

Chapter 8

Other Stakeholders' Views About the 'Out of School' Issue for Ethnic Minority Young People

Abstract Interview data with three ethnic minority community leaders from Nepalese, Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities in Hong Kong; two government officials; one teacher who taught secondary level ethnic minority students; and one NGO professional, were drawn upon to understand perspectives on the magnitude of the 'out of school' phenomenon for ethnic minority young people, reasons, and the 'out of school' life of ethnic minority young people. Issues included being caught in a vicious cycle with no upward social mobility due to not possessing a university degree and, therefore, being unemployable in Hong Kong. Similarly to factors discussed by students, parents and school teachers (Chaps. 4, 5, 6, and 7), these interviewees considered poor academic achievement; inadequate school provision; low educational aspirations; Chinese language concerns (including a gap existing between achieved Chinese qualification and that required for higher education and employment); behavioural problems; racism; and ethnic minority stereotypes to be reasons for students dropping 'out of school'. Some primary and secondary school dropouts younger than 15 usually return to school; some are placed in NGOs or vocational bridging courses to allow for an alternative vocational path. Alternatively, others would seek employment if over 15 or apply to study on vocational courses.

The previous chapter presented a case study of an ethnic minority child who had never been able to attend kindergarten. This chapter will be concerned with other stakeholders' views about the 'out of school' issue for ethnic minority young people in Hong Kong – to explore from those stakeholders' perspectives, what is the magnitude of the 'out of school' issue for ethnic minority young people, what are the reasons for ethnic minority young people being 'out of school' and what their 'out school' life looks like. This chapter partly provides answers to questions 1, 2 and 3 posed for the research reported in this book.

This chapter draws on the interviews with other participants such as three ethnic minority community leaders, two government officials, one teacher (other than those in the three study schools), and one NGO professional, to understand their perspectives on the magnitude of 'out of school' phenomenon for ethnic minority young people, the reasons and the 'out of school' life of ethnic minority young people. There are five sections in this chapter. Section 8.1 provides some background

information about the participants. Section 8.2 explores the magnitude of the 'out of school' issue for ethnic minority young people. Section 8.3 identifies the reasons for ethnic minority young people being 'out of school'. Section 8.4 portrays ethnic minority young people's 'out of school' life. While the participants' interviews provided a clear picture of the 'out of school' issue several themes were created from their accounts to explain what they saw as the reasons for young people's being 'out of school'. Section 8.5 concludes the chapter by providing a summary.

8.1 Background Information

This section provides some background information about the participants as well as the context in which they were identified and interviewed.

8.1.1 Ethnic Minority Community Leaders

There were three community leaders from Nepalese, Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities in Hong Kong.

8.1.1.1 Mr. Sumit Baral

The first author of this book first met Mr. Baral in early 2012 in an educational researchers' forum for ethnic minority education organized at one of the universities in Hong Kong. Since then they had been in contact frequently mainly because of similar professional interests. Because of his strong involvement with one of the South Asian communities' affairs, his previous teaching background in Hong Kong schools and recent status of being a researcher looking at educational issues of South Asian students, Mr. Baral was asked to be one of the research participants and was asked for an interview which he kindly accepted.

Mr. Baral first came in Hong Kong in 1996 for work and migration purposes but he frequently travelled between Hong Kong and his home country until 2001. At that time he mainly worked for some insurance companies on an irregular basis. After moving to Hong Kong permanently in 2001 he started a teaching job in 2002 and continued until 2012. In this period he taught in two primary schools and one secondary school. His last teaching job was in a designated secondary school from 2007 to 2012 where he was teaching English. Later he was awarded a PhD scholarship by a university in Hong Kong in 2012; he left his school job and started pursuing his PhD.

In terms of the community engagement Mr. Baral was the founding secretary of one of the south Asian community organizations established in 1998. During the

time of his interview he was performing an advising role to the organization in activities such as cultural gatherings, community interactions, children's educational program etc. In addition, Mr. Baral was involved with a mainstream political party in Hong Kong where he advised in their ethnic minority working group. Mr. Baral had his wife and son living in Nepal; they also had Hong Kong permanent resident status.

8.1.1.2 Mr. Shahed Alam

The first author came to know about Mr. Alam from Azad Rabbani, a Pakistani dropout boy who participated in the research reported in this book (please see Sect. 5.6 of Chap. 5 for Azad Rabbani's case study). But Azad could not give any contact details of Mr. Alam apart from only saying Mr. Alam was very active in community work for one ethnic minority group and professionally he was a school teacher. Upon collecting his school's number using google he was contacted on his school phone and was asked for an interview to which he agreed.

Mr. Alam was a second generation South Asian born in Hong Kong in the early 1980s. His father migrated to Hong Kong in 1965 searching for a better future. Mr. Alam finished his schooling and university first degree in Hong Kong between 1988 and 2003. For the last 10 years he had been teaching in the same school where he had studied. The school was a designated secondary school which had a long history of admitting ethnic minority students going back to 1980. Mr. Alam was responsible for teaching English to ethnic minority students in three upper Forms. He was awarded a PhD degree last year from a Hong Kong university. His research focused on a critical review of the provision of Chinese language education for the non-Chinese speaking students in Hong Kong.

From 2009 Mr. Alam had been extensively involved in community work. He had held two positions in one of the South Asian community associations of Hong Kong for the last 4 years, one was on the editorial board of the yearly magazine publication and another was the member of education committee. Mr. Alam was also one of the founding members of one of the South Asian communities' students' association and there he had been an education adviser for the last few years. Since 2011 Mr. Alam had been appointed by the Secretary for Home Affairs of HKSAR government as a non-official member to the Committee on the Promotion of Racial Harmony of Race Relations located in the Home Affairs Department. He was also a member of the vetting committee of the personalized vehicles registration mark in Hong Kong appointed by the Transport Department. Moreover, he was the school manager of one Muslim kindergarten in Hong Kong. Because of his unique portfolios of being student and then teacher in the same secondary school in Hong Kong, being a researcher in one of the major concerned areas for ethnic minority education and being a community leader, Mr. Alam had been a regular face in many forums working for the welfare of the ethnic minority population in Hong Kong.

8.1.1.3 Mr. Tareque Rahman

The first author first met Mr. Rahman in 2011 in a program organized by one of the south Asian community associations in Hong Kong observing their home country's national day. Since then they had met several times in several programs organized by that community association. Mr. Rahman was interviewed once before in 2012 for the first author's voluntary work at the *Ethnic Voice* weekly which published the interview story (Bhowmik 2012b). When asked for another interview later for the research, Mr. Rahman immediately accepted.

Like many other high skilled professionals, being a textile engineer, Mr. Rahman had been transferred to Hong Kong office in 1993. After working in the Hong Kong office for six and a half year he started his own business related to garments and textiles. Later he became a very successful businessman in Hong Kong. Mr. Rahman was one of the founding members of his community association that was formed in 2003. He had been the President of the association for two terms from 2008 to 2012. During the time of the interview he was a general member of the association.

In 2012 Mr. Rahman had been appointed as a non-official member to the Committee on the Promotion of Racial Harmony of Race Relations by the Secretary for Home Affairs of HKSAR government. He was also a member of the ethnic minority working committee of a District Council where there was a high concentration of ethnic minorities for three terms starting from 2009 until 2014. Moreover, he was also an active member of a political party where he sat in their working group for ethnic minorities. Mr. Rahman was one of the few ethnic minority community leaders who had a comprehensive understanding and interest about the issues and challenges related to ethnic minority population in Hong Kong probably because of his strong involvement with the Home Affairs Department, District Council, political party as well as community groups.

8.1.2 Government Officials

There were two government officials interviewed in the study. Although the EDB official Mr. Cheng was introduced briefly in Chap. (4, Sect. 4.1) here we provide more details concerning him.

8.1.2.1 Mr. Lee Cheng

The second author of this book wrote to the Deputy Secretary of the Education Bureau requesting her support for an interview for the research. We received a reply from the Bureau within a few days providing us with Mr. Cheng's details and mentioning that he would be happy to be interviewed. The reason given was he was a member of the non-attendance cases team within the Education Bureau.

Mr. Cheng had been working for the Education Bureau for more than 30 years in different roles. For the first 12 years he was a Student Guidance Officer, then 10 years as a Supervisor of the Student Guidance Officers, then 8 years as a School Development Officer and the latest one for one and a half years in the non-attendance cases team. In the non-attendance cases team there were 13 Student Guidance Officers and one Assistant Inspector working. The team was responsible for looking after non-attendance and dropout cases for the junior secondary students typically age-group 11–15 for the whole of Hong Kong. In his previous roles Mr. Cheng mainly worked in Yuen Long, Tai Po and North districts but in the new role he had to work for all districts in Hong Kong.

8.1.2.2 Mr. Albert Cheung

The Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) was contacted asking for two interviews, one with Chairman and another with one of the working group members of the ‘Education for All’ report (EOC 2011). The ‘Education for All’ report of the Equal Opportunities Commission in 2011 identified for the first time the issue that the participation of ethnic minority students in upper secondary and post-secondary level was disproportionately low compared to the mainstream Chinese students (EOC 2011). A quick reply came from Mr. Cheung that the EOC Chairman was not involved in the Working Group and the Working Group itself already expired. He indicated, however, he would be happy to be interviewed given his research portfolio in the organization and his involvement with the Working Group.

Mr. Cheung had been working for the EOC since its establishment, which was 17 years altogether. In the first 7 years he worked for the operational team for disability discrimination complaints. From 2003 he joined the policy and research team and held an important position in the team. The main role of the team was to work on public policy issues that might have an impact to change the livelihood of the disadvantaged groups of people, and also to conduct various research related to it. In addition to the policy and research area there were another three areas that EOC also worked on namely complaints, legal assistance and public education and promotion.

8.1.3 *Teacher Other Than Studied Three Schools: Martin Knowles*

The first author first came to know about Mr. Knowles from one of the Associate Supervisors of his PhD supervision panel. He was told that Mr. Knowles was teaching ethnic minority students in a secondary school and also doing some research on the dropout issue for his Master’s thesis. When asked whether he would be interested to take part in an interview for the research, Mr. Knowles replied positively.

Mr. Knowles was British and had been living in Hong Kong since 2010. He had a teaching qualification from the United Kingdom and he taught there prior to moving to China in 2009. In his 1 year stay in China he was also teaching. Then he took a job in a Hong Kong secondary school as a native English teacher, commonly known as a NET, in 2010, and moved to Hong Kong at the beginning of the academic year 2010–2011 to start work. One of the other reasons for Mr. Knowles to move in Hong Kong was his girlfriend, a Hongkonger. Mr. Knowles was also doing a Master of Education degree part-time in a university of Hong Kong where he was pursuing a thesis on 'at risk of dropping out students' mainly looking at what factors push them out of schools or to stay in school. Mr. Knowles could speak both Putonghua and Cantonese.

The school in Hong Kong where Mr. Knowles was teaching was a secondary school, a so called band 3 school. It was a 25 year old mainstream school for Chinese students. The school started admitting ethnic minority students 5 years ago. Like many other schools in Hong Kong the numbers of the total students was declining which was why Mr. Knowles' school had opened their places for ethnic minority students.

8.1.4 NGO Professional: Mr. Monu Pun

Several NGOs were approached seeking support for the research to allow one of their staff to be interviewed. Some of them did reply while some of them declined the request saying that they did not have enough resources to support us. It was only International Social Service Hong Kong (ISSHK) that replied positively. Mr. Monu Pun, one of the Coordinators of Harnessing Opportunities and Potentials for Ethnic Minorities (HOPE) Centre of ISSHK replied and offered himself for interview.

Mr. Pun moved to Hong Kong from one of the South Asian countries in 2009 to join his wife who was a Hong Kong permanent resident. He started working for ISSHK from early 2010. In his last three and a half years he was mainly working for the HOPE program while the program itself had started 1 year earlier. The main objective of the HOPE Centre was to support the ethnic minority population to integrate well with the local Chinese communities so that everyone could live harmoniously with dignity. For this the Centre provided a wide range of services including English and Chinese language classes, computer classes, after school tutorial classes, financial management training, orientation training on Hong Kong laws and services, and access to Hong Kong public services, vocational assistance and training skills for enhancement of youth, counseling, organizing cultural events, volunteering and hotline services for any emergency. The programs were mainly funded by the Home Affairs Department (HAD) of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR). In addition, the Hope Centre charged a token 100 HKD for each 50 h language course. Each year Mr. Pun's HOPE Centre provided services to 6000–7000 ethnic minority people including adults, children and youth.

8.2 The Magnitude of ‘Out of School’ Issue for Ethnic Minority Young People

All participants viewed being ‘out of school’ or dropping out as a big issue for ethnic minority young people in Hong Kong. Community leader, Mr. Baral, commented:

‘Out of school’ is a serious issue for ethnic minority students in Hong Kong because it is related to their future. Ethnic minority students are Hong Kong residents. They have rights to have good education and after that find a good job. If they can’t finish school successfully or do not have a good degree they cannot find a good job. They will not be able to have an upward social mobility. If it continues this way, the social prejudice or stereotypes against them such as they are not successful, or they cannot get a good job will continue to remain in the society. For a healthy living in Hong Kong society, they must be supported to overcome this issue. Otherwise, it may create a social and community problem in the long run. Therefore, the dropout issue needs to be seriously taken. (Mr. Sumit Baral, community leader, interview, 12 February 2013)

The same line of argument was also revealed by community leader, Mr. Alam, and NGO professional Mr. Pun. Mr. Pun raised one further point. How could ethnic minority young people be able to make their future generation successful in Hong Kong when they themselves could not be successful? He referred it as a vicious cycle that is difficult to break.

In noting the importance of the dropout problem for ethnic minority students and explaining its effect in the larger Hong Kong society and how Hong Kong government could actually use properly educated ethnic minority young people as a potential opportunity for addressing some of the emerging issues of mainstream Hong Kong society, EOC official Mr. Cheung commented:

Dropout for ethnic minority young people is a big problem for our society. There are about 18 % Hong Kong school graduates can go to University but the percentage of ethnic minority students coming to the University is very low compared to the Chinese students. Not getting chance of education for upper secondary or higher education lessens the opportunity for finding a better job. Many of them get involved in crimes, drug trafficking etc. for earning their living which are ultimately creating many social problems. I heard this from many of my colleagues from the Police Department. If we can help them to be academically successful it would help many of them not to rely on Comprehensive Social Security Assistance. Ultimately, for better social stability this issue needs to get priority....Hong Kong is facing a major challenge of ageing population at the moment. The birth rate for local Chinese people is less than one, but ethnic minority population has traditionally bigger family. Hong Kong government must think to make these young people highly productive as they are belonging to Hong Kong. (Mr. Albert Cheung, EOC official, interview, 28 February 2013)

Community leader, Mr. Rahman, mentioned how Hong Kong was losing its talented ethnic minority young people by not enrolling them in the local university. He expressed his particular dissatisfaction for the very low participation or opportunities of ethnic minority students in higher education in HK. He stressed that their children wanted to contribute positively in Hong Kong society and for that they needed to be educated well in Hong Kong universities. But unfortunately they could not get places there; whereas some of them had actually secured places at very good universities abroad. Given that Hong Kong had some top-rated universities, they

really did not need to go abroad, if they could have access to the local universities they would love to stay in Hong Kong. "Government must think carefully how they can increase the enrolment of ethnic minority students at the local universities", Mr. Rahman further emphasized.

However, EDB official Mr. Cheng did not view that 'out of school' or dropout was a big issue reasoning that the numbers of ethnic minority students were not big in Hong Kong schools. He mentioned that the ethnic minority students who started schools from Primary One can continue up to Form Six but those ethnic minority students who came and started their education from late primary or secondary schools were having problems with academic results, especially Chinese language. He further added that children from the family of new immigrants from Mainland China and some Chinese children born outside Hong Kong such as in the United States or Canada and came back Hong Kong at some point later were also facing the same difficulties in Hong Kong schools. If the students were willing to work hard they could be successful in Hong Kong. Mr. Cheng's view is a long standing stereotype of ethnic minority students' learning in Hong Kong as suggested in the literature (Ku et al. 2005).

In terms of the extent of 'out of school' phenomenon, community leader, Mr. Baral, from his one decade long teaching experience in Hong Kong, roughly estimated that about 15 % ethnic minority students dropped out between Form Three and Form Five and only 5 % students could make it through to university. Dropping out typically started at Form Three and continued up to the end of secondary Form Four. In terms of any specific patterns of drop out Mr. Baral mentioned that he did not notice any gender-based or ethnic – based pattern. Another community leader and teacher, Mr. Alam, mentioned that some ethnic minority children in the pre-primary age-group were not attending any kindergarten. He was also aware of the dropout issue in the secondary school and he estimated the dropout percentage in his school was about 5 % every year. Generally the bottom 5 % of students in the class had to repeat their Form, and many of the dropout ethnic minority students came from this group. Most of the ethnic minority students dropped out in Form Three or Four. Mr. Alam noticed that more boys than girls were dropping out of but he did not observe any ethnic specific pattern across ethnic minority groups.

Mr. Knowles from his 3 years' work in a Hong Kong secondary school estimated that about two or three ethnic minority students from a class of 30 dropped out every year. Although in statistical term it meant about 10 %, he could not confirm that number. He referred to his current Form Four class that had 27 students in Form Three in the last year but five students had already dropped out. His current Form Five class, however, had only lost one student from the Form Four class last year. In terms of any specific dropout pattern, Mr. Knowles commented:

There are mainly two types, firstly, the students who are told to repeat their Forms are most likely to be dropping out of school for a variety of reasons. Secondly, there are students who are looking for places in other schools and students who are working dropped out more. Dropping out happens throughout all forms in the same manner. I observed during my last three years in the school that boys dropped out more than girls. Since the school has more Pakistani students the dropout numbers for them are also the highest. There is a common

view in the school that Indian and Filipino students are doing better and Pakistani students are not. Nevertheless, in my classes as well as in other non-Chinese classes in the school the highest achievers are Pakistani and Pakistani students are the majority in the list of the lowest achievers too. (Martin Knowles, teacher, interview, 9 March 2013)

EOC official Mr. Cheung linked the dropout issue to the compulsory education law of Hong Kong that requires all Hong Kong students to be in the school from age 6 to 15. He thought that many ethnic minority students started drop out after finishing the compulsory education level at Form Three meaning that dropping out mainly started from Form Four and continued until the end of secondary. He further added that the dropout phenomenon reached the highest level after Form Five because students had to sit for the HKCEE (this was before the new 3-3-4 schooling system Hong Kong that provided 6 years of compulsory education. Mr. Cheung had not noticed any specific pattern of dropout according to gender or ethnic group.

In terms of his direct encounter with 'out of school' students, NGO professional Mr. Pun had not come across any young person coming to the HOPE Centre to who had not been attending kindergarten or primary school. He mentioned, however, that sometimes he provided advisory support to some guardians who sought support for their children having serious school attendance problem. He remembered one case where the child was only in Primary Six but had not been going to school for more than 2 months when the student's father sought support from him. In such cases, Mr. Pun and his colleagues often helped parents by providing information on how to be connected with and get support from a social worker at the school or from the Integrated Family Service Centre (IFSC). Identifying the number of school dropout students in HOPE's skills enhancement program for youth seemed difficult for Mr. Pun. He thought the main reason was participants did not generally want to reveal their dropout status. There were four batches of skill enhancement programs organized every year with around 12 students in each batch. While many of the participating youths were regular Form Four or Five students some of them were school dropouts. Mr. Pun mentioned that he only found a few students who revealed their school dropout status, yet, he stressed that there must be more students in the group who also dropped out of school but did not reveal their status. Because of this Mr. Pun hesitated to estimate any percentage of school dropouts participating in their programs. He also observed some patterns of ethnic minority school dropouts from his experiences working with them:

Most of them dropped out of school after Form Five or Six. Many ethnic minority dropout students had come to Hong Kong having completed their primary schooling from their home countries. There are also dropout students among the ethnic minorities who have always been in the Hong Kong education system since the beginning of their schooling. The number of dropout boys is always dominant while Pakistani and Nepalese dropouts are more than other ethnicities. Indians children drop out less; some families either sent them back to India or other countries to graduate. (Mr. Monu Pun, NGO professional, interview, 2 May 2013)

While EDB official Mr. Cheng indicated a rounded figure about 1,800 overall students dropping out every year in Hong Kong, 400 were from primary level and 1400 were from junior secondary level. Unfortunately, he could not provide any

specific dropout data for ethnic minority students. He reasoned that they normally did not summarize the separate statistics of non-attendance or dropout cases for ethnic minority students. Rather the office kept records only for the whole student group. Nonetheless, he agreed when the interviewer reminded him that the detail record file for individual cases, ethnicity was mentioned. In terms of any specific pattern for dropping out he indicated that, end of Form Three was one of the critical points for ethnic minority students dropping out as it was the end point of compulsory education and boys dropped out more than girls.

8.3 The Reasons for Ethnic Minority Young People Being 'Out of School'

All the stakeholders identified a range of factors to explain why ethnic minority students were 'out of school'. These are given below.

8.3.1 Academic Achievement

Poor academic achievement emerged to be one of the main reasons for ethnic minority students being 'out of school'. EDB official, Mr. Cheng, EOC official, Mr. Cheung, teacher, Mr. Knowles and community leader, Mr. Alam indicated that especially identified it because of the less academic achievement in supported this a reason for dropping out. Many ethnic minority students did not do well in subjects such as Mathematics, Chinese, Science, Liberal Studies, English. Mr. Knowles, however, mentioned that the decisive factors for ethnic minority students for promotion were their results in Mathematics, Chinese and English. Because of their lower scores they lacked the required marks to be promoted to the next class. Then they were either asked to repeat or were "kicked out" of school. Many of them eventually dropped out.

8.3.2 Inadequate Schooling Provision for Ethnic Minority Students

Pre-primary schooling was neither free nor compulsory in Hong Kong. Therefore, many ethnic minority students could not afford the cost of private kindergarten even after getting support from government's pre-primary education voucher scheme, as mentioned by both community leaders Mr. Rahman and Mr. Alam. Even access for ethnic minority students in primary and secondary schooling was somewhat inadequate as getting available school places for ethnic minority children remained problematic for some of the community members. Mr. Rahman commented:

Not all the schools in Hong Kong admit ethnic minority children. Some of them teach in English where ethnic minority kids usually go. These schools are called designated schools but the numbers of places in these schools are not sufficient. Therefore, many of the students had to wait for one to two years in order to get a place in school. The standard of these schools is not good. These designated schools mostly have only ethnic minority children, so they miss the opportunity to make friends with majority Chinese students. English School Foundation (ESF) schools and international schools, who also teach in English, are just beyond most of the ethnic minority community people's affordability. (Mr. Tareque Rahman, community leader, interview, 12 March 2013)

EOC official, Mr. Cheung's account showed how school provisions for ethnic minority students in Hong Kong interacted with poor academic achievement and ultimately resulted in dropouts. Mr. Cheung asserted:

The school allocation system for secondary is very competitive in Hong Kong mainly based on students' academic performance; parental choice is also considered. Ethnic minority students cannot get a place in a good English medium Band 1 secondary school because the academic requirement for getting in those schools are high which many ethnic minority students do not possess because of their lower achievement. Most of the ethnic minority students end up going to English medium Band 3 designated schools where Chinese language learning environment is completely missing because not many Chinese students are going to these schools. Some students get places in Band 2 or Band 3 schools where the medium of instruction is typically Chinese. Many students are not doing well in other subjects in these schools because of their weak Chinese. Because of their poor academic achievement they dropped out at some point of their later secondary years. (Mr. Albert Cheung, EOC official, interview, 28 February 2013)

8.3.3 Low Educational Aspiration

Community leader, Mr. Baral, indicated low education aspiration was a factor for school failure. Some ethnic minority students were highly motivated and had high expectation towards their study while some were not. He associated this with the difficulty level of curriculum in Hong Kong schools compared to the curriculum in ethnic minority students' home country. He stressed that he taught in schools in two countries which helped him to compare. Many newcomers from south Asian countries found the study really hard for them to continue in Hong Kong schools.

EOC official, Mr. Cheung, linked dropping out and lack of high aspiration for study with ethnic minority students' feeling of exclusion from the school. Ethnic minority students had fewer or no opportunities to mix with Chinese students in both designated schools and mainstream Chinese schools, therefore, they felt excluded from the school. He thought the feeling of exclusion from the school negatively affected ethnic minority students in their aspiration and motivation of continuing education in Hong Kong school. He mentioned, however, that this was nothing to do with skin color or racism but rather Chinese culture. He gave an interesting explanation:

Generally higher academic achievement is highly valued in Chinese culture. Chinese students want to mix with those students who are doing better academically so that they

can be influenced positively. Family also encourages them to do this. This is a long tradition in Chinese culture. Since ethnic minority students are not generally doing well in the school, therefore, Chinese students don't want to mix with them. (Mr. Albert Cheung, EOC official, interview, 28 February 2013)

8.3.4 Chinese Language

Not surprisingly Chinese language emerged as one of the other main reasons for the school failure of ethnic minority students in Hong Kong as indicated by all the participants. Many ethnic minority parents did not want their children to attend mainstream Chinese school because the medium of instruction was Chinese. Rather, they preferred to send their children to designated schools where the medium of instruction was English. Yet they had to take Chinese language courses in designated schools. The level of Chinese taught in those designated schools was low compared to the Chinese taught to Chinese students. Many students found the Chinese language subject difficult to pass. Community leader, Mr. Khan, stressed that all children from his community regularly complained that they found Chinese very difficult to learn. He had not yet come across to any students from his community who was doing really well in Chinese. The level of achievement, however, actually varied from student to student as mentioned by community leader, Mr. Baral. He found the Chinese language ability of many students from his previous jobs in a designated school was 'outstanding', whereas some were having serious difficulties in learning Chinese. Especially those who joined Hong Kong school later at some point in late primary or early secondary school faced greater difficulty. Even students who had passed Chinese could not get through to universities or could not get a proper job because of the higher level of Chinese language requirements – a gap existed between their achieved Chinese qualification and required qualification for higher education and employment. To highlight the consequences of poor Chinese language skill NGO professional, Mr. Pun, mentioned that due to the lack of Chinese language skill there was only one Pakistani woman from the entire ethnic minority community who up until now had a civil service job.

A somewhat different opinion came from community leader, Mr. Alam. When asked hesitantly whether Chinese language skill had any bearing on dropping out of school, given that he had his PhD degree focusing on Chinese language learning of ethnic minority students in Hong Kong school, he immediately replied negatively. After a couple of seconds he mentioned that it could be a factor in mainstream Chinese medium schools and in some new designated schools that had recently admitted ethnic minority students. He further added that designated schools that were catering for ethnic minority students for a long time such as his school probably did not have any problems with students who were dropping out due to Chinese language issues.

8.3.5 Behavioral Problems

EDB official, Mr. Cheng, indicated that the behavioral problems of ethnic minority students were a major issue for their not succeeding in the school. Teacher, Mr. Knowles, agreed in the sense that students' behavioral scores were also considered for promotion in Hong Kong school in addition to academic results. He commented:

Academic achievement and behavior are considered simultaneously for their promotion. A student who is very good at behavior but not doing well academically in the school can be promoted to the next Form. In the same way, one who is passing marginally in academic subjects but doing very badly in behavior can be told to repeat the Form. So, behavior is very important for the school making decisions to let students be promoted to the next form. (Martin Knowles, teacher, interview, 9 March 2013)

The main behavioral issues for ethnic minority students that Mr. Cheng mentioned were talking in the classrooms, not concentrating on lessons, chatting with friends during the lesson, not obeying teachers. Mr. Knowles, however, sounded somewhat critical of the way students' behavior was viewed as 'problematic' in Hong Kong schools and teachers' expectations towards students' behavior. He said that sleeping in the classroom was not viewed as a major behavioral problem in Hong Kong school and he saw many Chinese students sleeping and not concentrating on the study during the lesson. In contrast, some teachers did not expect students to talk before they started talking and if the students started talking then the behavior was viewed as problematic, even if the teachers probably did not explain their expectations to the students before and did not make an effort to manage their behavior. Mr. Knowles also mentioned that he found some ethnic minority students were more enthusiastic and active which he felt was far better than sleeping in the classroom. The behavioral problems of the students were nothing here compared to the behavioral problems in UK schools, he further added.

8.3.6 Stereotypes of Ethnic Minority Students

EOC official, Mr. Cheung, mentioned that many stereotypes of ethnic minority students' ability existed in Hong Kong schools such as they are not hard working, they are lazy, less motivated and the culture of their home countries does not regard education as important. He indicated that these types of stereotypes could negatively impact on their study and ultimately could contribute to school failure for ethnic minority students. He boldly commented, however, that: "this is nothing to do with less intellectual ability or anything like that rather these students are not getting effective support for their education which is actually hindering their success".

Teacher Mr. Knowles was also very much aware of many long standing stereotypes of ethnic minority students in Hong Kong schools. He said that people tended

to make generalizations from one or two instances. He shared one example that in his school few female students were hesitant to use a high commode toilet probably because they did not use it in Pakistan and in their house in Hong Kong they had flat commode. But later it had been generalized that all Pakistani girls did not use high commode. Mr. Knowles further stressed that it was really a problem to make generalizations from one or two instances because it created stereotypes and stereotypes could affect students' educational performance.

Interestingly, during the interview EDB official, Mr. Cheng, mentioned a handful of reasons for ethnic minority students' dropping but these were actually based on stereotypes. He indicated these under the guise of religious and cultural factors. His comment:

There is some religious, gender and cultural reasons that many ethnic minority girls do not continue after primary education. They either stay back at home or go back to their home country. After a certain time they get married. Ethnic minority students who join schools in Hong Kong late cannot do well in education. Students have their sub-cultural groups like Pakistani group, Nepalese group, they always fight against each other. Ethnic minority students do not have any interest at all to learn Chinese. They have gross behavioral problems. (Mr. Lee Cheng, EDB official, interview, 26 February 2013)

8.3.7 Health Issues

EDB official, Mr. Cheng, indicated that the health issue of some ethnic minority students was one of the reasons that led to their being unsuccessful in school. He remembered some of them actually were not physically fit to continue school and some of them were suffering from illness for a long time. Eventually at some point they stopped coming to school. Mr. Cheng also mentioned that he found 'mental illnesses' in some dropout students and, in some cases, their parents. When asked to tell more about what type of 'mental illness', Mr. Cheng replied that it was not any serious mental disorder but some sort of disorder that one could easily perceive such as parents who did not show much concern when their children dropped out of school.

8.3.8 Special Educational Needs

Community leader, Mr. Alam, asserted that ethnic minority children with special education needs were more prone to school failure. He mentioned that some ethnic minority students had special education needs but they had not been identified earlier because either their parents were not aware of this or previous schools did not care much. Therefore, they did not have proper support right from the beginning of their schooling. Eventually many of them dropped out because they could not cope in the regular classroom.

8.3.9 Employment

Some participants felt that available employment was one of the other reasons for ethnic minority students’ dropping out. Community leader, Mr. Baral, explained how it affected school failure:

Many of the students get involved with part time work when they are 15 and in some cases even before. They then start liking their work, earning money. Slowly they lose their interest in education. Their motivation for continuing education also goes very low. As a result, they stop coming to school and continue work. This is a very clear reason for them to be dropping out that I noticed over my last many years in school and in the community. (Mr. Sumit Baral, community leader, interview, 12 February 2013)

Teacher, Mr. Knowles, echoed Mr. Baral regarding the relationship between employment and dropping out when he shared the story of one of his dropout students. The student dropped out of his class last year and then started working in a security job earning HKD 16 k per month. It significantly affected other students in the school because they were comparing University graduate salaries in Hong Kong that started with less than that amount, for instance, teaching assistants were paid only 10–12 k with a University qualification. He further added that when some of his students came in contact with their working friends outside the school they were influenced by their apparent success stories, and it impacted in a way that other students thought about leaving school and working to earn money as early as possible.

8.3.10 Family Factors

Most participants indicated that there were several factors related to ethnic minority students’ families that affected their school failure. In terms of pre-primary ‘out of school’ ethnic minority children community leader, Mr. Rahman, mentioned that many of the ethnic minority children were not going to pre-primary schools mainly because of their parents’ ignorance about this provision. This was also supported by community leader, Mr. Alam. In most of the South Asian countries pre-primary education was not offered or not compulsory, therefore, many parents were not aware of the pre-primary education provision in Hong Kong. Mr. Rahman asserted that although the Hong Kong government supported pre-primary education through the voucher scheme, making it free and compulsory would make pre-primary education more accessible to ethnic minority young children since the existing provision seemed costly for many of them. He also added that some ethnic minority parents just did not want to send their children to school so early but rather wanted to wait until primary age to start school.

The financial condition of the family was viewed as a major decisive factor for ethnic minority students’ educational success by some participants. Teacher, Mr. Knowles, observed that the students, whose parents were well off, had good educational backgrounds and could communicate well with the school in English and Cantonese, were doing better in the school compared to other ethnic minority

students. Those families who could support their children continuously up to Form Six without asking for any return in between were staying in the schools more. Mr. Knowles also said that sometimes parents asked the students to help them in their own business or directly wanted some financial support if the family was poor and parents' income was not sufficient for their living. Those students were at more risk of dropping out. The poor economic condition of many ethnic minority parents meant they could not afford private tuition or extra support for their children who were failing in many school subjects such as Chinese and Mathematics.

Another family factor was ethnic minority parents' lower educational background that limited the extent to which they could support their children's education. Community leader, Mr. Rahman, mentioned that some parents did not have any education from their home country and they did not value education seriously for their children especially regarding completing school. Many ethnic minority students also attended some religious based education such as madrasah after schools. Children whose parents were more concerned about making the right balance between school academic work and after school religious work were often more successful in schools, he further added.

Community leader, Mr. Baral, felt some parents' lack of awareness about Hong Kong's school and curriculum, their low level of engagement in their children's education and their relatively poor support for the school activities were also contributing factors to their children's lack of school success. He went on explaining that many South Asian parents were actually working hard in construction jobs because of their lower socio-economic condition. They did not have enough time to get involved with their children's education. In any case, they actually lacked skills to support their children in education.

Another parental factor was the poor relationship among between minority students and their parents. This impacted students' behavioral problems that led to adolescents' delinquency as observed by NGO professional Mr. Pun. There were some dropout students who had only single parent at home. Mr. Pun's account below showed how different family factors were interacting together and making school unsuccessful for ethnic minority students:

In most cases both father and mother work, so they don't have enough time to give children. There was none to look after them or some of them are mainly looked after by domestic workers (if they could afford it). Therefore, this creates a gap between children and parents, a big gap. They don't know what their child is doing or don't have time to give academic support which children need from the parents. Or they even don't have skill to support academically. Parents' economic ability also causes some problem. If parents can't provide a good environment for studying at home because of crummy space, or can't support with adequate resources for education how will their children succeed in the school? (Mr. Monu Pun, NGO professional, interview, 2 May 2013)

8.3.11 School Factors

Some participants pointed to several school factors that affected ethnic minority students' school failure. These were mainly school policies and practices related to behavioral and academic requirements for progression in school, teaching-learning

practices, and the curriculum and assessment system in the school. For instance, when EDB official, Mr. Cheng, was asked whether there were any school factors that affected dropping out, he answered, “Should have”. He continued that schools in Hong Kong made their own policy for acceptable student behaviors. It varied from school to school. Many ethnic minority students did not follow the standard and accepted outlook when they were coming to the school, such as, many students colored their hair which schools did not accept. Mr. Cheng remembered that many dropout ethnic minority students he came across had colored hair. He also mentioned that the acceptable academic achievement for progression varied from school to school. He stressed, however, that while the Education Bureau provided guidelines to schools not to be very strict about academic achievement requirement for progression, the accepted conduct of students largely rest with the individual school. NGO professional, Mr. Pun, also mentioned that there was too much pressure from the school side in terms of academic requirements that many ethnic minority students could not cope in the school and eventually dropped out.

Another school factor was the mismatch between teachers’ teaching style and students’ learning style as viewed by community leader and teacher, Mr. Alam. He commented:

Students’ preferred learning style does not match with many teachers’ teaching style as students learn in different ways, for instance, some students are kinesthetic or musical but probably they could not have appropriate teaching in supporting their learning style and they do not have developed interests in other styles. At one point they drop out of school.... hidden curriculum in the school, that is, mainly environment of the school could also affect the dropout phenomenon. By environment I mean the teaching learning environment which is not supportive for the ethnic minority students. (Mr. Shahed Alam, community leader, interview, 19 March 2013)

Similarly community leader, Mr. Rahman, mentioned that ethnic minority children had different needs from majority Chinese children. Therefore, they had to be treated differently in school in terms of the way they were taught. This had also a relationship with the curriculum they experienced and the way they were assessed. He was concerned that these issues were not handled very well in schools. As a result, ethnic minority students did not show much interest about the schools and eventually dropped out.

8.3.12 Peer Factors

Some peer factors were indicated as affecting ethnic minority students’ school failure by some participants. Community leader, Mr. Rahman, mentioned that since many ethnic minority students were not doing well in school, it had an effect on other ethnic minority students. Community leader and teacher Mr. Alam’s, account below clearly showed how peers exerted influence on ethnic minority students’ school failure:

We try our best to make students successful in their study when they are in school. But we cannot control them when they are out of school. Many ethnic minority students mix with illegal refugees or asylum seekers from their same ethnic origin and roam around with them after school. They have many friends including refugees and asylum seekers who become members of gangs and triad societies and get involved in some illegal and unsocial activities. In Yuen Long many crimes were committed recently by refugees, asylum seekers, gangs and triads. There are some students may develop adolescent delinquency within themselves when they are getting along with them. One rotten fish is enough to spoil other fishes in the group.... Some students having their friends working for triad society or gang become highly influenced by them and at some point they leave school and join their friends in gang or triad society, the students become unsuccessful in school. (Mr. Shahed Alam, community leader, interview, 19 March 2013)

NGO official, Mr. Pun, also mentioned that there were many Pakistani or Nepalese boys involved with triad societies or gangs and they became engaged in many criminal activities including fighting with other gangs and drug trafficking.

8.3.13 Technology as 'Deviator' Instead of 'Mediator'

One interesting reason for dropping out asserted by EDB official, Mr. Cheng, was 'computer dependency' among young people. He commented:

Computer dependency is a serious problem for the students. They mainly play games on computer as well as do some other things for the whole night; then go to bed around 6 o'clock in the morning. They cannot wake up in the morning and miss school. Even if they come they sleep in the classroom, they cannot concentrate in classes. It hampers their study; they cannot do well in the study and exam. At the end they fully stop coming to school. This computer dependency is harming many students now-a-days. (Mr. Lee Cheng, EDB official, interview, 26 February 2013)

Mr. Cheng further mentioned that this 'computer dependency' was not only a problem for ethnic minority students but also a problem for local Chinese students in Hong Kong schools.

8.3.14 Inadequate Educational Support and Lack of Quality Assurance

Some participants felt that the educational support for ethnic minority students was inadequate and inappropriate; therefore, it had an effect on ethnic minority students' school failure. Community leader, Mr. Baral, asserted that the support was limited to Chinese language improvement while there were many other issues related to ethnic minority education such as underachievement in Mathematics and the drop-out issue that needed to be attended to seriously. Even in the Chinese language support area EDB had not been yet able to introduce Chinese as a second language curriculum, he further added. Community leader, Mr. Rahman, sounded critical about too much after school support programs for Chinese language at school as

they were often inconvenient for the parents in picking up their children from school and also a long tiring day for students. Alternatively, he suggested deploying more funds to the local NGOs so that students could attend to extra Chinese language classes at NGOs in their locality during the night after taking rest at home after school.

It was clear from some participants’ views that the government had spent a good amount of money for supporting ethnic minority students. Yet they expressed their disappointment at not seeing positive results. In terms of Chinese language support, EOC official, Mr. Cheung, admitted that although government was spending significantly to support ethnic minority students it was not going well. In addition, community leader, Mr. Rahman, revealed his dissatisfaction not seeing any success from the government’s investment:

I came to know from one meeting at the Home Affairs Department that the government spent HKD 70 million for Chinese language support of ethnic minority students last year, this is a very big amount for 6000 ethnic minority students, but the result is not satisfactory to anyone yet. (Mr. Tareque Rahman, community leader, interview, 12 March 2013)

EOC official, Mr. Cheung, identified absence of a strong quality assurance mechanism as the main reason for not achieving expected results from the funding for ethnic minority education support. He mentioned that it was part of the Hong Kong school culture that schools were independent and Principals enjoyed full autonomy. EDB was giving them money to support ethnic minority students for their Chinese language. Unfortunately, schools were sometimes not spending money in the right way. The monitoring and reporting systems were not very strong, the accountability system was not working well. Mr. Cheung further added that in one or two cases in the area of support for children with special education needs, he heard that Principals hired teaching assistants to support students but they used them for other unrelated duties.

Community leader, Mr. Alam, also a non-official member to the Committee on the Promotion of Racial Harmony of Race Relations Unit of the Home Affairs Department of HKSAR, reasoned the same as Mr. Cheung. He further mentioned that money was not well spent and hesitated to tell more. Although it was tempting to pursue this issue, when he said that he could not tell more because of his affiliation with the government committee, the issue was left. Yet it did suggest for the first time that the issue of government expenditures on ethnic minority education needed to be further explored.

8.3.15 Racism

Community leader, Mr. Baral, indicated that racism existed in Hong Kong schools. He shared one story from his previous secondary school. Once a group of students were doing some activities in a hall room, the Chinese discipline teacher punished only ethnic minority students without any reason. The class teacher of that group of students was also Chinese, a very good colleague of Mr. Baral. She cried a lot for this injustice happening to her students. She became so shocked that she later quit the school.

Mr. Baral had also encountered some racist behavior in his own life too in Hong Kong. He commented:

At my beginning days in Hong Kong, police were always checking my ID card wherever they saw me. It was a very odd feeling that they were only doing this with me, not with any other Chinese passing by us. I really did not like it....At my job in a Hong Kong school I did not get promotion in time because probably I could not speak Chinese. Although I passed a number of years teaching successfully in the school but I did not get my well-deserved promotion. (Mr. Sumit Baral, community leader, interview, 12 February 2013)

Another community leader, Mr. Rahman, asserted that the attitude of Hong Kong people towards ethnic minority population was not generally friendly. He had not over generalized it though, but mentioned that it was very much common among people who were less educated. Both community leaders, Mr. Baral and Mr. Rahman, stressed that racism in school and outside could have impacted ethnic minority students' school failure.

8.4 Ethnic Minority Young People's 'Out of School' Life

In terms of what ethnic minority young people do after dropping out all the participants provided more or less the same account. EDB official, Mr. Cheng, mentioned that all primary dropouts usually came back to school again. Some secondary dropouts who were below 15 came back to school. Some of them were placed in NGOs or vocational bridging courses in order to continue an alternative vocational path. Some stayed at home and waited until they were 15 so that they could start work. Some just could not be traceable. Many of the dropouts over 15 started working right away and some went for vocational courses. "Actually they are over 15, so they do not need to be followed up", Mr. Cheng commented. EOC official, Mr. Cheung, mentioned that many of them started working right away regardless of their age and also many of them were involved with criminal activities including gangs and drug trafficking.

Teacher, Mr. Knowles, shared the experience of observing dropout students from his school:

Many of them start working right away. Many of them are not doing anything; they are just staying at home. The proportions of working students and students not doing anything are half and half. Most of the students who start working are mainly in the restaurant, bars and security. I heard a very few students get involved in some drug trafficking or with stealing groups. The overall gang involvement of the students of my school is low as one of the responsibilities of one Pakistani teaching assistant is to talk to the gangs for not engaging students of the school. Even one of my student's elder brothers who is a gang leader and does not want his younger brother getting involved with any gang, he actually scared the younger brother threatening that if he gets involved he would punish him. (Martin Knowles, teacher, interview, 9 March 2013)

NGO professional, Mr. Pun, mentioned that some of the dropout young people passed the whole day hanging out with friends as both parents were out for work, so

there were none at home to whom they would have to be accountable for staying outside. While Nepalese dropout young people seemed to be involved in security, construction, bar and restaurant jobs, Pakistani dropout young people were more inclined to set up their own business but also went into construction jobs, he further added.

8.5 Summary

This chapter presented selected participants' views on the 'out of school' issue for ethnic minority young people in Hong Kong – its magnitude, reasons and what ethnic minority young people do being 'out of school'. The participants were three ethnic minority community leaders, two government officials, one teacher from other than three studied schools and one NGO professional. Their accounts provided a clear picture to understand the 'out of school' issue from their perspectives in relation to ethnic minority young people in Hong Kong.

The interviews with other stakeholders revealed that the 'out of school' issue for ethnic minority young people had been viewed by most of them as a significant issue. It also emerged from the interviews that there are an array of factors at the levels of students, their families and schools, and factor such as racism that potentially could affect ethnic minority young people's being 'out of school'. The 'out of school' life of ethnic minority young people appeared to be mainly working in different sectors such as restaurants, bars and clubs, construction and security services.

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