Ethnic Minority Young People's Education in Hong Kong: Factors Influencing School Failure

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Abstract This chapter explores different factors that contribute to the school failure of ethnic minority young people in Hong Kong. It draws on a case study approach based on 15 in-depth interviews with 11 "out of school" ethnic minority young people, of whom 6 were dropouts, 4 were at risk of dropping out, and 1 never attended a school. It was also augmented with an additional 22 in-depth interviews with 20 other stakeholders related to ethnic minority education including 3 principals, 6 teachers and support staff, 3 school social workers and NGO professionals, 2 government officials, 3 ethnic minority community leaders, and 3 parents. Several themes were created using schema analysis that help explain different factors making them "out of school." It has been common to attribute school failure for ethnic minority students in Hong Kong to problems with Chinese language education, yet this study shows that a number of other interrelated factors contributed to their lack of successful schooling. The key influences are multilevel – with individuals themselves, within families, within schools, and within the community. Implications are drawn at the levels of policy, practice, and theory to better support ethnic minority young people's schooling success in Hong Kong.

1 Introduction

The official recognition of ethnic minorities as a subgroup of Hong Kong's population was only announced in 2001, even though such groups were already present since the beginning of the British colonial period (Bhowmik and Kennedy 2013). "Ethnic minorities" refers to the "people from non-Chinese ethnicities" by the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government (HKSARG) (Census and Statistics Department 2007, 2012, p. 2; Census and Statistics Department 2017,

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p. 3). According to the latest 2016 by-census (Census and Statistics Department 2017, p. 7), 584,383 people living in Hong Kong (about 8.0% of the total population) were ethnic minorities. They belong to the ethnic groups of Indonesians, Filipinos, Indians, Pakistanis, Nepalese, White, Japanese, Thais, Koreans, Bangladeshi, Sri Lankan, etc.

Ethnic minorities are a small but growing population in Hong Kong. This is evidenced by the fact that the 2006 by-census (2007, p. 15) reported about 5% (exact figure is 342,198) of the total population of HKSAR were ethnic minorities which means an increase of the total number of ethnic minority population by 70.8% in 10 years between 2006 and 2016 (Census and Statistics Department 2017, p. 7). In 2016, South Asians collectively represented 14.5% of the total ethnic minority population which increased by 71.4% compared to the 2006 by-census (Census and Statistics Department 2017, p. 21).

The schools predominantly catering for ethnic minority students in Hong Kong are called designated[1] schools. "Biliterate and trilingual" is the language policy context in post-handover Hong Kong under which ethnic minority students' education is provided. This means that all Hong Kong students should be able to master two written languages (Chinese, English) and three spoken languages (Cantonese, Putonghua, English).

A growing body of literature has reported that ethnic minority students are facing many issues and challenges within Hong Kong school in the areas such as admissions, Chinese language learning, assessment, curriculum, teaching, resource support, supervision and monitoring, and overall policy toward multicultural education (e.g., Connelly et al. 2013; Heung 2006; Hue 2011; Kennedy 2011a, b; Kennedy and Hue 2011; Ku et al. 2005; Loper 2004). It has been collectively suggested that all these issues and challenges are seriously hindering ethnic minority students' access to higher education, the job market, and their future prospects. However, there is one area that has been little explored, that is, the reasons why ethnic minority students are "out of school" or have dropped out of school. To address the issue, this chapter explores different factors that contribute to making ethnic minority young people fail in Hong Kong schools. It draws on a larger research (Bhowmik and Kennedy 2016) that sought to understand the extent of "out of school" ethnic

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[1] While the number of designated school was 15 in 2006/07, it has reached 31 in 2012/13 (Education Bureau [EDB], 2012). Education Bureau (EDB) in Hong Kong has clearly mentioned the rationale of inviting schools to be designated schools mainly to develop expertise among a pool of schools in dealing with ethnic minority students and sharing their experience with other schools. Perhaps, this system was easier for the EDB to provide support and resources. However, this designated school concept has been highly criticized as a discriminatory approach itself mainly because it reinforces segregation rather than integration (EOC, 2011, p. 7). The EDB is not any more using the word 'designated school' on their website, and recently changed the term to 'schools provided with recurrent funding and school-based professional support for non-Chinese speaking students' (EDB, 2012). Yet, the very essence of segregating ethnic minority students in these schools, in whatever name it takes, is still in practice. I will keep using the word 'designated school' for easy reference and maintaining consistency with the previous literature.

minority young people in Hong Kong, the reasons for being "out of school," and what their "out of school" life looks like.

2   Literature Review

Hong Kong's Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) first recognized the disproportionately low participation rates of ethnic minority students in upper secondary and post-secondary education compared to the majority ethnic Chinese students (Equal Opportunities Commission [EOC] 2011). Earlier in 2009, a Hong Kong Legislative Council (LegCo) discussion paper raised concerns about the academic performance of ethnic minority students by indicating that less than 50% met the minimum requirements to be admitted into Form Six in 2008/2009 with only 24 students sitting examinations in the final year of senior secondary. LegCo provided recommendation for the government to carry out research on ethnic minority students' academic performance (Hong Kong Legislative Council 2009).

Bhowmik (2013, 2014) analyzed the 2006 by-census data and the 2011 census data, respectively, to understand the extent of "out of school" ethnic minority children in Hong Kong. In both cases he suggested that although there is a lack of available data to estimate the right number of "out of school" ethnic minority young people in Hong Kong, a good number of ethnic minority children were "out of school" including the pre-primary, lower secondary, upper secondary, and post-secondary age-group young people. "Out of school" issue could be as high as about 25%, and more than 85% of ethnic minority young people were out of full-time education by the time they reached to upper secondary and post-secondary education, respectively. Kennedy (2012) also reported similar phenomena. Moreover, Bhowmik and Kennedy (2013) provided explanations concerning how the "out of school" phenomenon for ethnic minority young people raises new issues about access and equity in Hong Kong's education system and how it has failed to meet the requirements of the "no-loser principle" that is meant to characterize Hong Kong's most recent education reform (Education Commission [EC] 2000). Altogether the above works substantiate EOC's valid concern for ethnic minority students in upper secondary and post-secondary levels and also extend the same concern for ethnic minority students in pre-primary and lower secondary levels. This "out of school" issue warrants the examination of the factors associated with the school failure of ethnic minority students in Hong Kong. Because of the little knowledge and understanding about "out of school" ethnic minority students in Hong Kong, the potential personal, social, and economic impact of this school failure issue (Rumberger 2011), and the need to ensure equity in Hong Kong's education system and uphold the social justice as a whole, this chapter seeks to specifically answer one research question:

What are the factors influencing ethnic minority young people's school failure in Hong Kong?

3 Theoretical Framework

Conceptualizations of the school failure or "out of school" issue largely stem from experiences in developing countries where the universalization of primary and secondary education remains a key policy objective. Commonly used frameworks such as "Five Dimensions of Exclusion" (UNICEF and the UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2010, p. 3) and "Seven Zones of Exclusion" (Lewin 2007, pp. 21–23) consider "out of school" construct for the students up to the end of lower secondary level in the contexts of developing countries. Yet dropout discourse in the context of the United States considers students until the achievement of a high school diploma (Rumberger 2011). While it is seen from the literature that there are two different upper limits, we shall extend those limits to discuss "out of school" issue for ethnic minority young people from pre-primary to post-secondary level of education in Hong Kong. It can be summarized in three broad categories, firstly, the pre-primary, primary, secondary, and post-secondary age-group young people who have never been to any schools; secondly, the dropout students of primary, secondary, and post-secondary level; and thirdly, the primary, secondary, and post-secondary level students who are in primary, secondary, and post-secondary school but at risk of dropping out (Bhowmik and Kennedy 2016, p. 54).

School failure literature worldwide has identified that school failure in both developed and developing contexts is more than simply a consequence of academic failure; rather there are many other interrelated factors contributing to this (Hunt 2008; Rumberger 2011).

Hunt (2008) provided a comprehensive review of academic and development agencies' literature on dropping out especially in the development context with a focus on South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa and also included research from places such as China and South American countries. The review identified a number of interrelated factors in relation to household, community, and schools that influence dropout. Hunt's (2008, p. 53) review also identified four "at-risk" indicators. The four indicators are students repeating grades, students with lower achievement, students at overage enrolment, and students who remain regularly absent from the school or had temporary withdrawal previously.

Rumberger's (2011, p. 155) work provided a conceptual framework that constitutes both individual and institutional factors as predictors of dropping out drawing on his over 30 years work on dropping out in the US schools. The framework assumes dropping out is an aspect of student performance in school and identifies two types of factors that influence the performance. While "individual factors" are associated with students themselves, the "institutional factors" focus the contexts found in students' families, schools, and communities. Rumberger additionally offers conceptualizations of "socioeconomic" factors, that is, differences in resources in the social contexts of family, school, and community, and "sociocultural" factors, that is, cultural differences in values, attitudes, and behaviors in explaining racial and ethnic differences in dropping out.

For the purpose of this chapter, the discussion will mainly be limited to a selected number of factors from both Hunt's and Rumberger's frameworks which are found to be affecting school failure of Hong Kong's ethnic minority students. These theoretical frameworks provide a basis to analyze selected ethnic minority young people's cases in this chapter and help identify the processes and factors involved for them becoming school failure in Hong Kong. It is important to note that these frameworks have 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 issue in this distinctive context needs further investigation and this chapter has only begun to explore this complex social issue.

4   Methodology and Methods

This study sought to understand what school contexts shaped and influenced a group of young people becoming "out of school" students in Hong Kong. The qualitative study employed the case study method (Stake 2000) based on 15 in-depth interviews with 11 "out of school" ethnic minority young people. In addition, there were another 22 in-depth interviews carried out with 20 other stakeholders related to the education of ethnic minority young people. The reason for choosing case study is to gain a better or more complex understanding about school failure issue in ethnic minority young people's life (Stake 1994) and subsequently for theorizing about them (Stake 2000). All in-depth interviews were unstructured in nature that provided a greater breadth to understand their school failure issue critically (Fontana and Frey 1994).

4.1   Participants

A total of 31 people including 11 "out of school" ethnic minority young people, 3 principals, 6 teachers and support staff, 3 school social workers and NGO professionals, 2 government officials, 3 ethnic minority community leaders, and 3 parents participated in the research. All the participants were selected purposively as they were willing to be involved in the project. Selection was also informed by theoretical sampling, that is, sampling was guided by the "theoretical sensitivity" which is necessary in qualitative work in general (Glaser 1978; Strauss and Corbin 1998). For example, the selection of "out of school" ethnic minority young people for interview followed the summarized and extended adaption of "out of school" framework (Bhowmik and Kennedy 2016, p.54) that largely included three categories, i.e., students who never attended school, dropout students, and students at risk of dropping out. Please see Bhowmik and Kennedy (2016, pp. 62–68) for details about

participants' category, gender, ethnicity, and how many in-depth interviews were conducted with each participant.

4.2 Data Collection and Analysis

The interviews were conducted over an 8-month period, between October 2012 and May 2013. Each interview with "out of school" ethnic minority participants lasted for about 2 h and with other participants on average between an hour and 2 h. The family interview with a young girl and her parents lasted for 3 h. I conducted all interviews. The language of the interview was in English and is a second language for most of the participants and myself. However, some of the ethnic minority participants opted to use their South Asian languages such as Urdu, Hindi, and Bangla. Being a native Bangla speaker, I am also conversant in Urdu and Hindi. The time and place of the interviews were negotiated and determined according to the participants' preferences.

Data analysis was continuous and started simultaneously while collecting data. It was in the form of writing stories based on the field notes and audio record. After stories' validation against transcription and notes, they were read several times from beginning to end for coding and writing a list of ideas and finally to identify themes. In this process several readings were also done again between transcription and field notes. Schema analysis (Ryan and Bernard 2000) of participants' accounts was done to identify the themes that help explain the reasons of school failure for ethnic minority young people. The relationship in this schema analysis between different coding categories is what Foss and Waters (2007, p. 201) call the "cause and effect." This means school failure is the "effect" of the different factors identified at the coding categories of the schema, or in other words, different factors identified at the coding categories of the schema are the "cause" of the school failure. Finally, salient themes were created from the data to answer the research question (Strauss and Corbin 1998).

5 Factors Contributing to Ethnic Minority Students' School Failure

The case studies with 11 "out of school" ethnic minority young people and interviews with 20 other stakeholders revealed an array of factors that contributed to ethnic minority young people for being "out of school." These are low academic achievement, overage and retention or repetition, low education aspiration, attendance issue, Chinese language, behavioral problems, employment, involvement with gangs, health issues, school changes or student mobility, peer factors, family poverty, parental education, dropout history in the family, parental practices,

inadequate schooling provisions for ethnic minority students, segregation effect in designated school, issues in teaching, school policy and practices, teachers' low expectation, community factors, differences of culture in education, immigration and citizenship, racism, special education needs, and stereotypes. Due to space limitation, only a selected number of factors are presented in detail in the following sections. Pseudonyms are used to refer to participants and their comments.

5.1   Low Academic Achievement

The most common factor found across most of the participants was low academic achievement. While the failing subjects list included almost all school subjects such as Mathematics, Liberal Studies, Chinese, Science, Biology, Chemistry, English, Business, and Accounting and Financial Studies, the first three subjects in the list emerged to be the main subject areas where many ethnic minority participants had not done well academically. For example, Morshed, a dropout student after Form one, commented:

> In primary school I was always passing in Chinese and English but failed in the rest of the subjects. In secondary school my academic result was very poor, I only scored 31.14% at the final examination where the school's requirement for progressing to the next Form is more than or equal to 50%. I only passed in Chinese and English language subjects, the rest of the subjects I failed.

Academic achievement has been identified as one of the powerful predictors of dropping out in the developed context such as the United States (Rumberger 2011). A majority of the studies that examined the effects of test scores and grades on school failure found that academic achievement had a statistically significant effect on the likelihood of dropping out, more powerful in the middle and high school, although the majority of the studies did not find a direct relationship between achievement in elementary grades and dropping out (Rumberger 2011, p. 166). Similarly, lower achievement has been identified as an "at-risk" indicator of dropping out in the developing context (Hunt 2008, p 48). Research suggested that students with lower achievement were more at risk of dropping out than those with higher achievement.

5.2   Overage and Retention or Repetition

It was common that many of the "out of school" ethnic minority participants actually came to Hong Kong at the end of primary school age or early secondary school age after having spent the first years of schooling in their home country. At the entry point to Hong Kong schools, they were not allocated to the respective grade level relevant to their ages. Some of them also had to repeat in the same class because

they had not achieved the required marks academically for promotion. Therefore, many of the participants ended up being in the classroom where they were significantly overage compared to their peers. In the cases of Morshed and Azad, the issue of overage was very prominent. Azad, a dropout student, commented:

> I was significantly over aged compared to my classmates. I started primary school when I was 9 years old. And again I lost one more year when I was 'kicked out' of my first secondary school after Form One and repeated the same Form in another secondary school. Altogether I was at least 5 years over-age compared to my peers in the secondary school.

Overage has been identified as an indicator for at risk of dropping out students in the developing context (Hunt 2008) and a predictor of dropping out in the developed context such as the United States (Rumberger 2011). Hunt's review found a number of studies that suggested students who started schooling over age were more at risk of dropping out than those who began at the official age and were less likely to complete full education cycle (2008, p. 45). Rumberger and Lim's (2008) review identified that 31 studies out of 52 that examined the relationship between overage and dropout showed older students were more likely to drop out than younger students at the high school level (cited in Rumberger 2011, p. 164).

Similarly grade retention has been found as a consistent predictor of dropping out in the United States (Rumberger 2011). Rumberger and Lim's (2008) review in this regard showed that 37 of the 50 studies found retention in primary or junior secondary level increased the likelihood of dropping out of high school (cited in Rumberger 2011, p. 163). Retention in the name of repetition has also been identified as at-risk indicator for dropping out in the developing context (Hunt 2008). Hunt's review found that repeating students were more at risk of dropping out than non-repeaters.

5.3 Chinese Language

Case studies of students such as Taufiq, Nadia, Aruna, and Sahid, who were at risk of dropping out, revealed that many of them were seriously struggling in Chinese language especially in Chinese medium of instruction schools. For example, when asked whether Taufiq was facing any problem being taught in Chinese in the secondary school, he commented:

> Here every subject is in Chinese. It is very difficult to understand many things. Then I ask help from teachers or some students in my class. With their help sometime I understand, sometime I do not understand anything. The situation was very bad in Form One, but now it is slowly getting better…

It was also found from the case study with dropout participant Veem that his struggle in Chinese was one of the main reasons for his dropping out. In addition, Aruna's high academic expectation in Hong Kong was hindered by her poor Chinese skills. Moreover, Maneesha felt that she would never do well in work and career in the future due to her lack in Chinese skill. Chinese emerged as one of the main three subjects in the list that many participants failed academically in school.

Dropout research in the context of the United States identified immigration status has a bearing on dropping out (Rumberger 2011). In most cases, this was related to their poor English language skills. Most of the studies found that immigrant students with less English language ability had higher dropout rates (p. 184). Dropout research in the context of developing countries referred to the role language might play in dropping out (Hunt 2008). Exclusion may occur when students are taught in languages other than their native languages. The research in Burundi found that repetition rates increased for children by up from 28% to 40% in the first 2 years of using French as the language of instruction (Jackson 2000, cited in Hunt 2008). Research from Paraguay suggested that language influenced school performance and was highly associated with poverty, leading to dropout and low earnings (Patrinos and Psacharopoulos 1995, cited in Hunt 2008, p. 40).

5.4 Family Poverty

Family poverty seemed to be a very strong factor for the "out of school" participants such as Shormin and Abdal. In Shormin's case, the whole family was living in Hong Kong with an amount of only 10,000 HKD for a month for a family of four members which was far below than the poverty line considered in Hong Kong. As a result, the family could not afford to send Shormin to a kindergarten even at the age of 5. Mr. Abbas, Shormin's father commented:

> We were told by the Student Financial Assistance Agency (SFAA) of Hong Kong government for pre-primary education voucher scheme that we are not eligible to receive assistance for Shormin because I am on a student visa. Then we visited at least five to six kindergartens and phoned several others both English and Chinese medium. There is not any bar for Shormin to get a place in a kindergarten but the minimum monthly fee would be HKD 3000. Considering other costs such as transportation, dresses, buying books, notebooks etc. altogether we would need at least HKD 4000 per month for Shormin. We cannot afford this cost since we only have HKD 10,000 a month to lead our life in Hong Kong.

In general the census data show that the median monthly incomes for the South Asians are among the lowest of all major ethnic minorities in Hong Kong excluding foreign domestic helpers (Census and Statistics Department 2007, p. 75; Census and Statistics Department 2012, p. 86; Census and Statistics Department 2017, p. 100).

In the context of the developing countries, Hunt's (2008) review identified research that indicated direct and indirect schooling costs were important factors in whether children enroll in, attend, and continue school since schooling incurred a range of costs. While direct costs referred to school fees, the more hidden costs included uniforms, travel, equipment, and the opportunity costs of sending children to school. Therefore, family poverty appeared to be an important factor in determining success in school. Hunt argued: "both statistical data and empirical research suggest that children from better off households are more likely to remain in school, whilst those who are poorer are more likely never to have attended, or to drop out once they have enrolled" (2008, p. 7).

In the United States' context, family poverty as a part of composite indicator of socioeconomic status (SES) has been widely examined in the dropout literature (Rumberger 2011). Rumberger and Lim's (2008) review of research revealed that students from high SES were less likely to drop out than their counterpart students from low SES (cited in Rumberger 2011, p. 191). The review also found that family income predicted school failure; therefore, childhood poverty is a powerful predictor of adolescent and adult outcomes. Rumberger also highlighted one US national study that found students from the lowest quartile of SES were five times more likely to drop out than the students of highest quartile of SES (Dalton et al. 2009 cited in Rumberger 2011).

5.5 Issues in Teaching

Issues in teaching skills in Chinese and other subjects, as revealed from the interviews with dropout ethnic minority participants such as Maneesha and Veem, affected their school failure. For example, Maneesha indicated her teacher's lack of skills in teaching Chinese was the reason for not learning Chinese well in school. The teacher only focused on writing skill whereas other important skill such as speaking was not addressed at all:

> I didn't learn anything from my Chinese class. The reasons were mainly our teacher who always wrote something on board and asked us to write down. We never had a chance of practicing speaking in our class. Even our Chinese classmates were always communicating with us in English.

Lack of teachers' skills in teaching Chinese as a foreign language has also been identified as a barrier for ethnic minority students to learn Chinese in EOC report (2011). A wider literature also reported Chinese language issue including teaching for the Hong Kong ethnic minority students (e.g., Ku et al. 2005; Loper 2004, Ullah 2012).

In the developed context such as the United States, it was found that teacher quality as a part of school resources has a bearing on dropout or graduation rates (Rumberger 2011). Similarly, in the developing context, teaching quality has been identified as a factor affecting dropout, as Hunt (2008, p. 39) argued, the quality of the teaching in schools is linked to the learning outcomes of student, and it can also influence students' experiences of schooling, their motivations, and the move toward dropping out.

5.6 Teachers' Low Expectation

Teachers' low expectation seemed to affect Taufiq, an at risk of dropping out student. Mr. Jordan, Taufiq's teacher, had low expectation about Taufiq's school success as when asked why he thought that Taufiq was at risk of dropping out, Mr. Jordan commented:

> Taufiq's Chinese is bad. Although he speaks Chinese quite well, but his reading and writing are not good. Moreover, his academic result is very low throughout the last three Forms. He also has some bad peer influences like most of his friends in the school do not like study. He does not have yet any attendance problem though. Although he wants to finish his HKDSE, but I fear that he would not get promoted to Form Four and will have to repeat Form Three mainly because of his academic result. Therefore, his target may change when he will have to repeat his Form. All in all, Taufiq has a strong possibility for dropping out…

Some other stakeholders also felt that teachers' low expectation about ethnic minority students' educational success influenced ethnic minority students in the Hong Kong schools.

While Rumberger's (2011) framework for dropping out failed to explain this factor, Hunt's (2008) work in developing countries identified literature showing a relationship between teachers' low expectation and dropping out. He highlighted a research from Peru that suggested teachers had very low expectations of girls, because they believed girls would drop out (Ames 2004, cited in Hunt 2008). Drawing on social, educational, and developmental psychology literature in developed countries, Schofield et al. (2006) suggested that teachers' expectation regarding students' academic ability and achievement can impact students' academic outcomes. And it is often the case that teachers often have lower expectations for the academic performance of students from low socioeconomic status and/or immigrant and minority backgrounds.

5.7 Stereotypes

Stereotypes as a school factor can affect ethnic minority students' school failure. Interviews with principal Mr. Yuen and teacher Mr. Knowles revealed that stereotypes of ethnic minority students such as "lazy," "less motivated," and "not hardworking" were very pervasive among the teachers in Hong Kong schools. Interestingly, during the interview with EDB official Mr. Cheng, he mentioned a handful of reasons for ethnic minority students for dropping out which were actually 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 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.

Literature also suggests that teachers were holding stereotypes of ethnic minority students such as 'useless', 'misbehaving' and 'impolite' was prevalent (Ku et al. 2005). In addition teachers also hold the views about parents of ethnic minority students such as 'not supportive to education', 'don't cooperate with the school' were common among Hong Kong school (EOC 2011; Ku et al. 2005).

Rumberger's (2011) framework located stereotypes within sociocultural factors instead of school factors to explain racial and ethnic differences in dropout rates in the United States. He highlighted research that demonstrated social stigma or stereotypes related to intellectual inferiority among some cultural minority groups contributed to their lower academic achievement (Claude 1997 cited in Rumberger 2011, p. 204). In addition, social, educational, and developmental psychology literature in developed countries suggested that, for immigrant and minority students, negative stereotypes related to inferior intellectual skills to group membership can considerably obstacle both short- and long-term performance in a variety of academic domains (Schofield et al. 2006). Eventually it can lead to reduced interest in academic accomplishment and to behaviors that undermine achievement in the long term. However, dropout literature in developing countries has not yet explored relationship between stereotypes and educational achievements.

5.8 Peer and Community Factors

Four out of six dropout ethnic minority research participants in this study had friends from their own community who also dropped out of school previously. For example, Azad, a dropout student, commented:

> I remember about three of my classmates from my schools. They were all of Pakistani origin. Two of them dropped out of my first secondary school after Form Two. One of them had started working in a restaurant right away. Another was sent back to Pakistan by his parents as he was having drug addiction problem. The third one dropped out of my second secondary school after Form Four. He had been working in a mobile shop in Tsim Sha Tsui since then.

It was also found that some of the participants' ethnic minority classmates were working part-time and at some point they stopped coming to school and started full-time work. For example, Abdal's friend who was a candidate for interview in this study did not appear in school at all during my fieldwork period in the school. He had been identified as at risk of dropping out student by a teacher at the beginning of my fieldwork, and he actually dropped out by the time I finished my fieldwork. Abdal mentioned that his friend was working part-time in places like Sham Shui Po, Mong Kok, for distributing leaflets when he was still in school. Overall, it seemed that the practices in the community mentioned above affected some participants' school failure. It can also be mediated through peer factors in the ethnic minority community.

Undoubtedly, peers have a strong influence on adolescents. In the US dropout literature, it was consistently found that having dropout friends increased the likelihood of dropping out, with such association appearing as early as seventh grade (Rumberger 2011, p. 176). Community factors have also been identified as predictors of dropping out in the developed context such as the United States (Rumberger 2011). One study highlighted that community factors could affect adolescents in three different ways such as access to institutional resources, parental relationships,

and social relationships (Leventhal and Brooks-Gun 2000, cited in Rumberger 2011). Although Rumberger and Lim (2008) found no strong correlation between dropout and community factors (cited in Rumberger 2011, p. 201), in his later work, Rumberger (2011) argued that affluent neighborhoods or communities provide students more access to community resources and positive role models from affluent neighbors. In the developing context, however, the relationship between peer or community factors and dropout has not yet been explored.

5.9   Racism

The case studies indicated that almost all "out of school" ethnic minority participants experienced racism in their life in Hong Kong. For example, Tanvir, a dropout student, shared his experience:

> … On the streets and in the MTR I found many Chinese people avoided me many times… Many ethnic minority people I knew working in Airport said to me that they were less paid compared to Chinese people…One of my recent experiences was with a Chinese lady who fainted in the middle of the road. I helped her by calling an ambulance and accompanying her to the hospital instead of going to work. But when the lady had her sense back, she scolded me. …On another occasion recently I tried to help one of my old aged colleagues with his weight loads but in return the old colleague punched me… In a recent district council election I saw one candidate circulating his election promises in Chinese full of racial hatred and that he would not be going to support providing resources for ethnic minority people's well-being if he was elected.

Many of them also encountered racism in the schools. For example, Maneesha, a dropout student, mentioned some different behaviors of her teachers in school compared to their behaviors toward Chinese students:

> …In detention rooms teachers were stricter on the international students. When Chinese students were arguing with the teachers in detention room they normally overlooked it or pretended they didn't hear it. But in case of other students like me arguing with teachers in detention room caused extended detention. And they were rude towards us…

Even one community leader, Mr. Baral, had also faced racism in his life in Hong Kong as he revealed in his interview. He also mentioned that some ethnic minority students in his school experienced such while he was teaching in a Hong Kong school. Therefore, it appeared that racism which privileges Chinese and oppresses ethnic minorities was a common feature in the life of ethnic minority young people in Hong Kong including in their schools. Such experiences are not confined to this study but have also been in the literature. Using ethnographic approach Ku et al. (2010) conducted a year-long field study to understand the lives of the South Asian community in Hong Kong. Their study depicted South Asians' experiences of racial discrimination in areas such as "employment (hiring, firing, and advancement), admission to facilities, purchasing of goods and services, access to government services, and acquiring a home" (p. 4–5). Ku et al. (2005) found a quarter of the ethnic minority students who participated in the research agreed that their teachers did not

treat students of different ethnicities equally. They also reported that teachers gave more attention to the Chinese students than ethnic minority students and teachers gave more severe punishment to the ethnic minority students than Chinese students.

Dropout literature in both developed (Rumberger 2011) and developing (Hunt 2008) contexts did not identify racism as a separate factor for school failure. Critical race theorist López (2003) was right when he identified that the presence and effects of racism remain largely absent from the discussions in the areas such as educational administration, politics of education, policy studies, and political science. Drawing on Rumberger's (2011) dropout framework, however, through factors such as social composition of school that segregates ethnic minority students, school policies and practices that treat ethnic minority students differentially and ultimately create negative school climate for them and stereotypes that characterize inferior academic ability of ethnic minority students can explain how racism affects ethnic minority students' lower academic achievement and finally school failure. Similarly, drawing on Hunt's work (2008), factor such as teachers' low expectation toward ethnic minority students can also explain how racism affects school failure. Because of racist teachers have lower expectations that contribute to lower academic achievement of students and ultimately affect school failure. Moreover, the work of Schofield et al. (2006) can be drawn on to explain how racism interacts with ethnic minorities' or immigrants' lower academic achievement through the effect of negative stereotypes, teachers' lower expectation, and segregation at school.

6   Conclusion

In Hong Kong literature, it has been common to attribute school failure for ethnic minority students to problems with Chinese language as the language of instruction in most secondary schools and to lower achievement in the Chinese language school subject (Ku et al. 2005; Loper 2004; Ullah 2012). Yet we learned differently from some "out of school" participants' stories in this study. It is clear that a number of interrelated factors such as low academic achievement, overage and retention or repetition, family poverty, issues in teaching, teachers' low expectation, stereotypes, peer and community factors, and racism are affecting ethnic minority students' school failure in Hong Kong. In all cases several factors interacted together to create the condition for their school failure. This list of factors and their interaction are mostly in line with school failure literature worldwide (e.g., Hunt 2008; Rumberger 2011).

Despite the long list of different factors identified in this study affecting ethnic minority students' school failure, policy makers in Hong Kong have assumed that the only issue that needs to be addressed is the Chinese language skills of ethnic minority students. In light of the result of this study, this is a very limited response on the part of government. Without addressing other issues, it would be impossible to gain any success against school failure of ethnic minority young people. It is, therefore, important to understand the interaction of different school failure factors

at students' individual, family, and school levels so that the support measures can be targeted at all levels. Without intervention at all levels, it would be difficult to fight against school failure. Structural issue such as family poverty needs special attention as it has been identified as one of the most powerful predictors of dropout irrespective of developed or developing context.

At the practice level, schools should take more responsibility to address all the school factors that have a bearing on ethnic minority students' school failure. At the same time, schools also need to be aware of which school factors exert more powerful influence than others on school failure and, therefore, should be targeting to address those in the first instance. In addition, schools also might need to take prompt and active initiatives to work closely with students' family for a well-integrated intervention meaning that schools and families need to work together to prevent school failure.

At the level of theory, the school failure 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, such as their limited income and support from the school, which make ethnic minorities vulnerable to school failure. Moreover, racism in Hong Kong, which represents Chinese privilege and oppression in relation to ethnic minorities, should be properly acknowledged and considered at the center of these critical understandings.

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