

‘HYBRID’ MULTICULTURALISM? ETHNIC MINORITY STUDENT POLICY IN HONG KONG¹

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Introduction²

It is tempting to regard liberal multiculturalism (Kymlicka, 1995) as a universal prescription for dealing with issues of multicultural policy. Yet even its main protagonist has had some reservations about the ability of communities to realize fully its main principles (Kymlicka, 2007). Nevertheless, the issue remains as to how communities can and should cater for the needs of their minorities if there is not a universal prescription – it is by no means an easy issue to resolve.

Kymlicka himself has commented: “I don't think that specific models of multiculturalism can be transported directly from one country to another, particularly not the Canadian model, which is a product of a very unique history.” (Peonidis, 2008) Chwaszcza (2008, p.121) has made the point in relation to a consideration of transnational justice that “we lack a clear understanding of what the rights and duties of individuals are (or ought to be) outside the socio-political background institution of the liberal paradigm of the (national) legal state.” Yet multicultural realities

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confront many nation states – both liberal and authoritarian – and if liberal versions of multiculturalism are what Chwaszcza (2008, p.119) would call “context dependent”, then the issue arises as to how the empirical realities of multicultures within the confines of a nation state without liberal political values can be recognized. If history, politics and culture have not conspired to create the values and structures conducive to multiculturalism that values difference, supports equality and actively champions equity, how should such nation states and their communities respond to the needs of multiple groups within their boundaries?

This question will be explored with specific reference to ethnic minority student policy in Hong Kong. As a Special Administrative Region of the People’s Republic of China and a former British colony, Hong Kong has a legal system inherited from its colonial period, a political system aligned to, but not subsumed by, China and a cultural history that links the present day to an ancient civilization. It is in this context that Hong Kong has grappled with the issue of its ethnic minority students for the past five years seeking a solution that satisfies ethnic minorities and the multiple influences that construct modern day Hong Kong.

The remainder of this paper will outline a number of background issues that define the context in which Hong Kong grapples with multiculturalism, review a number of possible options for multicultural policy and finally make an assessment of where the current approach to ethnic minority students can be located against this background.

Hong Kong - Liberal Law, Illiberal Politics and Confucian Culture

As a Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China, Hong Kong has a unique status. This status is often described as the "one country, two systems" policy where Hong Kong has retained many of its colonial institutions while becoming part of a single unified China. One of these colonial institutions is the "rule of law" as understood in the English legal tradition. As Tsang (2001, p.1) has pointed out:

What sets it (i.e. Hong Kong) apart from the People's Republic of China (PRC) is the existence of the rule of law and an independent judiciary. They are generally accepted in Hong Kong as the most important legacy of 156 years of British imperial rule.

Yet since 1997 this legal legacy has existed within a new political context. Hong Kong's electoral system is based on an executive led model where the Chief Executive is elected in a small circle election by 800 nominated electors and the results are subject to approval by the national government. The CE then appoints an Executive Council that acts largely as an advisory body just as it did in the days of the British governors. In addition, the CE appoints Ministers to manage various portfolios and senior civil servants to oversee the major policy bureaus. The legislative branch of government as represented in the Legislative Council is made up of a proportion of members directly elected by the people as well as a proportion elected by functional constituencies representing broad based professional or business groups. While there is much debate between the CE and his Ministers on one side and the Legislative Council on the other, the system it is not democratic in the sense that the Executive is not directly answerable to the electorate through an electoral process. Hong Kong governments "steer" policy based on widespread community consultation that can be quite effective. Yet in the end they lack the kind of legitimacy conferred on democratically elected governments and this has tended to make them

conservative rather than adventurous and pragmatic rather than principled. Indeed pragmatism may be seen as a key Hong Kong value.

Overlaying the legal and political system is a connection to Confucianism that transcends modern politics and even modern life. King (1996, p.275) has pointed out that it is not “imperial Confucianism or institutional Confucianism” but rather “social Confucianism or the Confucianism of everyday life”. Liu (1996, p.111) has referred to “Confucianism as a storehouse of popular values”. Hue (2008), for example, has recently shown how teachers’ beliefs about school counseling in Hong Kong have been influenced by Confucian principles. At the heart of Confucianism is obedience to the family and to the state and a very fixed order for social and personal relationships. It is not clear how Confucian values are disseminated or maintained since it is not an organized religion yet commentators agree that such values continue to play an important role in the lives of Hong Kong people. Exactly how this has influenced ethnic minority student policy will be shown later in the paper.

There is, therefore, mixture of influences on policy formation in Hong Kong and ethnic minority student policy has been no exception. Its principles reflect legal standards that guarantee equality before the law for all Hong Kong people. This derives as much from British legal traditions as it does from the Basic Law – Hong Kong’s mini-constitution agreed to by the Chinese authorities. Equality before the law as a legal principle has been enshrined in the Racial Discrimination Ordinance endorsed by the Executive Council and agreed to by the Legislative Council in July 2008. Yet it would be hard to argue that liberal values have been the driving force behind these legal and political processes. As shown elsewhere (Kennedy, 2008), Hong Kong’s ethnic minorities have had to struggle very hard to extract specific conditions from the government to

ensure that the spirit of the Ordinance will be reflected in daily practice. It is one thing for the law to mandate equality for all: it is quite another to guarantee that the values underlying this principle will find their way into the social fabric of everyday living. As the following section will show, communities have options in interpreting the way policies are implemented.

Planning for Multiculturalism – What are the Options?

Skerrett and Hargreaves (2008, pp 914-915) (Skerrett A. & Hargreaves, A., 2008), drawing on a significant range of literature in the field, identified three main educational orientations to diversity, each with distinctive characteristics. Drawing heavily on their work, Table 1 describes these orientations. It can be seen from a brief review of Table 1 that these orientations could represent deliberate policy

Table 1

Skerrett and Hargreaves’ Educational Orientations to Diversity

Orientation	Description	Proponents
Monocultural education	All students benefit from the same curriculum, instructional strategies and assessment practices.	Edmonds (1970); Gilborn (2004)
Multicultural education	Schools and the school curriculum reflect the knowledge, values, skills, pedagogies, assessment practices, policies etc that recognize, support and celebrate the contribution of all groups represented in the school community	Banks (1986)
Critical multiculturalism	Teaching against all forms of racism is explicit and	Troyna and Carrington (1990)

	eliminating all forms of discrimination is a key goal.	
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choices for governments. At the same time, policies may also be adopted inadvertently or without any understanding that there are alternatives. In the case of ethnic minority student policy in Hong Kong, it is probably the latter rather than the former case and the reasons are more likely to be cultural rather than political.

The current policy for ethnic minority students arose directly out of politico-legal processes that have been described by Kennedy (2007). The focus of those processes was on developing a legal framework that would protect ethnic minorities in Hong Kong from being exploited – especially in employment related areas. Little though was given to schools and education and indeed because the government itself was excluded from the ambit of the proposed ordinance there was even less likelihood that the treatment of ethnic minority students would ever surface as an issue under the ordinance once it was approved. Thus there was not a deliberate attempt on the part of the Hong Kong government to create a policy on the treatment of ethnic minority students, as for example there is in China (). Rather, it seems that as public discussion of the Racial Discrimination Ordinance was underway, ethnic minority students and their treatment emerged as an issue. This can largely be accounted for by the advocacy of a number of non government organizations on behalf of ethnic minorities and by a number of reports that documented the disadvantage being suffered by ethnic minority students. It is against this background, that Hong Kong’s educational orientation to diversity can be analyzed.

Hong Kong and Diversity: How to Meet the Needs of Ethnic Minority Students?

Using the descriptions in Table 1 it is not difficult to identify Hong Kong's approach to diversity as monocultural. One explanation for this may be that provided by Chwaszcza (2008) and referred to earlier in the paper. Since there are no liberal political structures in Hong, there is not the values base out of which can emerge a more liberal multiculturalism. If this explanation is correct, it ignores the existence of a liberal legal system and other infrastructure such as Hong Kong's assent to the International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination. It may be that this kind of liberal apparatus is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the emergence of a liberal multiculturalism. What, then, in Hong Kong influences attitudes to diversity in such a way that monoculturalism rather than multiculturalism characterizes current approaches to dealing with ethnic minority students?

Reference was made earlier to cultural issues and in particular Confucianism and it is particularly relevant at this point. There is some evidence to suggest that Western conceptions of social justice are not the same as those in Confucian societies such as Hong Kong (Chiu & Hong, 1997; Chan, 2001). For example, it has been argued that "when it comes to matters about people's well being, material welfare and life chances, Confucian justice seeks to promote sufficiency for all and not equality between individuals" (Chan, 2001). This concept of social justice is expressed though the idea of impartiality (Chan, 2001):

Political rule should be impartial or fair (*gong* in Chinese) to everyone – by that it means political rule should promote the good of everyone without prejudice or favoritism. In other words, it would be a violation of fairness or justice (*gong*) if the ruler were selectively concerned about some people only.

Thus when Hong Kong's Education Bureau insists on a common curriculum, a common examination, limited support for induction programmes and a reluctance to expand the number of designated schools for ethnic minority students, it is consistent with this Confucian principle.

The government is responsible for *sufficient* provision rather than *equitable* provision. Chinese students and ethnic minority students must be treated the same way to meet the standards of Confucian justice.

This distinction raises important questions about social justice in Confucian societies and the limits it places on multicultural policy, or policy of any kind. Walker (2007, p.262), for example has shown how widespread education reform in Hong Kong constantly runs up against cultural values that tend to dampen the intended effects of the reform. He talks in terms of “hybridization” in relation to the issues confronted by local school leaders in Hong Kong “where cultural differences endure and influence what local leaders do, even as they are mediated and moderated by globally driven reform demands.” Hybridization is an apt description of Hong Kong’s approach to ethnic minority student policy. The approach brings together the liberal principles of Hong Kong’s legal system with Confucian values that view equity as the same treatment for everyone rather than special treatment for those who might need it. This creates a ‘hybrid’ multiculturalism reflecting values from both the East and the West but in terms of Table 1 one, it is a monocultural approach to diversity. It recognizes multiple cultures but acts as those the needs of all cultural groups are the same.

Conclusion

A monocultural approach to diversity means the needs of ethnic minority students are being recognized through new policies and increased resource provision. This is a positive outcome for students. At the same time such an approach does not signal a commitment to celebrating this diversity or adapting the curriculum to meet any special needs that ethnic minority students may have. ‘Hybrid’ multiculturalism as it is practiced in Hong Kong thus has its limitations - the

extent to which it may transcend these limitations is an important issue for the future. It is important for society a whole since it involves not only recognizing difference but also regarding it as a positive value that can contribute to social development. Yet it is not an issue that will be resolved quickly involving as it does the adoption of liberal political values and a reorientation of long held cultural values. Nevertheless, expanding beyond monoculturalism to multicultural and anti-racist education is a worthwhile objective if ethnic minority students and the contribution they can make to Hong Kong is to be realized in the coming years.

