

Why inclusion and acceptance of cultural diversity is important in classrooms

[Art & Culture](#), [Cultural Diversity](#)



Cultural diversity and inclusion. In the 21st century, the idea of inclusion has received a lot of attention. More and more, the workplace and education space is being filled with people from all around the globe. You can't stop internationalization, and it doesn't stop with Hong Kong either. There are all sorts of ethnicities represented in classrooms all across Hong Kong. You can find several nationalities represented in schools all across this city. This essay will go through reasons as to why it is necessary to cater to cultural diversity, will highlight some of my own personal experiences with inclusive classroom culture, and finally will lay down some practical ways aspiring teachers can go about fostering an inclusive classroom culture that caters to cultural diversity in the classroom.

Inclusion: Necessary?

Our first question arises as to why is it indeed necessary to promote inclusion and cater to diversity through planning in curriculum, and in the classroom? According to the immigration department of Hong Kong, more and more visitors and immigrants have come to live in Hong Kong. Immigrants come from all over the place. A lot of new residents come from Mainland China, Taiwan, Philippines, Indonesia, Pakistan, and India just to name a few. Schools now have to keep in mind that not every student that enters in holds the same values and knowledge we would see more commonplace in Hong Kong. Not only has Hong Kong needed to realize that the population is becoming more and more culturally diverse, but Hong Kong has needed to adjust the curriculum and classroom practices to better fit a more international body.

In the year 1999, the Education Commission released a document on education reform in Hong Kong. The following is a statement that summarized the underlying theme of the document:

There is an urgent need to introduce fundamental reforms to our education system. Reforms in education should bring new learning opportunities to every citizen, and should bring new opportunities for the future development of Hong Kong. This should be the guiding principle for education reform in Hong Kong.

And in 2000, the Education Commission expanded on the idea of learning opportunities for all citizens in their Review of Education System Reform Proposals: “ There should not be, at any stage of education, dead-end screening that blocks further learning opportunities... Teaching without any discrimination” (Education Commission, 2000, p. 9).

This theme has since been incorporated as one of the five principles of Hong Kong educational reform and is also often referred to as the ‘ no loser’ principle. Not only was education reform desired in order to foster to an increasing international population, but reform was also desired so as to open up new development opportunities for Hong Kong. Is this underlying theme of bringing new, equal learning opportunities to every citizen still relevant today however?

A Curriculum Flaw in Hong Kong’s Education System

Many would argue that the education reforms in Hong Kong have not done enough to provide equal opportunities for non-locals and ethnic minorities

receiving education in Hong Kong. Secondary students in the ethnic minority group that aren't local are limited in terms of educational opportunities as they can usually only get into designated schools or schools that are taking in the most students from the lowest banding. This is just educational policy and the education admission system, but what about inclusion within curriculum or assessment?

Learning the Chinese language is of the most concern when one talks of curriculum issues when dealing with ethnic minorities. All students, whether local or ethnic minority, must go through the same curriculum. Locals and ethnic minorities must learn the same Chinese content and at the same pace, without regard to the fact that not all students are the same. Testing and assessment also follows the same route - treating every student the same without much regard to different learning pace and language proficiency. So how can we work towards fixing and changing these issues with cultural diversity?

I want to briefly discuss my own experience with cultural diversity, because as an International student growing up overseas I feel that my school did a reasonably good job taking into account cultural diversity and promoting an inclusive classroom culture. As a private International JK-12 school situated in Yunnan province, a lot of curriculum and assessment guidelines came from an American-style perspective. With this in mind, English was the main language and, just like Chinese in Hong Kong schools, it was the language that was used as the MoI while also being assessed. Since we had many different cultures represented at our school (Korean, American, Denmark,

Australian, and Mainland Chinese), the school developed its own English development program available for students with low proficiency in English. This English Language Development (ELD) program was a sort of second curriculum in that students needing help in English did not attend the usual English Language classes (Literature, Reading, Writing) and attended English classes more suited to their language level instead. This was good as it allowed students with a basic level of English to approach the language on a more manageable level. The idea of ELD, was that once students had reached a certain level of English proficiency, they would get the opportunity to test out and attend the standard English level classes - which is why ELD was only needed for elementary and middle school students as many students would be able to test out by the time high school came around. We also had mandatory Mandarin classes that were separated into four levels (Basic to Advanced) according to what level of Mandarin proficiency a student had achieved.

A Second Curriculum?

The idea of a second curriculum and different-leveled classes is not a new idea for Hong Kong, yet a second curriculum for Chinese learning for ethnic minorities still has not been implemented by the EDB. I feel that allowing a second curriculum helps to foster a friendlier environment for learners with limited proficiency in the local language. Oftentimes, a learner just needs to feel confident and safe to start learning and growing in knowledge. An education system that treats every student the same is actually fostering monotony, so how can Hong Kong expect “ new opportunities for future

development” if the treatment of students that go through the education system is so bland and stale?

The Inclusive Culture Classroom

This brings us to the classroom. A good teacher should try and make the classroom a safe and stimulating space for all learners to challenge themselves. Within a culturally diverse classroom, a teacher may also find importance in giving opportunities to students to express themselves in their own culturally unique way. Our school had the wonderful opportunity to host International fairs where we would invite all the students and their families along with the local community to participate in activities, enjoy performances, and eat food unique to different countries. All sorts of countries were represented, and it was just a great opportunity to see special customs activities unique to specific regions that you wouldn't be able to see without traveling to that country. International fairs allowed students to be proud of their background and to show off new things unique from their culture that other students didn't know about. Within the classroom, teachers gave time for students to share and talk about their own country and the different foods, traditions, and festivals they celebrated back home. Not only can students from different backgrounds showcase their unique stories from back home, but allowing students to design a class or instruct a lesson based on their unique identity brings everyone in the class closer.

Some practical ways to encourage an inclusive culture in the classroom is to allow room for expression. Planning in-class activities that allow learners to

show off their culture is a fun way to do this. Another way to encourage inclusiveness can be through lessening the language barrier many students may face in an English as Mol classroom. A teacher doesn't necessarily have to understand and learn a student's unique language, but giving out worksheets and homework with multiple language printed alongside the original questions is just another small way teachers can encourage inclusion in a culturally diverse environment. While our Mandarin teachers in my school were encouraged to conduct lessons in Mandarin, when we needed help with classwork or had general questions, we could ask in English and they would try to help us. Code mixing in the classroom is not a bad thing, as understanding should be a top priority within any classroom. I still remember in my philosophy class in high school where a lot of concepts were in English, the teacher allowed the Korean students to discuss amongst themselves in their own native language so as to better understand what was being taught. The practical things we can do to encourage an inclusive classroom culture are all small helpful things we as aspiring teachers can already do. The big changes we need to see happening to allow for equal learning opportunities for local and ethnic minority students in Hong Kong are down to the implementation of a second Chinese language curriculum that actually takes into mind the different pace and general knowledge an ethnic minority student has of Chinese. For now, the most we as aspiring teachers can do to encourage inclusive classroom culture is to be aware of learner differences and look at every student as a unique learner with different learning and thinking styles - not just a mass of faceless entities going through an

education system. It's time to start approaching learners like the irreplaceable individuals they are.

Conclusion

With cultural diversity comes the need to somehow foster an inclusive environment that doesn't turn anyone away, and allows for equal opportunity within education. Hong Kong has come a long way in terms of adjusting and reforming the education system, but there is still a long way to go in terms of addressing cultural diversity. Even though the education system is nowhere near perfect in Hong Kong (similar to countries everywhere), we as aspiring teachers have a big part to play in keeping our minds open to the individuals we are teaching in the classroom. Curriculum reforms like a second curriculum haven't seen implementation by governmental powers in Hong Kong, but that doesn't mean inclusion cannot be promoted by the teachers. We as aspiring teachers can create safe havens for equal learning opportunities. An inclusive classroom environment is safe and welcoming to all individuals from different cultures and backgrounds, and as future teachers it is important for us to constantly examine whether we are treating our special students like the irreplaceable individuals they are, or if we are just treating them like another number in the system.