemic Chinese language curriculum that best boosts EM language ability. On top of that, it is believed that more thoughtful consideration should be given to universities' admission policies when it comes to enrolling EM and looking at their educational background, which is to have more flexibility to review their applications in context.

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