

Chapter 10

Conclusion

Abstract Hong Kong upper secondary and post-secondary education levels were first considered having a disproportionate participation of ethnic minority students by the Equal Opportunities Commission in 2011. Multiple data methods (case study based on in-depth interviews and observations, other in-depth interviews and document analysis) in the research reported in this book substantiated initial concerns at the aforementioned levels, in addition to pre-primary and lower secondary, not previously identified. Ethnic minority young people's school failure was not simply a consequence of academic failure. Instead, many interrelated factors were found to contribute. This book reported one factor not identified in earlier studies: the relationship between school failure and differences in schooling culture. This echoed Hunt (Dropping out from school: a cross country review of literature. CREATE pathways to access research monograph, no. 16. University of Sussex, Brighton, 2008) and Rumberger (Dropping out: why students drop out of high school and what can be done about it. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2011) that "dropping out" is gradual and complex. It also contends the government focusing on Chinese proficiency is a limited response towards ethnic minority students failing in Hong Kong schools. A critical review of the literature uncovered many issues and challenges including admissions processes, overall policy towards multicultural education, and the efficiency of overall support measures ethnic minority students are facing within Hong Kong schools. This book, therefore, supports and strengthens the growing discourse recognizing the education system is failing ethnic minority young people and is also incapable of responding to diversity and ever growing multiculturalism.

This concluding chapter has six sections. Section 10.1 summarizes the results of the research reported in this book. Section 10.2 describes some of our reflections on researching ethnic minority students in Hong Kong. Section 10.3 discusses the significance of the research in relation to policy, practice, theory and methodology. Section 10.4 identifies some limitations of our research. Section 10.5 proposes some future research. Section 10.6 provides a final note.

10.1 The ‘Out of School’ Issue for Ethnic Minority Young People in Hong Kong

In the research reported in this book we have explored the extent of ‘out of school’ ethnic minority young people in Hong Kong, the reasons for these young people being ‘out of school’, and what their ‘out of school’ life looks like. Although there is a lack of available data to estimate the exact number of ‘out of school’ ethnic minority young people in Hong Kong, nevertheless, this book found that a good number of ethnic minority young people are ‘out of school’ which includes pre-primary, lower secondary, upper secondary and post-secondary age-groups. The Equal Opportunities Commission (2011) first indicated the issue of disproportionate participation of ethnic minority students in upper secondary and post-secondary levels. This book substantiates EOC’s valid concern and also extends the same concern for ethnic minority students in pre-primary and lower secondary level where participation issues have not previously been identified.

In terms of reasons for being ‘out of school’, it was found that ethnic minority young people’s school failure was more than simply a consequence of academic failure. Rather, there were many interrelated factors that contributed to school failure of ethnic minority young people. Similar to work on school failure in both developed and developing contexts, the key influences are multi-level – with individuals themselves, within families, within schools and within the community (Hunt 2008; Rumberger 2011). There were also additional factors found in this research that the wider literature cannot explain. The research reported here unearthed the relationship between school failure and differences in schooling culture, a factor not previously identified in the international literature. It also uncovered the relationship between school failure and factors such as citizenship status and racism in the context of Chinese privilege in Hong Kong.

The findings also revealed that some participants’ academic failure was not sudden but had appeared long before they dropped out. This highlights again that dropping out is more a process (Hunt 2008) and as Rumberger (2011) argued, dropping out is a complex process which can begin as early as the first grade of school. Nevertheless, there appeared to be no extra care or additional support provided to ethnic minority students from their schools. The results of the research reported here strongly suggest that focusing only on Chinese proficiency is a limited response on the part of government towards the issue of ethnic minority students’ school failure.

Regarding the ‘out of school’ life of ethnic minority young people, all the six dropout young people participated in the research were working after (and sometimes before) they dropped out of school. Of the four at risk of dropping out students, one student was working beyond school time, and the other three students were passing their time after school by staying home and playing. The young child, who never went to any school, was receiving education at home from her parents and elder sister.

In addition to above findings, this book provided a critical review of the literature that reported many issues and challenges that ethnic minority students are facing within schools. These included micro-views of the problem, admissions processes, Chinese language, assessment, curriculum, teaching, resource support, supervision and monitoring, overall policy towards multicultural education in Hong Kong, and the efficiency of overall support measures (please see Sect. 2.4.7 of Chap. 2 for details). When these issues are added to the central focus of this book, ‘out of school’ ethnic minority young people, the vulnerability of ethnic minority young people can be fully recognized. By focusing on ‘out of school’ ethnic minority young people as a new area of research, this book supports and strengthens the growing discourse that recognizes ethnic minority young people in Hong Kong are being let down by an education system incapable of responding to diversity and a growing multiculturalism.

10.2 Reflections on Researching Ethnic Minority Students in Hong Kong

In addition to methodological reflections provided in Sect. 3.2.8 of the Chap. 3 we also have some further reflections on researching ethnic minority students in Hong Kong. First, although we managed to conduct field studies in three Hong Kong schools, it was not so easy gaining access to these schools. We approached more than 20 schools and ended up with positive responses only from three schools. Even gaining access to these schools could not guarantee achieving our mission as we faced much difficulty in accessing dropout data in two sample schools. They were reluctant to provide such data. We had to rely on their enrolment data to try and understand the dropout scenario, a very limited technique. Interview data with the participants from all three schools, however, provided deep insights to understand the magnitude of the ‘out of school’ phenomena specific to the schools.

Second, being ‘outsiders’ in Hong Kong we reflect on our shortcomings of not speaking local language that might have limited us from gaining in-depth understanding of the Chinese participants. Yet the first author was also an ‘insider’ of South Asian ethnic origin and he capitalized on his language skills to understand South Asian participants. Although in the literature there is much debate regarding the superiority between ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ accounts, we reflect on Katyal and King’s (2011) work in the context of Confucian heritage culture research when they argued that both ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ accounts are interesting and meaningful in their own right.

Third, in researching ethnic minority young people we often thought about one issue. There is a sizeable literature now available regarding different issues and challenges that ethnic minority students face in Hong Kong schools. We were also aware of ongoing research looking at the ethnic minority education issue. At the same time there is also much advocacy work undertaken by a number of NGOs. In

addition, hopefully the findings of our research reported in this book also might add to the knowledge base of ethnic minority education in Hong Kong. The issue that remains is whether enough has been done to help ethnic minority students and whether policy makers are being influenced by current research, including our own. Can research really influence policy makers? What can research really do in making differences in the lives of ethnic minority young people? Reflecting on Kennedy and Hue's (2011) work on ethnic minority students in Hong Kong, we can only be left with an unsatisfying conclusion that research might at best be able to identify and understand problem, but cannot solve the problem.

10.3 Significance for Policy, Practice, Theory and Methodology

The findings of the research reported in this book are significant in a number of ways. First, at the policy level, it seems Hong Kong has progressed in recognizing the 'no-loser' principle in its education reform (Kennedy 2012). The government has adopted the 'through train' concept, reform of the primary and secondary admissions system, a full 6 years of secondary education for all students, support for students with special needs, a core curriculum for all students and the reduction in public examinations. Yet, this book questions the 'no-loser' principle when it comes to ethnic minority students. The important question is how Hong Kong's education reform can promote the 'no-loser principle' when there remains a good number of ethnic minority students 'out of school'. Or does the 'no-loser' principle have a different meaning when it comes to the ethnic minority students? Policy makers need to pay attention to participation issues relating to ethnic minority students, to the quality of education provided for them and to ensuring that they are able to achieve the same educational outcomes as their Chinese peers.

The Racial Discrimination Ordinance (RDO) is meant to protect ethnic minorities in Hong Kong from any kind of discrimination, including in educational areas. It seems, however, that the RDO is not capable of ensuring equal educational opportunities and outcomes for the ethnic minority young people as the scenario of 'out of school' issue has shown. Kennedy (2011b) argued that in the development of the RDO little thought was given to schools and education and the main focus was to protect the ethnic minorities from employment exploitation. Therefore, the results of the research reported in this book strongly suggest that the RDO needs to be revisited so that the provision of equal educational opportunities and outcomes can be incorporated.

In regard to proper policy responses, it is important to have sufficient educational data concerning ethnic minority young people and also to understand critically the issues and challenges that they are facing in Hong Kong education. Without these it will be difficult to devise any appropriate support measures. Policies such as extending compulsory education age until the end of secondary education and intervention

in pre-primary education might be of interest to Hong Kong policy makers as these have proven to work in many parts of the world to gain success against school failure.

Second, at the practice level, this book provides a nuanced understanding of the 'out of school' issue for ethnic minority young people. Thus the findings of the research reported in this book might be useful for all concerned parties including schools, government, NGOs, international human rights organizations and supra national agencies in devising their strategies to address the issue. Hong Kong schools should seriously take into account all the school factors identified in this research. Addressing these on the part of schools will significantly advance the fight against school failure. In addition, cash support to poor ethnic minority parents, as referred to previously, has the strong potential of an all-round integrated response towards the 'out of school' issue and recognizes the significant effects of poverty on educational access and success.

Third, at the level of theory, this research is significant in conceptualizing multiculturalism in a Chinese context and its response towards diversity. Thus it highlights the need for a multicultural education policy in dealing with the multicultural student population in Hong Kong. In addition, this book emphasizes that the 'out of school' issue for ethnic minority young people should not be understood from the point of view of their so called 'deficits'. Rather, it should be conceptualized at the intersection of multiple inequalities and disadvantages that make ethnic minorities vulnerable to school failure. Moreover, racism in Hong Kong, that represents Chinese privilege and oppression in relation to ethnic minorities, should be properly acknowledged and considered at the centre of these critical understandings.

Fourth, at the methodological level, this research showed the value of researching at individual school level to understand the dynamics of 'out of school' issue for ethnic minority students since large scale data sources could not help much. In addition, adopting critical race theory and methodology as a part of theoretical framework and methodology helped understand the phenomenon critically in the privileged Chinese context. Perhaps most importantly the research reported here does not rely on a single theoretical perspective but on multiple perspectives that shed light on a complex personal, social, political and cultural issue.

10.4 Limitations

In addition to some methodological limitations referred to in Sect. 3.2.9 of the Chap. 3 the research reported in this book also has some other limitations. First, we have relied on literature relating to school failure that has been drawn from Western literature as well as literature relating to developing countries. Neither of these sources exactly reflects the Hong Kong context that is developed but deeply embedded in a Chinese value system. School failure in this distinctive context needs further investigation and this book has only begun to scratch the surface of a complex social issue.

Second, it was not possible to access family members for most of the ‘out of school’ participants. This obviously missed the opportunity to understand ‘out of school’ issues from their family members’ perspectives. Since families play such important roles in the lives of their children it is unfortunate that their views are missing from this book.

Third, it is not a limitation as such, rather a caution for readers when understanding case studies in this research. For example, the case study of Shormin, the young girl who had never been to any pre-primary school was a dependent child of a student visa holder. Student visa holders in Hong Kong are not allowed to access public resources such as pre-primary education voucher scheme (PEVS) for their children. Therefore, Shormin’s case study has to be understood in its own context. In fact, all case studies in this research can only be understood in their unique contexts. As Flyvbjerg (2006) has argued, case study generates context dependant knowledge.

10.5 Future Directions for Research

The findings of the research reported in this book can inform future studies. One study might aim at getting access to census and other educational base data sources for ethnic minority students in order to manipulate these data systematically so that the right number of ‘out of school’ ethnic minority young people can be estimated and it’s magnitude can be determined Hong Kong wide. Perhaps a longitudinal study by tracking a cohort of primary ethnic minority students until their post-secondary level would also be very helpful.

Another study might involve ethnography with a group of ‘out of school’ ethnic minority young people over the period of a considerable time to have further nuanced understanding on why they are ‘out of school’. The methodology should include spending enough time with them in their school, family and community settings to understand more how these institutional factors interact with their individual factors. The study should also be grounded in critical race theory to understand the phenomena critically. In addition, this book also calls for further investigations of factors such as cultural differences in schooling and their relationship with school failure of the ethnic minority students in Hong Kong and elsewhere.

One of the other important research areas might be to look at understanding the school success of the ethnic minority young people in Hong Kong. Especially to explore what factors make their school success unlike their ‘out of school’ counterparts. It would also be useful to compare between school success and school failure in relation to how much individual and institutional factors can explain both.

Finally, there might be one study that needs to be undertaken soon which will look critically at the effectiveness of different support measures to solve dropout or ‘out of school’ issue for ethnic minority young people in different jurisdictions. In this regard Connelly et al. (2012) work is very insightful as they identified that the

HKSAR government's ongoing educational support measures for ethnic minority students in Hong Kong schools largely failed to impact positively in achieving government's objectives such as 'alleviating the obstacles of language and cultural barriers', 'facilitating smoother integration' into Hong Kong society, and 'positively impacting the educational opportunities'. Since any of the government support measures has not exclusively focused on addressing the 'out of school' or school failure issue for ethnic minority young people it might be useful to look at policies and practices of other countries. Many parts of the world have large numbers of immigrants and there should be lesson about how the issues of school failure can best be handled. Hong Kong does not need to solve the problem without an understanding of how others have approached it.

10.6 Final Note

Ensuring access, meaningful participation and equal outcomes in education for ethnic minority young people will ultimately contribute to Hong Kong's future and its development. New policies are needed that recognize the need to deal with school issues such as curriculum, pedagogy and assessment as well as ensuring access and progression so that ethnic minority students remain in school and transfer eventually to university. These are significant challenges for the government and for the Hong Kong community, but most of all they are important for ethnic minorities if they are to be accorded the basic rights of all Hong Kong citizens.

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