

## INSIGHT

## Going off course

Angel Lin and Miguel Perez-Milans

say the policy to allow more English teaching in schools will go nowhere unless they are freed from funding pressure to focus on quality teaching – in whichever medium

The latest Secondary One place allocation results showed that 72 per cent of participating pupils were admitted to a school from their top three choices, while some parents and students were seen to “knock on the door” of some secondary schools to beg for a discretionary place. Many of the schools in demand were those that offer classes taught in English. Why is it so? What are these parents and students looking for? What is at stake, and for whom?

Language-in-education policies have been traversed by diverse and often conflicting interests across different contexts in the world. In the case of Hong Kong, public opinion cannot be detached from the historical link of English and the former colonial order in which English speakers occupied the highest social positions within a stratified social structure. However, persistent parental demand for English-medium education is also deeply tied to current trends in economic globalisation that go beyond the local confines of the old colony/metropolis dichotomy in Hong Kong.

The use of English in global markets and networks is reinforcing its value as the language of the wider world. Indeed, English is often seen as a commodified set of skills for successful participation in the international market. Increasingly, Asian and European societies are focusing on English-oriented language education policies to increase the competitiveness of their respective economies.

Under these circumstances, the post-1997 Hong Kong government’s efforts in publicising the educational benefits of mother-tongue education have not been very successful and society in general still attaches far greater value to English-medium education.

The fine-tuning of the medium-of-instruction policy introduced in 2010 represented the government’s response to strong societal pressure to blur the boundary between Chinese- and English-medium schools to mitigate the labelling effect. Now, all secondary schools can opt to teach in English for up to 25 per cent of the curriculum time, or up to two subjects in the junior secondary curriculum (Schools have always been allowed to choose their medium of instruction for senior secondary levels in view of the need to prepare for English-medium university studies).

However, this well-intentioned policy might have given rise to unintended dilemmas in schools that try to implement it.

While public discourse stresses more than ever the importance of quality education, the present trend to use market forces as a basis for funding has led to extensive monitoring, evaluation, standardisation and ranking of schools

and students. It has also forced schools to digress into marketing efforts.

Many former Chinese-medium schools are also hurrying to run “English-medium classes”, often without adequate planning or qualified staff to ensure quality, with the aim of attracting more students to avoid having to close down.

Many maths and science classes have switched to using English as a language of instruction in these schools. Such a choice is probably due to the impression that these subjects are less language-dependent and thus learning them in English would have less severe adverse effects on students’ academic outcomes, even if they have not mastered English sufficiently well to benefit from the English



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teaching. However, if teachers are not properly trained in helping students master the highly specialised registers of science and mathematics, using English as the medium of instruction can easily stifle students’ interest. In fact, explaining science and maths concepts in English is much more difficult than it might seem.

Other problems appear to be occurring in those schools implementing English-medium education for ethnic minority students. The setting up of an international division within a former Chinese-medium school, in which ethnic minority students learn through English – in some cases taught by ethnic minority teachers – is sometimes the result of a strategy to increase the intake of students by targeting the ethnic minority populations.

This seems to favour the access of ethnic minority students to tertiary education, since many feel more confident in English even though they had a Chinese-medium primary education and speak Chinese. In this ambivalent context, tensions can emerge in everyday school life, given the so-called “local” and “international” divisions.

Such tension often arises from a clash be-

tween the Hong Kong institutional culture of testing and the demands from international teachers who want a greater focus on critical thinking and creativity.

All this points to the need to counterbalance the exaggerated emphasis on testing and the institutional monitoring of schools. This would allow school participants to avoid the stress concerned with closing and to focus wholeheartedly on how to make quality implementation a reality.

If schools are forced to market themselves to the public according to the amount of English-medium instruction they offer, the space for tailoring their teaching to suit the needs of their students will be diminished. The invisible hand of the market seems to yield more damage than good in the basic education of our children.

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