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Final Paper:

A Comparative Study on Education Policy for Ethnic Minority of Hong Kong and

Singapore

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Introduction

As one of the major pillars of social policy, education has a crucial role in enhancing individuals' and society's wellbeing. Not only does education enable us to develop our full capability, but it is also a social attainment in connection with different institutions, such as employment, to further utilize the opportunities for our self-accomplishment in different life stages. Thus, education is also regarded as a means of empowerment. In this way, it is important to ensure equal education for every citizen in the society, such that human capital can be fully developed, maintaining social competitiveness (Equal Opportunities Commission [EOC], 2011).

However, a disparity in educational attainment and socio-economic status between the ethnic minority and the mainstream society always exists. For example, low level of educational attainment has been observed for the South-Asia minorities in Hong Kong (Commission on Poverty, 2014) and the ethnic minorities in Singapore (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2010), comparing to the mainstream Chinese counterparts. At the same time, the median monthly household incomes of Southeast Asia minorities were all lower than that of Hong Kong whole population (Commission on Poverty, 2014), while the median household income of the ethnic Malay minority was also lower than that of Chinese and Indian ethnic group.

When ethnic differences are enlarged, social tension might also increase, threatening social cohesion (Lai & Mathews, 2016). Therefore, equality in education has been actively promoted in multiethnic societies, such that fair treatment within education institutions can be

ensured, which also contributes to fair competition in the labour market, promoting social upward mobility in the long-run.

In view of education as a powerful tool for individual empowerment and promoting upward mobility of every stakeholder, particularly the marginal groups in the society, this essay aims at studying different approaches of ethnic minority (EM) education policy in the society of Hong Kong and Singapore, exploring the various difficulties confronting EM. In the following, the comparability of two societies and the overview of their education policies will be elaborated first. Analysis of polices will fall within the framework of social exclusion for discussion, followed by the evaluation session.

Reasons for Choosing Hong Kong and Singapore

Topping the list of 2016 Index of Economic Freedom with Hong Kong being the first and Singapore comes the second (The Heritage Foundation, 2016), the two regions share various similarities with each other in terms of different socio-economic dimension. They are both capitalist societies which experience prosperous economic development with similar Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2016, with Hong Kong ranks at 33th and Singapore ranks at 39th (International Monetary Fund, 2016). They are also highly urbanized with scarce natural resources that makes them dependent on development of human resources and tertiary sector of economy. Consequently, it can be deduced that education would be of crucial importance in development of human capital to both societies. The ethnic composition is also similar with Chinese being the majority – 93.5% for Hong Kong (Commission on Poverty, 2014) and 74.3% for Singapore (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2016). Therefore, Hong Kong and Singapore are chosen as the subjects for this comparative study on education policy for ethnic minority.

Overview of Education Policies of Ethnic Minority

The education policies of EM for Hong Kong and Singapore are similar in terms of provision. Education is provided mainly through state-maintained school system in both regions as EM are assimilated into the system together with the mainstream (Education Bureau, 2016; Ministry of Education, 2016). Though the state is the main provider of education policies, part of additional supportive services is provided by private sector, or a combination of both. In Hong Kong, some Chinese and English courses are offered to minorities through non-governmental organizations (NGOs), where the NGOs are contracted with government to provide such services (Education Bureau, 2016). While in Singapore, self-help groups are established to empower the disadvantaged EM through assistance in education. Yayasan Mendaki is one ethnically-based community group that helps underprivileged Malay students to achieve excellence in education through financial assistance, tuition class and parenting education as well (Tan, 2013). Though it is regarded as private provision service, it receives financial and infrastructural support from the government.

In terms of membership, Hong Kong and Singapore shares a similar definition of EM. Singapore regards Malay and Indian as the EM in the society and they account for 13.4% and 9.1% of the total population respectively (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2010). In Hong Kong, EM is regarded as non-Chinese speaking students defined by Education Bureau. Among different categories of EM, South Asians (Indian, Pakistan and Nepalese etc.) are mostly referred to in education policies as they are relatively poorer with the longest standing of history residing in Hong Kong (Commission on Poverty, 2014). The total population of this group of EM is 60,000, which is less than 1% of the total (Commission on Poverty,

2014). For those minorities students who are eligible for the state-maintained education system, they must be the aged 6-15 with the citizenship and right of abode in Hong Kong or Singapore.

However, the objectives of their education policies different greatly from each other that which reflect clearly the differences in social contexts. The education policies for minority in Hong Kong aim at facilitating minority students' mastery of Chinese language. Thus, the intervention of the policies mainly focus on assistance in learning Chinese as their second language (Education Bureau, 2016). But Singapore takes a different route. Instead of forcing the minorities to learn the mother tongue of the majority Chinese, Singapore practices a Bilingual Education Policy for all students where the mastery of English language is facilitated at the first place instead regardless of their ethnicity (Wee, 2016). The second language is chosen regarding the mother tongue of the students, namely Chinese, Malay and Indian. In the following, such huge difference in the education policy for the minority will be elaborated with reference to the social contexts.

Hong Kong: The Culturally Inferiority Approach

Since Hong Kong employed Chinese and English as the official languages, it is essential for Hong Kong students to master both languages during school years. Mastery of these two languages in both written and spoken forms is also a prerequisite of entry to higher education, attainment of employment or other social institutions, and thus a necessary factor for social integration. Therefore, there are several education policy areas aim at facilitating the learning of Chinese of the minorities, with the most prominent one named as "Chinese Language Curriculum Secondary Language Learning Framework" (Education Bureau, 2016).

The framework involves the perspectives of learner of secondary language and provides direction for teachers to adjust the curriculum and learning expectation for the minority students, maximizing their learning performance. It helps them integrate into the mainstream education which uses Chinese as the teaching medium and places Chinese Language as a core subject as well. Secondly, the Education Bureau provides an extra funding of $800-1500 thousands to schools who have admitted 10 or more minority students in order to support the implementation of the Secondary Language Learning Framework and to encourage the building of a more inclusive and effective learning environment for the minorities (Education Bureau, 2016). A support network among the schools with a higher admission rate of minority students has also been set up since 2004 under the coordination of Education Bureau. It aims at providing mutual support to the schools through experience sharing regularly on delivery education to the minority students. Thirdly, multiple pathways are available to minority students in which they are allowed to choose alternative Chinese qualifications for higher education, including Applied Learning Chinese (for non-Chinese speaking students) Courses (Education Bureau, 2016). Through all these policies, it is clear than the learning differences have been addressed.

Apparently, it might seem that Hong Kong has taken a culturally sensitivity approach to work on the education policies for minorities with its acknowledgment on their learning difficulties and a differential policy design to cater their needs, hopefully the minority students will be empowered under such inclusive models (Sundar, Sylvestre & Bassi, 2012). Nevertheless, with a deeper investigation on the objectives of such policies, the importance of other cultures is not addressed. For example, other languages like the mother tongues of the ethnic minorities are not in the same position as that of Chinese, or even English. Mastery of such languages is not valued or even accepted by different social institutions. Instead, their

mother tongues are regarded as inferior and in a subordinate position to the mainstream in the Hong Kong Chinese society. Lack of competence in Chinese is thus seen as a deficit which require social policy intervention with the goals of helping them assimilated into mainstream society, conforming the mainstream norms. Such a deficit and integration perspective should be regarded as the culturally inferiority approach indeed (Sundar, Sylvestre & Bassi, 2012).

Hong Kong: Social Exclusion as Process and Outcome

With the use of culturally inferiority approach in education policy for the minority, social exclusion is resulted as both the process and the outcome. Originally, a support network for schools with higher proportion of minority students have been set up to strengthen the assistance provided to them. However, it turns out that more minority students are attracted to such schools, where they gradually become a majority proportion of total students. Consequently, some schools have even change to use English as the main teaching medium with even lesser exposure to Chinese language (EOC, 2011). In this way, the minority students are further socially excluded not only in the lack of competence in Chinese, but they are also being excluded from the social network with the mainstream students (魏雁濱、曾群, 2007).

Some minority students may undertake the exam of alternative Chinese qualifications for higher education, but their recognition is still not as high as that of the mainstream qualification owing to the huge disparity in the Chinese proficiency. While the mainstream Chinese students will take the Chinese course exam Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination for qualification after high school, the GCE exam taken by the minority students is only equivalent to the Primary 3 level of the Hong Kong mainstream

curriculum (EOC, 2011). Universities or other higher education institutes will only take such qualification of the minority into consideration under very special circumstances (EOC, 2011). Such barrier to institutional resources is regarded as social exclusion (Cunningham & Cunningham, 2008).

Even for minority students who are more academically capable and eventually graduated from tertiary education institutions, barriers still existed which prevent them from full participation in the society. For examples, they are still not qualified for jobs that require written Chinese skills, such as civil servants, occupational therapist, lawyer, and managerial position in any company ('爽通識：少數族裔面對的成長挑戰', 2013; '探射燈：同是香港人 少數族裔 有學歷冇工做', 2014). It can be concluded that the upward mobility of the minority students is further blocked. As reflected in the news, their only choice is to adopt a low-skilled job with a low and unstable income. With the lack of incompetence in Chinese, they might be forced to sign contracts written in Chinese which implies exploitation to them. As a result, there is no way of minority to get rid of the inter-generation poverty with limited upward mobility. Furthermore, owing to the discrimination experienced by the minority, most of their jobs are referred by relatives and friends and they tend to stay in the business operated by themselves, the group with the same race (The Hong Kong Council of Social Service, 2014). In short, minority students are experiencing economic exclusion and exclusion from social network as well.

In addition, though the policy intervention of education for minority focuses mainly on the mastery of Chinese language, there is a lack of cultural sensitivity to address the identity issues of the minority students. Identity formation are crucial to the self-development during school ages since the need for belonging and connection with cultural roots are

regarded as human basic needs (Corey & Corey, 2011). Though most of the students of ethnic minorities are born and raised in Hong Kong, they are frustrated by the cultural-inferiority approach of differential educational policy with lack of sensitivity to their cultural roots and competence ('爽通識：少數族裔面對的成長挑戰', 2013). The incapability of Chinese language also poses a barrier to identify with the Hong Kong culture with different experience of social exclusion. Although they are entitled to vote in political election just as other Hong Kong citizens, their needs and concerns are seldom reflected in candidates' manifestos. Such a lack of representation of ethnic minority reflects their experience of political exclusion (魏雁濱、曾群, 2007).

Singapore: The Culturally Competence Approach

Singapore adopt a totally different approach from that of Hong Kong. While a specific working group on education for minority has been set up under Equal Opportunities Commission in accordance to the Race Discrimination Ordinance to ensure equal education opportunities for ethnic minorities (EOC, 2011), there is no such legislation against discriminatory practice in Singapore (Ponnusamy & Gopinathan, 2013). There is not even a policy area for education framed as "education services for EM". The only relevant education policy for the minority in Singapore would be the bilingual language policy.

Regarding the language policy of Singapore, there are 4 official languages, namely English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil (Wee, 2016). Malay remains as the national language but there is no obligation for citizens to master it as it is mostly the language for national anthem and military purposes. Under the bilingual education policy, English language is the first language that pupils are required to master it. It is used as the medium for teaching and it is

regarded as the common working language of all races. Then students have to choose their mother tongues as their second language for learning as a subject according to their ethnicity (Wee, 2016), i.e. Mandarin for Chinese, Malay for Malays, and Tamil for Indians.

Comparing such policy with that of Hong Kong, it is apparent that Singapore is practicing a culturally competence approach where negotiation of common ground among different cultures is demonstrated. First, instead of placing Chinese language in a dominant position owing to its use by Chinese as the majority of the population, the Singaporean government considers English as the first language and a lingua franca to facilitate the inter-ethnic communication of the citizens (Wee, 2016). Such a use of an ethnically neutral language prevents subordination of any one of the culture to the mainstream dominance (Ponnusamy & Gopinathan, 2013). In this way, cultural permeability is allowed which promotes social integration since early school years, which is one of the essential elements of culturally competence approach (Sundar, Sylvestre & Bassi, 2012).

While having English as the communicating means for administration, judiciary purpose, and understanding science and technology know-how for the development of Singapore's post-industrial economy, English is only regarded as a working language with instrumental or practical value (Ponnusamy & Gopinathan, 2013). The cultural competence value of Singaporean bilingual education policy is also reflected on the appreciation on the mother tongues of each ethnicity. The adoption of the corresponding mother tongues as the compulsory subjects for every student demonstrated its responsiveness to the cultural concern of each race. Recognition of the use of mother tongues at school is equivalent to the recognition on preservation of cultural heritage, values and traditions, which is crucial to the formation of cultural identity (Ponnusamy & Gopinathan, 2013).

To sum up, the example of bilingual education policy in Singapore has illustrated how diverse communities are recognized with negotiation of new cultural norms and common grounds without sacrificing the competitiveness of the society at large. Such an acceptance of the innate differences among races and cultures are one of the core values of cultural-competent practice which directs us to a more cohesive multicultural society (Sundar, Sylvestre & Bassi, 2012).

Singapore: Equality of Treatment & Principle of Fairness

Under such bilingual policy, no group in particular is regarded as the indigenous to the nation, and thus no preferential treatment is assigned. With the acknowledgment of the ethnic diversity of the Singaporean community, English is selected as the ethnically neutral common language that ensures equal distribution of economic advantages. The use of English is also regarded as a means to "bridge social capital" (Ponnusamy & Gopinathan, 2013) because it provides access to capital, technology and market that are crucial to social upward mobility in a post-industrial society with the focus on development of human capital, science and technology. Since English is not the mother tongue of any race, it is assumed providing no privilege to any school age student, enabling fair educational competition at an initial stage. Unlike the practices of Hong Kong, where minority students keep playing perennial catch-up with their Chinese counterparts, owing to widening disparity in Chinese language proficiency. Apart from the use of language, equality of the education policy in Singapore is also reflected on the design and control of curriculum, educational structures, criteria and forms of assessment, and qualifications of teachers, with no delivery of differential treatment regarding race difference. Therefore, this practice of equality of treatment is a right-based

approach to ensure every individual is entitled to equal education opportunities with the same start (Alcock, 2012).

Nonetheless, such emphasis of equality of treatment might overlook the racial inequalities inherited before the education institutions. Though Singapore has adopted a bilingual language policy with English as working language and together with 3 mother tongues as official languages having of equal importance, linguistic bias is indeed shown towards Chinese (Barr & Low, 2005). Such emphasis on Chinese emerged around 1970s to counter the promotion of Western values under the globalization era. This phenomenon can be represented in the languages taught in PAP (People Action's Party) neighbourhood kindergartens in Singapore (Barr & Low, 2005). While all the kindergartens offer Mandarin, only a few are taught in Malay or Tamil which cannot cater the needs of all minority students. Hence most of the Malay and Tamil students are forced to learn Mandarin in kindergartens and they are only able to study their mother tongues once they are admitted to Primary schools. With deprived exposure to their mother tongues during early ages comparing to their Chinese counterparts, Malay and Indian students need to spend a longer time to catch up with their own mother languages, spending less time on other subjects. Consequently, they become the under-achievers in Singapore education system persistently (Barr & Low, 2005). Such inherent linguistic bias before the education institutions of schooling system is a barrier to achieve equality of outcome, undermining the value of equality of treatment.

Evaluation of Policy: Social Justice Framework for Singapore

Although there is hardly a pancreas to address the inequality in education for minority which hampers social upward mobility, it is necessary to examine and revise the relevant

policies regularly such that they are adherent to principles of social justice. If social injustice is resulted it is also considered as a violation to human rights as the acceptance of difference and diversity is not appropriately addressed (Craig, 2002). Thus, in the following the approaches of neo-liberalism and social democratic are taken as reference framework to evaluate policies' attainment of social justice.

Apparently, it is suggested that the bilingual language and education policy of Singapore follows the social democratic traditions as it places emphasis on the equality of educational treatment – everyone has to study bilingually, with one common language and one corresponding mother tongue as the second language. No mother tongue is regarded as the dominant language. It ensures that no race is considered inferior making people deprived of better educational opportunities. Their rights to equality to education are ensured. Social justice is fulfilled (Alcock, 2012).

On the other hand, with such bilingual policy as the only intervention implemented by the government to tackle inequality for minority, it implies a political orientation more identified with neo-liberalism approach. Under neo-liberalism, free market is valued as the best mechanism for distribution of resources with productivity as the reward under very limited government intervention (Alcock, 2012). Put it in the context of education policy of Singapore, provision of equality in education opportunity is similar to the notion of free market mechanism that enables fair competition, where resources are allocated with the academic ability or excellence, which matches with the consistent value of meritocracy in Singapore society (Ponnusamy & Gopinathan, 2013). Preferential treatment is not available since any privileges given would be regarded as a violation to the principle of equality and social justice. However, there is an underlying assumption that minority who are

disadvantaged and occupies a lower socio-economic status should take up their own responsibility of self-reliance (Tan, 2013). With reference to Marxism (Ferguson & Woodward, 2009), this model neglected the possibility that life chances like cultural or economic capital are determined by 'class' which is the root of racial inequality in education. Such an emphasis on equality practice that ensures the provision of the same start-point would indeed result in reproduction of inequality as equality outcome is neglected. As the difference in accessibility of resources and capital before education is not addressed, social justice is hardly attained.

Evaluation of Policy: Social Justice Framework for Hong Kong

Similarly, the two approaches used can be applied to the Hong Kong's education policies. Using a social democratic perspective, Hong Kong policies are consistent with social justice. As preferential treatment is practiced, the difference in Chinese language proficiency at the start-point is tackled, promoting the equality of minority's right to education (Alcock, 2012). Assistance to the disadvantaged is advocated to bring a socially just practice.

Using a neo-liberalism approach, we might regard Chinese language proficiency are placed with market value which acts as the basis for allocation of resources and opportunities in the context of minority education policy. With government's passive intervention at promoting minority students' mastery of Chinese language, it reflects the orientation that inequality of education of opportunities is reduced to personal deficits in language ability, instead of positioning the barriers structurally. Such perspective contradicts with social work values as it overlooks the contribution of social structures and institutions in one's life

challenges (Craig, 2002). In this case, the inequality is rooted in the recognition of Chinese language as the compulsory means to social institutions, including entrance to higher education and labour market, hampering minority students' upward mobility and social integration. However, currently there is no policies targeting at such structural barriers of the compulsory language requirement. All those educational services for minority tend to retain the status quo of placing Chinese as the dominant language not only in an education context, but also for the society at large, reinforcing the structural barriers. Radically, using Chinese language proficiency as the resources distribution mechanism has to be abandoned. Social work value of social justice is thus not upheld with the above-mentioned policies in the view of such radical perspective (Ferguson & Woodward, 2009).

Conclusion

All in all, under the influence of globalization, more cities and nations are experiencing a high transnational population flow which bring changes to the composition of population continuously. Whether multicultural intersections will bring opportunities or pose a threat to the society depends on the responsiveness of the social policies to the needs of not only the mainstream population but also that of the minority groups.

In this essay, a comparative study on education policy for minority of Hong Kong and Singapore has been conducted to see how different societies respond differently to the same issues. Being a Chinese society with 90% of the population being Chinese, emphasis of Hong Kong's education of minority is placed on their integration into the mainstream culture with assistance in mastery of Chinese language. It is regarded as a cultural-inferior approach which lead to social exclusion both as process and outcome. On the other hand, though 70%

of the Singaporean population is Chinese, a bilingual education policy is adopted. It reflects a cultural-competent approach in which social cohesion is encouraged through negotiating a new cultural norms and common grounds, promoting equal opportunities of educational treatment from the start-point.

Although Hong Kong and Singapore are two capitalist societies which are similar to each other in many ways, they have adopted two very different approaches. Regardless of the difference in social contexts, equal education for minorities in order to ensure a fair upward social mobility remains important nowadays (EOC, 2011). It is also necessary to review and evaluate the relevant social policies constantly owing to the changing circumstances confronting new challenges to the marginalized minority. Sharing of experience of different regions also permits mutual learning to enhance local practice. Hopefully in the future with improvements in education policies, a more inclusive social climate will be established such that more minorities are able to contribute to the society without being excluded, being recognized as assets intrinsically.

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