Developing a sense of belonging among ethnic minority youth in Hong Kong: challenges and opportunities

Ming Tak Hue
Department of Special Education and Counselling,
Faculty of Education and Human Development,
The Education University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, Hong Kong, and

Shahid Karim
Department of Early Childhood Education,
Faculty of Education and Human Development,
The Education University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Abstract

Purpose – Developing a sense of belonging among immigrant youth in multicultural contexts has attracted significant attention from scholars during the last few decades. Studies have already underscored how various educational factors hinder or facilitate students’ sense of belonging to the school or the larger society. Although most students in Hong Kong schools are ethnic Chinese, a significant number of non-Chinese children make students diversity an essential aspect of schooling. The study investigated how schools can develop a sense of belonging among ethnic minority youth in Hong Kong.

Design/methodology/approach – As the education system in Hong Kong lacks a multicultural education policy, how can schools help develop a sense of belonging to the school and the larger society among young ethnic minority people? To answer this question, this paper consolidates the two sets of data originally gathered for two research projects. The data was collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with nine secondary school teachers (Chinese and non-Chinese) and 15 students (non-Chinese) and analysed thematically.

Findings – The thematic analysis of the qualitative data identified several challenges and opportunities for developing ethnic minority students’ sense of belonging in Hong Kong.

Research limitations/implications – Researchers in comparative education can further explore how multicultural education and inclusive education approach together can help ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all and cater to students’ diverse learning needs across the education systems.

Practical implications – Given that the aims of multicultural education and inclusive education resonate with each other, schools can focus on the Whole School Approach to developing a sense of belonging among ethnic minority youth in Hong Kong. However, policymakers and practitioners may need to adopt a multifaceted perspective on inclusive education that strives to ensure equitable quality education for all.

Originality/value – The study contributes to the existing body of scholarship on multicultural education and inclusive education. The study findings underscore the importance of an interdisciplinary research framework in education and advocate an integrative approach to supporting students with diverse learning needs in multicultural contexts.

Keywords Hong Kong, Multicultural education, Inclusive education, Sense of belonging, Ethnic minority students

Paper type Research paper

The research reported here is drawn from the General Research Fund project, “Exploring the contextual influence of school, home and community on the development of ethnic minority students’ sense of belonging in Hong Kong” [GRF 18807219], funded by the Research Grants Council of University Grants Committee, Hong Kong.
Introduction
While most Hong Kong residents are ethnic Chinese, only 8% of the population belongs to non-Chinese or ethnic minority people (Census and Statistics Department, 2017). Their socio-economic predicaments since the return of the city’s sovereignty to mainland China in 1997 have attracted the attention of policymakers, scholars and practitioners during the last two decades. However, despite various policy and educational support measures, school enrolment and completion rates are comparatively low among ethnic minority students (Kapai, 2015), and their academic performance is still far from satisfactory (Tsung and Gao, 2012).

Scholars in multicultural contexts, particularly in the West, have extensively studied similar issues among young people with immigrant backgrounds and explored their acculturative experiences and sense of belonging to the host societies. Central to the phenomena of acculturation and a sense of belonging among youth from diverse backgrounds are the educational conditions that facilitate or hinder the development of a sense of belonging. Since a stronger sense of belonging results in improved academic outcomes (Cooper and Jacobs, 2011; Glazzard et al., 2019; Armstrong et al., 2010), scholars emphasise the critical role of educational conditions for developing a sense of belonging in multicultural contexts (O’Keeffe, 2013; Niens et al., 2013; Strayhorn, 2019; Strayhorn, 2012; Vaccaro and Newman, 2016).

Little is known about the experiences of non-Chinese students in Hong Kong, where schools lack a multicultural education policy and adopt a deficit approach to inclusive education. Therefore, this study examined the potential challenges and opportunities for developing a sense of belonging among ethnic minority youth in Hong Kong secondary schools by adopting a qualitative research approach. The paper highlights the potential challenges and opportunities for developing a sense of belonging to school among ethnic minority students. It discusses how the whole school approach (WSA) to inclusion can facilitate the developing of a stronger sense of belonging among ethnic minority children.

Developing a sense of belonging through inclusive education in multicultural contexts

Sense of belonging
A growing number of scholars explore the notion of a “sense of belonging” among immigrants and ethnic minority populations across the societies of their settlements. It is conceptualised as “an individual’s sense of identification or positioning in relation to a group” (Tovar and Simon, 2010). Various terms such as “sense of community”, “sense of relatedness”, “sense of connectedness”, “sense of membership” and “sense of belonging” are used interchangeably to assess their attachment to the host society. From an educational perspective, belonging is critical for young people’s psychological well-being and academic performance (Niemi and Hotulainen, 2016; Freeman et al., 2007; Cemalcilar, 2010). Studies have also reported a positive association between the sense of belonging and sociocultural adaptation (Strayhorn, 2012; O’Keeffe, 2013). Nevertheless, there are potentially different views on belonging and its social implications (Vaccaro and Newman, 2016; Hurtado and Carter, 1997).

It is believed that “human beings are fundamentally and pervasively motivated by a need to belong, that is, by a strong desire to form and maintain enduring interpersonal attachments” (Baumeister and Leary, 1995, p. 522). While it is a precondition for the actualisation of one’s cognitive and aesthetic capabilities (Desautels, 2014), Strayhorn (2012, p. 4) defines it as “a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued” by others. Since “identification with” and a “sense of belonging” to a social group are used interchangeably (Saeed et al., 1999), scholars often examine immigrants’ sense of belonging in terms of how they make sense of their social identification with people from their country of origin and the host society (Chow, 2007; Amit and Bar-Lev, 2015).
Empirical evidence suggests that a stronger sense of belonging to school helps improve academic achievement, attain school retention and persistence, prevents suicidal thoughts, results in positive emotions, and plays a meaningful role for students who often feel unwelcome and marginalised in their educational settings (Cooper and Jacobs, 2011; Glazzard et al., 2019; Armstrong et al., 2010). Therefore, studies have identified various educational factors such as peer interaction, supportive teaching, empowering school climate, students’ involvement in co-curricular activities and positive attitude towards diversity (Hoffman et al., 2002; Strayhorn, 2019) that not only affect students’ sense of belonging but also shape their unique trajectories of acculturation and enculturation (Karim and Hue, 2021, 2022a, b; Karim et al., 2021).

**Acculturation versus enculturation**

Developing a sense of belonging or social identification with the host society among young people with an immigrant background is integral to acculturation (Berry and Hou, 2019). Although there is a lack of consensus on a single definition of acculturation, which is often considered synonymous with integration, adaptation and adjustment (van de Vijver, 2018, p. 227), epistemologically, it has a directional meaning, connoting movement from one culture to another (Rudmin et al., 2017). For some, it essentially entails learning about another culture, just like learning about one’s first culture (Ferguson et al., 2016); therefore, it should be understood as “enculturation”, not “acculturation” (Weinreich, 2009). While the confluence of heritage culture and host culture acquisition characterises the phenomenon of acculturation (Schwartz et al., 2010), some prefer the term enculturation to acculturation for understanding the intercultural learning processes among immigrant populations. Although “migrants and the offspring of migrants continue to enculturate elements of the various cultural manifestations available to them” (Weinreich, 2009, p. 135), suggesting the boundaries between enculturation and acculturation are blurred, it is critical to clarify the fundamental differences between acculturation and enculturation.

Enculturation, as a social phenomenon, is often contrasted with acculturation. Given the lack of consensus on a single definition (Rudmin, 2003; van de Vijver, 2018), both enculturation and acculturation are defined in terms of changes in the cultural repertoire of immigrants due to intercultural contact in multicultural contexts (Redfield et al., 1936). In general, while enculturation is conceptualised as acquiring the first culture or heritage culture (Alamilla et al., 2017), acculturation refers to learning about the mainstream/host or the second culture in settlement societies (Rudmin et al., 2017). Amidst these differences, a growing body of literature, however, describes acculturation as a dual and multidimensional process of acquiring knowledge and skills about social identities, behaviours, and values related to both the heritage culture and that of the mainstream society (Oppdal and Toppelberg, 2016; Ward and Geeraert, 2016). This dual process suggests that the phenomenon of acculturation subsumes the meaning of enculturation, implying that the integration of immigrants in host societies involves the acquisition of cultural values, practices, and identities from both the heritage culture and the host culture (Schwartz et al., 2017).

Since the acquisition of both heritage and host cultures is inherent to the everyday lived experiences of young people in multicultural contexts (He, 2003; Karim, 2019), a distinction between first and second-culture learning helps delineate the factors that hinder or facilitate heritage and host society cultures acquisition in the societies of settlement. In the present study, acculturation has been conceptualised as learning about the host and heritage culture. In contrast, enculturation refers to the “acquisition of one’s own culture, including its values, behaviors, beliefs, understandings, social norms, customs, rituals, and languages” (Tan, 2014, p. 393).

**Multicultural education**

Like any other educational concept, multicultural education is understood and conceptualised differently. It is an idea or concept, an educational reform movement, and a process to offer equal
learning opportunities for all, regardless of their background (Banks and Banks, 2019). As a process, it is an educational and instructional strategy for managing cultural diversity in schools and classrooms to ensure equality and social justice (Gollnick and Chinn, 2013). While it encompasses a wide range of schooling aspects ranging from students’ diversity, curriculum, teaching, schooling policies and leadership to family and community engagement, specialists emphasise the critical role of teachers’ competencies concerning content integration, prejudice reduction, knowledge construction, empowering classroom culture and equity pedagogy (Banks and Banks, 2019). These aims explicitly resonate with the objectives of inclusive education at the classroom level. Teachers in inclusive classrooms focus on students’ abilities rather than disabilities, improve skills to connect with individual learning styles, honour the needs of all pupils equally, nurture shared respect and empathy, value different cultures and perspectives, and celebrate diversity and individuality (Gay, 2010; Ford et al., 2014). Although such factors characterise multicultural education at the classroom level, it demands a broader school and system-wide policy provision. Teachers alone can hardly ensure equal learning opportunities for all children without school leadership, parents and community support.

Inclusive education

There is an overwhelming diversity of views and perspectives on inclusive education across educational theory and practice communities. Scholars often refer to a proclamation, saying inclusion means different things to different people. It relates to celebrating differences (Corbett and Slee, 2000) and “a philosophy of acceptance where all people are valued and treated with respect” (Carrington, 2017, p. 240). It is a collective agenda for social justice (Glazzard et al., 2019) to help people already excluded from participating in their communities’ economic, political, social and cultural lives (Ferguson, 2008). In this sense, every educational effort to address the issues that exclude students from quality education opportunities can be recognised as inclusion in education. These interpretations suggest that inclusion is a policy framework subject to multiple interpretations and practice implications (Lindsay, 2003). However, despite emphasising quality education for all, inclusion is often understood as education for children with physical and intellectual disabilities (Johansson, 2014), and helping such students is considered inclusive education (Miles and Singal, 2010).

Given the diversity of students’ physical, emotional, intellectual and social abilities or disabilities, a sole focus on impairment is criticised as a limited approach to understanding the multidimensional inclusion phenomenon. Instead, in an inclusive learning environment, every pupil should be valued, accepted, and treated with respect so that every child can have a sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2019). Because “inclusion is not a matter of where you are geographically, but of where you feel you belong. There are many children, and especially adolescents, identified as having special educational needs, who can never feel that they belong in a large mainstream school” (Warnock, 2010, p. 34). Therefore, inclusive education should be understood as “developing the school for all” or “education for all” (Ainscow et al., 2006) and the “the concept of inclusion must embrace the feeling of belonging, since such a feeling appears to be necessary both for successful learning and for more general well-being” (Warnock, 2010, p. 14). In this paper, inclusive education has been conceptualised as a collective effort by different education stakeholders to create conducive learning schooling conditions and develop a sense of belonging among students with diverse cultural backgrounds to ensure equitable education for all and achieve the social justice agenda.

The educational context of the study

Demographically, many mainstream schools with students from diverse ethnic minority backgrounds characterise a multicultural educational context. However, despite continuous
advocacy for support measures for ethnic minority students, the education system lacks an explicit policy on multicultural education (Kennedy, 2011). The reluctance or inability of the education system to address these issues may be due to Western conceptions of social justice not being the same as those in Confucian societies such as Hong Kong (Kennedy, 2008). “When it comes to matters about people’s well-being, material welfare and life chances, Confucian justice seeks to promote sufficiency for all and not equality between individuals” (Chan, 2001). It explains the government’s “insistence on a common curriculum, a common examination, limited support for induction programmes, and a reluctance to expand the number of designated schools . . . the principle being used by EDB could be described as sufficient provision rather than equitable provision” (Kennedy, 2008, pp. 12–13).

Kennedy (2008) uses “hybridisation” to describe Hong Kong’s approach towards ethnic minority education. It combines the liberal principles of Hong Kong’s legal system with Confucian values that view equity as the same treatment for everyone rather than special treatment for those who might need it. In other words, it is a “hybrid” multiculturalism reflecting values from both the East and the West. Accordingly, the Hong Kong education system follows a “monocultural education”. It expects all students to benefit from the same curriculum, instructional strategies and assessment practices (Kennedy and Hue, 2011).

Consequently, schools hardly recognise, support and celebrate the contribution of all ethnic minority groups in the school community. Although a monocultural approach to diversity means ethnic minority students’ needs are recognised through new policies and increased resources, such a system does not signal a commitment to celebrating diversity or adapting the curriculum to meet any special educational needs. In the absence of a multicultural policy provision, schools often struggle to support diverse students through various policy provisions, such as a WSA for integrated or inclusive education. However, the typical approach to inclusion is a deficit-based perspective, and the medical model of inclusive education offers limited support to ethnic minority students in Hong Kong mainstream schools (Bhowmik and Kennedy, 2022).

Method

There is a common understanding that every research endeavour underpins a philosophy that informs or guides the whole research process. As a set of abstract ideas and beliefs, a research philosophy shows how a researcher approaches a problem, formulates research questions, and gathers information to answer them (Creswell, 2013). A researcher’s worldview, beliefs, assumptions, and values constitute a research paradigm (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). Since researchers have differences in worldviews, beliefs, assumptions, and values, they follow different philosophical paradigms that result in various research methodologies. Researchers operating in an interpretive research paradigm aim to know how individuals experience, perceive and make sense of a phenomenon or what happens to them and how their understanding of it informs their actions (Maxwell, 2013; Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014). At the same time, they remain sensitive to their subjective experiences. Creswell (2013) notes that:

[They] recognise that their background shapes their interpretation, and they ‘position themselves’ in the research to acknowledge how their interpretation flows from their own personal, cultural, and historical experiences. Thus researchers make an interpretation of what they find, an interpretation shaped by their own experiences and background. The researcher’s intent, then, is to make sense of (interpret) the meanings others have about the world. This is why qualitative research is often called “interpretive” research (p. 38).

With an epistemological assumption, researchers having an interpretive research paradigm always aim to produce knowledge while getting closer to the participants and analysing their subjective experiences (Creswell, 2013). Central to them is their focus on various factors that
shape social realities and their implications. They believe a “social reality is shaped by a whole range of human values and biases which sediment over time. These include social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and gendered aspects of reality” (Waller et al., 2016, p. 10). Therefore, a qualitative researcher brings the participants’ lived experiences and voices of struggle to the centre of their research analysis (Cole, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 2005; Rector-Aranda, 2016).

Research participants
The present study examined secondary school ethnic minority students’ intercultural learning experiences and sense of belonging in Hong Kong schools. Fifteen ethnic minority students were interviewed, and their accounts of intercultural learning and connectedness to the school were recorded. To know how belongingness is ascribed to ethnic minority students, nine teachers were recruited from a secondary school where most students come from non-Chinese ethnic backgrounds. Six participant teachers were Chinese, and the rest came from non-Chinese South Asian backgrounds. Five of them were males, and four were females. They had taught Chinese, English, and Liberal Studies to non-Chinese ethnic minority secondary school students for an average of 10 years. Tables 1 and 2 summarise the participants’ information.

While the students attended six different schools, teachers came from a single school with extensive teaching experience teaching non-Chinese students at various schools in Hong Kong. The selected school has a unique demographic picture of the students. Although the non-Chinese population is the minority in Hong Kong, non-Chinese students are the majority in the chosen school. Above all, more than 90% of Chinese students have an immigrant background from Mainland China. They prefer speaking Mandarin in everyday communication; therefore, they lack proficiency in Cantonese. The local Chinese students make up only 10% of the student body in the school.

Data collection
Interviewing is the standard data collection method in qualitative research across the field of inquiry (Creswell, 2013). Following the university’s Human Research Ethics guidelines, the researchers sought permission from the school authorities to request individual teachers to

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S1</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Pakistani</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S2</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Pakistani</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S3</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Nepali</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S4</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Filipino</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S5</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Filipino</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S6</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Indian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S7</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Nepali</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S8</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Pakistani</td>
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<tr>
<td>S9</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Indian</td>
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<tr>
<td>S10</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Indian</td>
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<tr>
<td>S11</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Filipino</td>
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<tr>
<td>S12</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Nepali</td>
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<tr>
<td>S13</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Pakistani</td>
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<tr>
<td>S14</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Indian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S15</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Pakistani</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1.
Student participants’ information

Source(s): Author’s own work

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participate in the study. Out of 12 teachers consulted for participation, ten agreed to share their views and comment on ethnic minority students’ sense of belonging to Hong Kong. However, interviews with eight teachers were conducted via the Zoom platform due to the pandemic. The two leading interview questions included what teachers think of their ethnic minority students’ intercultural learning and what factors affect their sense of belonging to the school. The average online interview duration was about one hour, and all the interviews were conducted in English. The Zoom platform offers audio and video recording functions, so all the interviews were audio-recorded.

**Data transcription**

Transcribing audio-recorded interviews is a common practice in qualitative studies. Data transcription is “the interface between oral and written data. It is also a juncture of the research process where the reliability and validity of the data may be questioned” (Sin, 2010, p. 314). All the interviews were transcribed verbatim to describe and understand the intended meaning of the participants’ expressions. Verbatim transcription helps researchers preserve the participants’ expression.

**Data analysis**

Thematic analysis is preferred in qualitative studies among various data analysis approaches. Although it is a widely used method, it lacks a consensus on how one goes about thematic analysis. Nevertheless, some scholars argue that thematic analysis is a research method and a methodology (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Therefore, the present study adopted a thematic analysis method to analyse the interviews. Table 3 summarises the thematic analysis phases Braun and Clarke (2006) enumerated. However, unlike traditional manual coding, Nvivo software was used to manage the data during the analysis process.

**Findings**

The thematic analysis of the students’ and teachers’ interview data resulted in the challenges and opportunities for developing a sense of belonging to school among ethnic minority students in Hong Kong schools. The findings of the study are elaborated in the two sections below.

**Challenges for developing a sense of belonging**

**Lack of inter-ethnic interaction and communication.** Although most secondary schools in Hong Kong welcome Chinese and non-Chinese students, they are streamed into different sections based on their proficiency in Chinese literacy. In addition, students are divided into

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Teaching subject</th>
<th>Teaching Non-Chinese (years)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>T1</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T2</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Liberal Studies</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T3</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Pakistani</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T4</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Liberal Studies</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T5</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T6</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Male</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Liberal Studies</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T8</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Pakistani</td>
<td>Liberal Studies</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T9</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Pakistani</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source(s): Author’s own work
sections according to their academic performance. Consequently, ethnic minority students have limited opportunities to interact and community with their Chinese peers. One of the student participants describes the inter-ethnic interaction and communication in the following lines.

In my school, most of the students are non-Chinese. Chinese students attend separate classes. There is a separate class for smart students and one for those who are not good. They are in the C class, and their teachers are stricter. There are 20 Chinese students in 3A, and I am in 3B. In my class, there are no Chinese. We are all non-Chinese students. The majority of the students in our class are Nepalese, Pakistani and Filipino. (S5)

Given that ethnic minority students seldom interact with their local peers, they could hardly develop friendships even beyond their school context. Teachers confirm how non-Chinese students spend their time even beyond their school premises. In a teacher’s words: “they only tend to hang out with other ethnic minority students. They do not interact that much with Chinese peers or Chinese counterpart” (T3).

Uneven curriculum standards and gaps in the Chinese language instruction. Most non-Chinese students are taught a simplified Chinese curriculum in Hong Kong schools. However, ethnic minority students and teachers are not happy with this arrangement. Because Chinese and non-Chinese students study Chinese with different standards, as one of the students said, “they are all studying the higher standard Chinese, and I cannot even understand what is on the book” (S2). Consequently, “the level of the majority of ethnic minority students’ proficiency is maybe equivalent to around the Primary 3 level for local Chinese students.” (T6). This not only affects their motivation for learning Chinese but also hinders the development of their sense of belonging to the school and the larger society. One of the teachers commented on how the Chinese language curriculum and teaching practices in Hong Kong schools affect ethnic minority students’ emotional connectedness to their schools and the larger society.

To be honest, I feel the youth; nowadays, they do not have the sense of belonging to Hong Kong because, I mean just speaking from my experience teaching the ethnic minority youth, they really do not enjoy learning Chinese” (T9).

Lack of accommodation and acceptance of differences. While sharing their everyday school experiences, most students shared the challenges they often encounter in everyday life in

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phases</th>
<th>Description of the process</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Familiarising yourself with your data</td>
<td>Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Generating initial codes</td>
<td>Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Searching for themes</td>
<td>Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Reviewing themes</td>
<td>Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic &quot;map&quot; of the analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Defining and naming themes</td>
<td>Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Producing the report</td>
<td>The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source(s): Table courtesy of Braun and Clarke, 2006

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Table 3. Phases of thematic data analysis
Hong Kong. Indeed, some students recounted how the lack of positive attitudes among students and teachers towards non-Chinese motivated them to change schools. In explaining why some students had to change their schools, one of the participants said:

I changed that school because I did not have friends there. All the students were racists. They always used to do bad things in the class and make fun of each other but blame me for everything they did. The teacher would also take their side and thought of me as a troublemaker ... I thought it was better to change the school. When my mother asked for school change, the teachers were very happy (S6).

To further explore if a lack of respect for diversity in schools is a real challenge for ethnic minority students, some teachers were asked a similar question. Although all the Chinese teachers made positive and welcoming remarks, some non-Chinese teachers seconded the experiences of the student participants. A non-Chinese teacher born and brought up in Hong Kong responded in the following lines.

Speaking from my own experience, I speak Cantonese, and I read and write basic because I learned in primary school. I wouldn't say I am a 100%, or I have a very strong sense of belonging to Hong Kong, but I do have a sense of belonging. It might not be completed. Because I still experience prejudice and discrimination in Hong Kong. So, I wouldn't say I ... I cannot comfortably say that I am accepted in Hong Kong (T9).

The above remarks from a student and a teacher suggest a lack of positive attitude among the local population towards ethnic minorities, which may hinder the development of a stronger sense of belonging.

A lack of cultural responsiveness. Regarding the school’s structural arrangements, some students also complained about the lack of cultural sensitivity in school policies and practices in co-curricular activities and school facilities. A monocultural perspective often deprives ethnic minority students of participation in various schooling activities and facilities. A student participant shared how the school’s dress code for swimming sports hindered her participation.

There was a lot of stuff I couldn’t do like the Chinese could do. For example, they have swimming classes, and I was not allowed to wear full sleeves clothes. What the teachers say it wasn’t good. So, in the end, I just gave up swimming and just sitting there and looking at the students swimming there. And the teachers really put their perspective on my side ... Instead, one time, the teachers told me to change my school due to my religion, and I felt really bad afterward (S8).

Similarly, some students also recounted their experiences of challenges they often encounter due to their dietary obligations. Students need to go out of school during the lunch break most of the time. They usually skip lunch because they cannot get what they want in the school or its neighbourhood.

I used to go to McDonald’s before and buy a fish burger, but now I am not going there anymore. I didn’t know before that they are haram [forbidden]. We were told at the mosque that food at McDonald’s and KFC is haram (S4).

These accounts of the students and teachers indicate that ethnic minority students experience a lack of respect, acceptance and positive attitude, affecting their sense of belonging to the school.

Opportunities for developing a sense of belonging
Valuing and living with diversity. While various challenges due to the monocultural education perspective hinder the development of a stronger sense of belonging, the study participants cherish several positive aspects of their schooling experiences that are instrumental to their sense of belonging. Most student participants were happy to learn with students from diverse
backgrounds. They value their engagement with peers from different nationalities and highly appreciate the diversity in their classrooms.

In our school, there are students from India, Pakistan, Nepal, Thailand, Vietnam, and the Philippines. The majority of the students are from Thailand, Nepal, and the Philippines. ... We also know about different cultures and the culture of their country (S1).

Indeed, one of the participants finds himself in a better position than his relatives and cousins in his country of origin. He explains how his experiences of attending school in Hong Kong helped him develop a feeling of connectedness with Chinese peers.

... cuz they never have a chance to, not never but not really have a chance to interact with people from different nationalities. But here, like, you can see every nationality here ... Like when I was in the previous school, so everyone around whenever I see people its usually Chinese people. So I feel like I am one of them (S2).

Learning multiple languages. One of the advantages of living in Hong Kong for ethnic minority students is learning multiple languages. Besides their ethnic languages, all the students can speak English and Cantonese and their ability to speak numerous languages differentiate them from their local peers. All the student participants acknowledged the benefits of their proficiency in multiple languages. One of the students praised his spoken language abilities in the following lines.

There are Chinese; there are Filipino, Nepali, Pakistani, and Indian ... when I am talking to people from India or Pakistan, I use Urdu, but uh for other Nepali or Chinese, I usually use Cantonese cuz they also feel comfortable when the other person is also speaking Cantonese, so for Nepali or Filipino, I use English (S2).

Teachers also counted the advantages of speaking multiple languages among ethnic minority students, especially their ability to speak Cantonese. Learning Cantonese helps non-Chinese students develop intercultural awareness and facilitates the acquisition of multiple identities, leading to their sense of belonging to the local community.

Most definitely, language has such a strong relationship with identity ... I mean if you can speak the language, you're not only speaking the language, but you are also speaking the culture of a specific place. Because language entails culture as well, the way things are done, the way people think, the thought processes and everything. So, if you cannot speak the language, that is to say, you do not have that awareness of what are the ways the people think or are the ways their culture works, and then this leads to a lot of misunderstanding (T3).

Learning about heritage culture (enculturation). While some students were critical about the lack of opportunities to interact and communicate with local peers, others highlighted the benefits of co-ethnic socialisation. A student born and brought up in Hong Kong explained her co-ethnic socialisation in a non-Chinese concentrated school where she was able to learn about her religious identity.

Actually, I learned a lot of things like basic things—What is good, right, and wrong. So it’s—as a Muslim, this school actually helped me, and I actually can communicate how—explain why I am doing what I am doing to non-Chinese students. Like why I am wearing like scarf these things (S7).

A non-Chinese teacher of Pakistani origin recounts the importance of students' ability to speak their heritage language. She explains the importance of acquiring the knowledge and skills related to heritage and host cultures to develop a sense of belonging.

If I don't speak my heritage language, I won't feel connected to or being a Pakistani. Just like that, I feel like these students, if they don't speak Cantonese, they don't read and write Chinese, they will lack this type of sense of belonging (T9).
Learning about other cultures (acculturation). Although most students and teachers underscore the lack of interaction and communication between non-Chinese and Chinese students, they are happy to know and learn about different cultures and people, both Chinese and other ethnic minority cultures. One of the student participants recounts his views on how locals celebrate various Chinese festivities.

I really like the Mid-Autumn festival, when most of the Chinese people are dressed in red clothes, and they are giving red packets which include the money they are giving to people... I think it's a good thing to show good gesture to your relatives and show that you are—you love them, and that's why I think that's also really good... For Chinese New Year, I would go to watch fireworks with my father. Yah, my father enjoys it with me (S3).

Besides learning about the local people and mainstream cultural practices, students also praised their knowledge of different ethnic minority groups in Hong Kong and their beliefs and cultural practices. He explains how interacting with non-Chinese peers with diverse ethnic backgrounds helps him enhance intercultural learning.

They have a different religion, and we learn about it. We also talk about our religion. For example, they have also fasting in their religion, but it's optional for them. Whereas for us it's compulsory. We also talk about our culture a little bit. They know about our fasting. They do not disturb us during the month of fasting and do not play songs (S4).

These accounts underscore the importance of students’ diversity and its benefits for students from diverse ethnic backgrounds to acquire multiple language skills and learn about both their heritage culture and the other cultures in Hong Kong.

Discussion
The study’s findings underscore the challenges and opportunities of developing a sense of belonging among ethnic minority students in Hong Kong schools. These are related to how the overall education system responds to students’ diversity and diverse learning needs. The significant challenges within the educational context include the lack of interaction and communication between Chinese and non-Chinese students, dual Chinese language curriculum standards, lack of accommodation of differences, and respect for cultural diversity. Most challenges often stem from the overall educational system and the lack of sensitivity towards students’ unique learning needs (Westrick and Yuen, 2007) and translating sociocultural diversity into schooling policies and practices (Tsung and Gao, 2012). The monocultural and assimilationist education approach hardly helps integrate ethnic minority youth in Hong Kong (O’Connor, 2012; Tong and Goh, 2008).

The participants’ socialisation with co-ethnic or non-Chinese peers underscores the limited opportunities for intercultural communication with ethnic Chinese peers and friends in everyday life (Cheung et al., 2015; Shum et al., 2011; Tsung and Gao, 2012). Although ethnic minority students’ concentration due to streaming based on Chinese language proficiency may enhance their satisfaction (Yuen and Lee, 2016), it hinders the process of their acculturation into the mainstream culture (Author, Year 1). Neither is it helpful for better sociocultural adaptation outcomes such as intercultural communication with Chinese peers and proficiency in the Chinese language (Gu and Cheung, 2016) nor does it help develop bicultural identity (Fang and Chun, 2018). The participants’ intercultural contact and friendship networks with non-Chinese suggest acculturation to non-Chinese cultures rather than mainstream society (Cheung et al., 2015). This may result in stereotypes about each other, potentially leading to perceived discrimination (Haugen and Kunst, 2017). Recognising and supporting students’ diversity and creating multicultural and inclusive schooling
conditions can facilitate inter-ethnic communication, intercultural learning, enculturation, and acculturation to develop a sense of belonging among ethnic minority students in Hong Kong secondary schools.

Since the curriculum has been developed with a lack of sensitivity to second or third-language learners, non-Chinese speaking (NCS) students find it challenging to manage multiple languages and devote sufficient time and energy to learning Chinese compared to local peers. Thus, the curriculum gaps show a deep-rooted “first language mindset” among teachers, administrators, and curriculum developers (Oxfam Hong Kong et al., 2020, p. 9) suggesting that recognising the diverse educational needs and making the school environment inclusive and responsive is inevitable for helping ethnic minority young people adapt to the education system and develop a sense of belonging.

Since the educational context is critical to intercultural contact and learning (Andriessen and Phalet, 2002), supporting students’ diversity and providing a multicultural learning environment for ethnic minority students is essential for their acculturation. However, the limited interaction with Chinese peers, lack of sensitivity to diversity, diverse learning needs and culturally responsive schooling suggest that:

Acculturation of minority youth in the school context is not sufficiently addressed through a bidimensional understanding of youths’ cultural transition along the dimensions of ethnic cultural maintenance and adaptation to the majority culture, which is predominant in the quantitative research on acculturation (Makarova and Birman, 2016, p. 12).

Scholars in other contexts have already emphasised language teaching strategies and teachers’ competencies for catering to ethnically and linguistically diverse classroom needs (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Makarova and Birman, 2016). Since the existing Chinese language teaching framework does not cater to diverse learning needs (Oxfam Hong Kong et al., 2020), there is a need to develop a separate Chinese language curriculum for second or third-language learners. It is also critical to have maximum sensitivity and consideration on the part of teachers in supporting ethnic minorities in learning Chinese. A single language-teaching curriculum may hardly help ethnic minority students master the language and compete with their Chinese counterparts. The study findings underscore the lack of policy and practice arrangements necessary for developing a stronger sense of belonging among ethnic minority students.

Studies have already highlighted Cantonese as a fundamental problem of adaptation for immigrant youth, including postgraduate students from Mainland China (Tsung and Gao, 2012; Vyas and Yu, 2018; Ullah, 2012). However, the present study found the Chinese language one of the several other factors responsible for the participants’ sense of belonging. The challenges of Chinese language literacy among the participants indicate the gaps in the existing language policy and Chinese language learning framework. The teachers’ frustration with the parental style and value of education (Oxfam Hong Kong et al., 2020) and low parental involvement (Chee and Ullah, 2019) among ethnic minorities suggest a lack of intercultural understanding and accommodation. Without preparing schools and teachers to manage diversity through “culturally responsive teaching” (Gay, 2018) and “culturally sustaining pedagogies” (Paris and Alim, 2017), it is challenging to develop a strong sense of belonging. The study findings highlight several aspects of educational policy, practice, and culture, which are the prime foci of WSA to inclusive education in Hong Kong. Given that inclusive education aims to create a conducive learning environment and conditions where every student feels a sense of belonging to the school or the classroom, WSA to integrated and inclusive education can be a promising approach to supporting ethnic minority students with diverse cultural backgrounds in Hong Kong mainstream schools.
Driving Hong Kong’s WSA forward

The research evidence and schooling practices across the education systems highlight the importance of collegial, collective, and collaborative efforts from teachers, parents, other school staff, and the community to improve the overall quality of education. Such an approach to inclusive education conceptualises schooling as an integrated social unit of students, teachers, parents, service professionals, and the community where everyone’s learning and well-being are valued. Although there is a lack of multicultural education policy in Hong Kong, there are policies for educational support provisions for diverse students that can help improve the sense of belonging among ethnic minority youth. One such educational intervention is the WSA to integrated education or inclusive education. WSA aims to make necessary changes and adjustments in the pedagogy, school culture, and structure to serve diverse students better and build inclusive education for all.

Originally conceptualised as a way to negotiate with a school’s physical and psychological boundaries and achieve beyond the mere pursuit of remedial guidance service delivery, WSA epitomises a system perspective that combines academic matters with proactive support and guidance services within schools (Hui and Lo, 1997). It seeks to set up a system that facilitates expertise sharing, participatory decision-making, and the provision of in-class teaching support (Dyson and Millward, 1997). More importantly, WSA calls for the willingness of all school personnel to accept students from diverse backgrounds and demands a shared responsibility of other stakeholders, including parents and community members. It combines the entire school community into a single whole, making it an educational change agent. The underlying meaning of such a collaborative nexus entails thinking about schools as a multilayer and interactive system and a process for change involving the entire school and all community members.

The evidence suggests that interventions based on WSA can positively impact students’ emotional and social well-being. Both local and international studies advocate WSA for addressing students’ psychological and behavioural challenges (such as bullying and counselling problems) as well as for building a cohesive and connected schooling environment (Goldberg et al., 2019; Hui, 2000, 2002; Lam and Hui, 2010; Rowe et al., 2007; Wong et al., 2011). Given its focus on multiple components, interventions based on WSA can result in better outcomes than classroom-based interventions.

Positioned as an intermediary between China and the wider world, Hong Kong introduced WSA in 1997 (Hui and Lo, 1997). It is a contextualised and systematic approach developed by the Hong Kong Education Bureau (EDB) to address SEN. It entails three interconnected aspects of a school: school policies, culture and practices. This is further elaborated concerning whole-school consensus, curriculum approach, differentiated teaching, peer support, teacher collaboration, classroom support and assessment accommodation (EDB, 2014). Accordingly, support is offered in three tiers:

Tier-1: Early identification and catering for all students with diverse learning and adjustment needs.

Tier-2: Additional support/“add-on” intervention for students with persistent learning or adjustment difficulties.

Tier-3: Individualised intensive support for students with persistent and severe learning or adjustment difficulties.

However, despite a promising and practical approach to quality education for all, Hong Kong’s WSA has systemic challenges. It appears to be an overarching framework open to interpretation and implementation by individual schools. To incorporate SEN students into
regular schools, WSA seems to focus on SEN students and their families’ needs and neglects the voices of other students and their families.

Likewise, school leadership might also be trapped in a dilemma where, on the one hand, they are obliged to devote resources for whole-school development initiatives; on the other hand, they are accountable to the families of other students. This dilemma is particularly significant, considering the global and local outcome-oriented education ranking regime that applies to various levels from school to country. The provision of counselling support and intercultural pedagogy also remains a continued concern. Teachers’ attitudes towards inclusion closely relate to their familiarity with educating learners from diverse backgrounds (Ford et al., 2014). There has been rising concern that teachers lack the time and relevant skills to assist students with counselling needs (Chao et al., 2016; Lam and Hui, 2010).

Although the evidence on WSA to building inclusive schools and classrooms is promising, much more must be done to ensure inclusive policies, culture and practices for equitable education for all. Promoting diversity is the precondition for making WSA effective and successful. An integrative approach towards conceptualising inclusion is integral to inclusive educational policymaking. Schools cannot ensure an inclusive culture without the support and services of teachers, parents and community institutions representing diverse social and ethnic groups. Above all, WSA to inclusion for all can only be meaningful if schools have capable, motivated and professionally trained teachers and staff.

Conclusion
Unlike the status of education during the colonial period, the educational predicament of young people from an ethnic minority or non-Chinese speaking background attracted much of the attention of government and scholars after the handover in 1997. Although the government introduced several policies and funding interventions to support NCS students, mainstream schools often struggle to create culturally responsive educational practices. Without an integrated and multidimensional approach to education for ethnic minorities, providing financial resources to schools may not facilitate the development of a sense of belonging.

Although various policy and funding interventions aim and claim to support diverse students, a sole focus on students’ learning needs stemming from their physical, emotional, behavioural or intellectual difficulties may not guarantee quality education for all. There is a need to reconceptualise inclusive education beyond a medical perspective. Moreover, despite the Western culture’s educational and cultural legacies from colonial time, the Confucian philosophy of social justice focussing merely on equal treatment has also hindered inclusive education in Hong Kong. Creating culturally responsive environments (Hue and Kennedy, 2014) through an integrated approach to conceptualising inclusive education and inclusive efforts by education stakeholders can only ensure inclusive education for all in Hong Kong.

Given that the aims of multicultural education and inclusive education resonate with each other, schools can focus on the educational policy of WSA for developing a sense of belonging among ethnic minority youth in Hong Kong. However, the existing state of the art in inclusive education demands a multifaceted perspective sensitive to all aspects of students’ diversity. An integrative approach to inclusive education that strives to ensure the right of access to quality education for all can be promising. Although the evidence on WSA for building inclusive schools and classrooms is encouraging, much more must be done to ensure inclusive policies, culture and practices for equitable education for all. Promoting diversity is the precondition for making WSA effective and successful. An integrative approach towards conceptualising inclusion is inevitable in inclusive educational policymaking. Above all, WSA to inclusion for all can only be meaningful if
schools have capable, motivated and professionally trained teachers. Preparing teachers to serve students with diverse learning needs can help schools implement WSA for inclusion. The WSA to inclusive and integrated education can partly fill the multicultural education gap in Hong Kong mainstream schools.

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**About the authors**

Professor Ming Tak Hue is currently the Professor at the Department of Special Education and Counselling and Director of Integrated Centre for Well-being. He obtained his Ph.D. degree at the Institute of Education, the University of London, England. He has extensive teaching experience in secondary schools, with active involvement in school counselling and discipline and supporting both primary and secondary schools at the various levels of student support, consultancy and teacher professional development. He teaches graduate courses in school guidance and counselling, classroom management, behaviour management and inclusive education. He is interested in cultural influence on school counselling, cultural responsiveness, multicultural education, multicultural competency, classroom management and mindfulness.

Dr Shahid Karim is Postdoctoral fellow at the Education University of Hong Kong (EdUHK). Before his Ph.D., he served at the Aga Khan University Institute for Education Development (AKU-IED) Karachi as Research Associate and Project Manager at the Charter Compassion, Karachi, Pakistan. Dr Karim has several years of working experience in education as a teacher, trainer, researcher, school administrator and manager. He has studied at the Aga Khan University Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations, London, UK, and Karachi University, Pakistan, for his postgraduate courses MA in Muslim Cultures and Master of Administrative Sciences, respectively. His research interests include acculturation, intercultural education and inclusive education. Shahid Karim is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: shahid@eduhk.hk

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