

# Bilingualism and social integration in Hong Kong: The role of education policies in shaping national identity

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## ***Abstract***

This paper explores how language use in Hong Kong schools' shapes students' identity, sense of belonging, and social opportunities. It focuses on three main languages: English, Cantonese, and Mandarin. Each language represents a different part of students' identity. English is linked to global success, Cantonese to local culture, and Mandarin to national unity. Based on student surveys and existing research, the paper finds that English-medium education is seen as more valuable for careers, while Cantonese is losing space in schools even though it is important to local identity. Mandarin is being promoted by the government but is sometimes seen as forced. These language choices can lead to social divisions and identity confusion. The paper suggests that schools should treat all three languages with equal respect to support students' development, cultural pride, and a stronger sense of community.

***Keywords:*** language policy, cultural identity, bilingual/trilingual education, Hong Kong education, social integration

## **Bilingualism and social integration in Hong Kong: The role of education policies in shaping national identity**

### **1. Introduction: Context and Purpose**

**Historical Linguistic Landscape of Hong Kong** - Hong Kong's linguistic environment is deeply rooted in its colonial and post-colonial history. Under British colonial rule from 1842 to 1997, English was established as the official language of government, education, and business, while Cantonese remained the dominant spoken language among the local population (Evans, 2013). This dual-language system created a functional bilingualism, where English symbolized institutional power and socioeconomic mobility, and Cantonese embodied local identity and everyday communication. After the 1997 handover to China, the Hong Kong government adopted the “biliterate and trilingual” policy — promoting proficiency in written Chinese and English, and spoken Cantonese, Mandarin (Putonghua), and English. This policy reflected both a desire to integrate with Mainland China and to maintain global relevance (Poon, 2004). However, in practice, these policies have triggered debates over cultural identity and the sociopolitical implications of language use.

**Education System: Bilingualism vs. Trilingual Reality** - Hong Kong's education system has been a central arena for language policy implementation. While officially promoting trilingualism, schools vary significantly in their language of instruction (MOI). English-medium instruction (EMI) is perceived as prestigious and is associated with elite schools and better career opportunities (Tollefson & Tsui, 2004). Cantonese-medium instruction (CMI), although more culturally resonant, is often viewed as less competitive, while Mandarin is increasingly emphasized in line with national integration policies (Wang & Kirkpatrick, 2015). This discrepancy between policy and practice reflects the tension between the official narrative and lived linguistic experiences. In reality, students often navigate a trilingual environment that reinforces not only linguistic diversity but also social hierarchies and ideological divisions (Lin, 2006). As a result, schools have become both linguistic battlegrounds and identity-shaping institutions.

**Research Aim** - This paper seeks to explore the role of bilingual and trilingual education policies in shaping cultural identity, social inequality, and national belonging among students in Hong Kong. Specifically, it investigates how language of instruction in schools' influences identity formation along three intersecting axes: Local (Cantonese), National (Mandarin), and Global (English). By analyzing the educational system's role in identity construction, the study aims to illuminate how language is more than a medium of communication - it is a symbolic marker of power, ideology, and cultural affiliation. Through a multidisciplinary lens incorporating sociolinguistics, education policy, and identity theory, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of how language functions not only within classrooms, but also within broader societal and political contexts. Ultimately, the research underscores the need for more inclusive, culturally responsive education policies that reflect the multilingual and multicultural realities of Hong Kong's youth.

### **2. Language and Cultural Identity Formation**

In Hong Kong's multilingual and politically dynamic environment, language plays a critical role in shaping students' cultural identities. Educational policy, historical legacies, and sociopolitical events have all contributed to identity alignment along three dominant axes: Mainland (Mandarin), Local (Cantonese), and Global (English). Each language functions not only as a communicative tool but also as a potent symbol of ideological orientation, cultural belonging, and social mobility. Mandarin (Putonghua) represents alignment with a Mainland Chinese identity, symbolizing national integration and political loyalty. Despite its official promotion through post-1997 education reforms and the “biliterate and trilingual” policy, Mandarin is often met with local resistance due to its perceived imposition and limited cultural resonance (Sin & Roebuck, 1996). For students, identifying with Mandarin may suggest conformity to state ideologies, yet this often clashes with Hong Kong's local cultural

sensibilities, leading to identity dissonance.

Cantonese, by contrast, embodies Local identity grounded in cultural autonomy and community cohesion. It remains the dominant spoken language in daily life, popular media, and political activism—particularly during movements such as the Umbrella Movement (Bolton, 2000; Hansen Edwards, 2016). Students aligned with Cantonese often express strong local pride. However, their identities may be undermined in English-centric educational environments where Cantonese is institutionally marginalized, affecting self-esteem and classroom engagement (Bartolomé, 1994; Van Maele & Van Houtte, 2011). English aligns with a Global identity, representing aspirations for internationalism, elite education, and economic advancement. As the language of institutional prestige and postsecondary instruction, English continues to carry colonial-era associations with upward mobility (Wong, 1998; SCMP, 1997). Nevertheless, the privileging of native English-speaking teachers and curricula can marginalize non-native speakers, contributing to perceptions of linguistic and cultural inferiority (Jeon, 2012; Li, 2011).

In response to these identity tensions, Hong Kong English (HKE) and hybrid varieties such as “Kongish” have emerged as forms of local linguistic expression that blend global structures with local meaning (Sewell & Chan, 2017; Li et al., 2020). Among politically conscious youth, these forms are increasingly embraced as identity markers, reflecting a shift toward endonormative stabilization, in which localized varieties gain legitimacy (Schneider, 2007; Kwok & Baldwin, 2015). Pedagogical approaches such as translanguaging have shown promise in bridging identity divides. By allowing the fluid use of Cantonese, English, and Mandarin in the classroom, educators can validate students’ full linguistic repertoires, enhance trust, and promote more equitable learning environments (Baker, Grant, & Morlock, 2008; Mitchell, Kensler, & Tschannen-Moran, 2018; Espinet & Chapman-Santiago, 2022). These identity alignments were further intensified during the 2019 protests, which brought the symbolic dimensions of language into sharp focus: Cantonese became a marker of resistance, Mandarin a symbol of state authority, and English a pathway to international solidarity. As such, language choices among students are not merely practical decisions, but active negotiations of belonging, power, and aspiration. To foster inclusive national identity and social integration, education policy must go beyond rigid monolingual frameworks and affirm the multilingual, multicultural realities of Hong Kong’s youth (Cummins, 1992; To, 2024).

### 3. Social Stratification Through Language

Language in Hong Kong schools plays a powerful role in shaping social hierarchy, as demonstrated in our survey responses. While Hong Kong officially promotes bilingualism (Cantonese and English) and increasingly trilingualism (adding Mandarin), in practice, the language of instruction is a key factor in social stratification, reinforcing divides in status, identity, and future opportunity. English-medium instruction (EMI) is consistently viewed as more prestigious by students, with many equating it to higher quality education and better career prospects. One respondent from a Direct Subsidy Scheme (DSS) school stated, “*English-medium education has significantly higher prestige,*” while another wrote that EMI helped them “*feel confident*” and “*get better grades.*” Many participants reported a sense of empowerment from learning in English, associating it with academic excellence and global competitiveness: “*Most terms are easier to understand and memorize in English like biology terms, names of historical figures...*” Others emphasized its value for the future: “*English is useful for university and job opportunities.*”

By contrast, Cantonese-medium instruction (CMI), though culturally significant, is often perceived as “local” and less advantageous for upward mobility. Several students expressed concern that Mandarin and English were being emphasized at the expense of Cantonese. One student strongly opposed Mandarin replacing Cantonese in schools, writing, “*Cantonese is the heart and soul of Hong Kong. There is no need to push it out.*” Another feared that language reforms would mean “*in the future it may be hard to hear Cantonese spoken in Hong Kong.*” Socioeconomic background also emerged as a clear factor in access to different school types and languages of instruction. Many respondents agreed that there is a correlation between family income and school type, with wealthier families sending children to EMI or international schools. One commented: “*There is a strong*

*correlation between socioeconomic status and the type of school students attend.*” Students from EMI or international schools reported greater access to global curricula, foreign teachers, and study abroad opportunities, while students in CMI schools often felt confined to more local or regional opportunities.

This divide creates not only academic but identity-based stratification. Students from EMI or international schools reported a more global orientation: *“I feel like my school is preparing me to leave Hong Kong.”* In contrast, those in local CMI schools felt a stronger connection to Hong Kong culture but were less confident about their global competitiveness. Some students noted that while they felt connected to their local roots, they also noticed limited exposure to broader international experiences. These identity tensions reflect how language of instruction can subtly position students within different cultural or ideological spheres: local (Cantonese), national (Mandarin), or global (English). This aligns with Bourdieu’s (1991) theory of linguistic capital—where language ability is unequally distributed and tied to access and power. In Hong Kong, English is the most valued capital, enabling mobility, while Cantonese, although rich in cultural meaning, does not always translate to institutional power or opportunity. This was further reflected in student attitudes toward English: nearly all respondents agreed that proficiency in English is essential for academic and career success, regardless of their school background.

In conclusion, our findings show that language in education is not a neutral tool—it functions as a gatekeeper for social mobility. The prestige of English-medium education, the marginalization of Cantonese, and the growing emphasis on Mandarin all serve to reproduce social divisions. A more equitable approach would involve recognizing the cultural legitimacy of Cantonese while providing balanced access to English and Mandarin instruction, without linking any language to hierarchy or exclusion.

#### **4. Policy, Nationalism, and Language Mandates**

The “one country, two systems” framework was established to preserve Hong Kong’s autonomy following the 1997 handover. Its goal was to balance integration with mainland China while maintaining a degree of local independence. However, recent years have seen growing tensions as national identity and language policies increasingly reflect Beijing’s influence. In Hong Kong, language is more than a means of communication; it functions as a vital symbol of cultural identity and power. Cantonese, in particular, has long been a marker of local heritage, history, and community pride. Recent shifts in language policies, therefore, have sparked widespread public concern, with many viewing these changes as threats to their cultural identity and autonomy.

The Hong Kong government has actively promoted Mandarin (Putonghua) as the medium of instruction (MOI) in schools through a range of funding and policy incentives. Between 2008 and 2014, over HK\$14 million was allocated to support schools adopting Mandarin for Chinese language classes, encouraging both primary and secondary schools to transition away from Cantonese. By the 2015/16 school year, only 28.3% of primary schools and 63.1% of secondary schools used Cantonese exclusively for Chinese instruction; the remaining schools incorporated Mandarin either partially or fully. This gradual shift has led to the marginalization of Cantonese in formal education settings. The impact has been tangible: research indicates that while basic reading skills improved, high-level reading comprehension declined among students, suggesting that the emphasis on Mandarin may restrict deeper engagement with Chinese language and culture.

This is further supported by recent survey data collected from ten students educated in Hong Kong. Although most respondents attended schools with strong English-medium instruction for non-Chinese subjects (90% studied subjects like science and math in English), only half described their learning experience in Mandarin as favorable. One respondent noted that although Mandarin was not their first language, it was “helpful for our future education and career,” while others viewed it as disconnected from their cultural upbringing. The data highlights how students’ language experiences are shaped more by practical global considerations (e.g., English for future success) than by an internalized sense of national identity tied to Mandarin.

Public sentiment aligns with these concerns. Data shows that the proportion of Hong Kong residents proficient in Mandarin increased from 40.2% in 2006 to 54.2% in 2021, while Cantonese speakers decreased slightly from 96.5% to 93.7%. Many residents perceive that Cantonese is increasingly threatened as the city's main language. Advocacy groups promoting Cantonese cultural and linguistic preservation have faced significant repression, exemplified by the police raid on a Cantonese advocacy organization in 2023, which effectively silenced a vocal movement to defend local language rights. For many Hongkongers, Cantonese embodies their cultural roots and identity; thus, perceived marginalization of the language is seen as part of broader efforts to diminish their cultural distinctiveness.

The tension between national identity and local resistance plays a central role in this linguistic landscape. The state's nationalist agenda seeks to use language as a tool to cultivate a unified Chinese identity aligned with mainland China's political goals. Emphasizing patriotism, Chinese history, and loyalty to Beijing, the government has implemented curriculum reforms and revised textbooks to reflect a mainland-centric narrative. These reforms often downplay or omit references to Hong Kong's protest movements, democratic aspirations, and local history, further emphasizing loyalty to the central government. Survey data reflects this ambivalence: while students acknowledged exposure to China-related topics—such as Chinese History, General Studies on issues like the “sannong problem,” and mandatory flag-raising ceremonies—only a minority felt strongly connected to a “Mainland Chinese” identity. Instead, many viewed these lessons as formalities rather than internalized national values.

Conversely, local communities and youth see Cantonese as a crucial symbol of their heritage and pride. Grassroots campaigns, protests, and media efforts continuously strive to preserve Cantonese, framing it as an essential part of Hong Kong's unique identity. This cultural resistance is often viewed as a safeguard against the erasure of local history and autonomy. According to the survey responses, while a few students recalled school events like heritage tours, local food projects, or Liberal Studies classes that touched on Hong Kong-specific topics, many said their formal education offered little content on local customs or identity. Despite this, 60% of respondents still rated their connection to a “Hong Kong identity” as 4 out of 5 or higher—implying that a strong sense of local belonging may stem from informal, lived experiences outside the classroom rather than official curriculum.

Interestingly, a larger proportion of students reported feeling connected to a **global identity**, with 9 out of 10 respondents rating it 4 or 5 out of 5. English was seen as a natural and practical language for education, especially in STEM fields, and allowed students to connect with international media, ideas, and peers. For some, it even overshadowed local or national affiliations. One student noted: “My family gave me more support in learning English than in learning Chinese. Therefore, I'm more drawn to English.” Another remarked, “Never speaking Cantonese” contributed to feeling less embedded in local culture—hinting at the cultural fragmentation caused by these language hierarchies.

Curriculum reforms and political messaging have reinforced these ideological shifts. The introduction of national education programs emphasizes patriotism, Chinese history, and loyalty to Beijing, with textbook revisions designed to align with mainland perspectives. The content now often minimizes or excludes references to Hong Kong's protest history and democratic struggles, fostering feelings of alienation among students who fear political repercussions. In 2024, Hong Kong schools began implementing a new curriculum centered on Xi Jinping's thoughts—an ideological framework aimed at fostering national pride and loyalty. The curriculum includes lessons on China's political structure, the international role of China, and historical events such as the Opium Wars and Japanese invasion—all framed within a nationalist narrative. These educational reforms aim to reinforce a sense of unity but also deepen the divide with local narratives and cultural expressions.

In theoretical terms, Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* provides insight into how nations are socially constructed through common symbols and shared language, while Pierre Bourdieu's *Cultural Capital* emphasizes language as a form of power that influences social status and identity. These frameworks help

explain the significance of language in shaping notions of community and authority in Hong Kong. The surveyed student experiences offer empirical grounding for these theories—demonstrating how educational structures, rather than fostering unified identity, often spark competing attachments to local, national, and global imaginaries.

## 5. International vs. Local School Systems

The respondents of our survey came from a variety of school backgrounds in Hong Kong. Half of them attended local schools that mainly follow the HKDSE curriculum with Cantonese or blended MOI. Another 20% studied in international schools, 20% in Direct Subsidy Scheme (DSS) schools that typically mix EMI and CMI, while a minority (10%) experienced a hybrid schooling system across different stages. This range of school experiences offers diverse perspectives and helps us understand how identity is shaped differently depending on the school system. One of the most notable findings is the dominance of English as the main language of instruction. According to our survey, 90% of respondents studied non-Chinese subjects (e.g., science, math, history) in English, even in some DSS or local schools. This aligns with broader global trends, as English has become a global lingua franca (ELF). According to Crystal (2003), English is now used across almost all domains of life (education, business, culture, media, and personal communication). A report by the University of Winnipeg highlights that English is an official language in 55 countries (28.5% of the world), and recognized in regions such as Hong Kong, Curaçao, and San Andrés. This widespread use of English not only facilitates access to global knowledge but also pushes students toward a more international or cosmopolitan identity.

On the other hand, Cantonese, though spoken widely in daily life, is used as the main MOI by only 10% of respondents during high school. This significant contrast suggests a shift in educational practices. Despite this, Cantonese remains a strong cultural anchor in Hong Kong. Its presence in local media, law, government, and everyday interactions plays a crucial role in preserving local identity. As WordsPrime (2025) states, “Cantonese is the language of the heart in Hong Kong... a vehicle for cultural expression and resistance.” For many students, Cantonese represents a source of pride and cultural rootedness, even if they do not strongly identify with local nationalism. However, it is important to note that some local schools in Hong Kong have begun adopting Mandarin (Putonghua) as a medium of instruction, particularly in Chinese Language and moral/civic education subjects. This trend is often perceived by students as part of a broader push for integration with Mainland China. Several respondents expressed discomfort with this shift, viewing it as an imposition on local culture. Instead of adjusting Hong Kong’s school system to accommodate Mainland newcomers, some students believed the government should encourage these newcomers to learn Cantonese in order to integrate into Hong Kong society. This sentiment reflects a growing tension between national integration efforts and the desire to preserve local linguistic identity and autonomy.

Our findings also show that students in international schools are more likely to feel connected to a global identity. While these schools often integrate local elements through liberal studies, history lessons, or cultural tours, many students reported that these initiatives feel superficial or performative. One respondent shared, “It felt like my school was preparing me to leave Hong Kong rather than be a part of it. No one spoke Cantonese, and even if you could, your experiences and humor didn’t match.” English was promoted from an early age to avoid exclusion among non-Cantonese speakers, but this had the side effect of weakening connections to Hong Kong’s local culture and making it harder for students to feel truly at home. Furthermore, many students saw English primarily as a practical tool, useful for higher education and career opportunities, but not inherently tied to their personal identity. This instrumental view of English contrasts with the symbolic role Cantonese plays in affirming one's cultural belonging in Hong Kong. Several respondents described a sense of disconnect between their school environment and the broader Hong Kong society, which made social integration more difficult, even when they were fluent in Cantonese.

In summary, international schools tend to nurture a global outlook, but sometimes at the cost of local integration and cultural rootedness. Meanwhile, local and DSS schools, though increasingly adopting English

and Mandarin, still provide students with greater exposure to Hong Kong's sociolinguistic and cultural fabric, reinforcing a sense of local identity and pride. These differences highlight the profound influence of school environments on how students in Hong Kong develop their sense of self, community, and place in the world.

## 6. Schools as Identity Factories

Based on our survey of Hong Kong students who completed their primary and secondary education locally, it is evident that schools in Hong Kong play an important role not only as academic institutions but also as one of the powerful agents of socialization and identity construction. Through formal curriculum and everyday routines, schools influence how students connect to local, national, and global narratives. As Althusser (1971) suggests, schools operate as Ideological State Apparatuses, they transmit the state's preferred ideology through routine, normalized structures such as school-wide ceremonies, daily rituals, and classroom discourse. In our findings, multiple students reported that their schools hosted patriotic ceremonies, including flag-raising and anthem singing on events like National Day, Sports Day, or school openings. These moments were typically accompanied by speeches, sometimes delivered in Mandarin during weekly “周會” (zhou hui) assemblies, indicating the strategic use of language to promote a specific national identity. This aligns with Anderson's (1983) concept of imagined communities, where those rituals foster a shared symbolic affiliation with the nation-state.

However, several student responses also reveal that the reception of these efforts is not uniform. Some respondents described feeling emotionally detached, attending the ceremonies passively, suggesting that participation does not necessarily result in ideological alignment. This is supported by Bourdieu's (1991) theory of symbolic power, which posits that language in institutional settings reinforces cultural legitimacy only when internalized by its audience. The use of Mandarin in place of Cantonese in public spaces like assemblies and announcements is particularly significant, it subtly signals the privileging of Mainland norms, even within ostensibly local contexts. Moreover, some students noted that their school placed greater emphasis on international or global values, particularly in extracurricular settings or liberal studies, pointing to identity fragmentation rather than cohesion. Overall, our data suggests that while schools in Hong Kong attempt to shape students' national identity and belonging through rituals, symbols, and language, students may internalize, reinterpret, or even resist these messages, resulting in a complex and contested identity landscape.

## 7. Conclusion

This research paper has explored the multifaceted relationship between language, education, and cultural identity in Hong Kong, emphasizing the critical role of bilingualism and trilingualism in shaping students' self-perceptions and social dynamics. Historically, Hong Kong's linguistic landscape has been influenced by colonial legacies and recent political transformations, resulting in a complex educational framework that aligns students with various cultural narratives: Mainland (Mandarin), Local (Cantonese), and Global (English). The findings highlight the nuanced impact of the current education system on student identity. While many students appreciate the opportunities provided by English-medium instruction, they also express significant concerns about the marginalization of Cantonese and the imposition of Mandarin. This tension underscores broader societal divides, with students often feeling disconnected from their local identity amidst pressures to conform to national narratives. The emphasis on English as a prestigious language further complicates this landscape, contributing to feelings of alienation and identity fragmentation.

The analysis reveals that their education system exhibits a mixed effect on student identity. On one hand, it enables social mobility through English proficiency; on the other, it reinforces linguistic divisions that can undermine local cultural identity. Many students feel empowered by their English-medium education, associating it with better career prospects, yet they also recognize the risk of losing their connection to Cantonese. The increasing emphasis on Mandarin in educational settings is perceived by some as a threat to local culture, further complicating their sense of belonging. Therefore, while the education system aims to cultivate a cohesive identity among students, it often exacerbates divisions rooted in cultural identity and social stratification.

The survey responses indicate a strong desire for a more inclusive approach that respects and integrates the rich linguistic diversity of Hong Kong. To foster a genuine sense of belonging and community among all students, educational policies must move beyond rigid frameworks and affirm the multilingual, multicultural realities of Hong Kong's youth. Such an approach is essential for promoting social integration and a cohesive national identity in an increasingly complex socio-political landscape.

**Recommendations** - The educational landscape in Hong Kong currently emphasizes English and Mandarin, often at the expense of Cantonese (Chan, 2020). This framework has led to a perception that English-medium instruction (EMI) is associated with higher quality education, which may reinforce social hierarchies based on language (Chan, 2020). To address these disparities, several actionable recommendations can be made to create a more inclusive educational environment. First, educational policies should mandate the inclusion of Cantonese as a primary language of instruction alongside English and Mandarin. This approach would involve developing a curriculum that values all three languages equally, ensuring that students become proficient in their native language while also acquiring the competencies necessary for navigating both global and national contexts. By integrating Cantonese into the curriculum, schools can foster a stronger sense of local identity and belonging among students. This change could enhance overall engagement and performance, leading to a more cohesive educational environment that respects linguistic diversity (UNESCO, 2023).

Second, the curriculum should encourage critical discussions around national identity. The current emphasis on Mandarin as a means of promoting national identity has led to resistance among some local students who feel disconnected from these narratives. To rectify this, educational policies could incorporate critical discussions that allow students to express their perspectives on both local and global issues. Facilitating open dialogues about identity can empower students and foster a more nuanced understanding of their cultural and national affiliations (Vicari & Mackway-Jones, 2025). Furthermore, current policies often overlook the social and emotional dimensions of identity formation, which can lead to feelings of isolation among students. To address this issue, schools should implement initiatives that celebrate cultural diversity. Activities such as cultural days, language festivals, and collaborative projects integrating multiple languages and traditions can provide platforms for students to share their heritage. Such initiatives can foster inclusivity and strengthen community bonds, enhancing students' sense of belonging.

Additionally, extracurricular activities tend to prioritize English and international perspectives, which may create a disconnect for students who are more aligned with local culture. To mitigate this issue, schools should diversify their extracurricular offerings to include activities that celebrate local culture, such as Cantonese theater and traditional festivals. Engaging students in culturally relevant activities can enhance their connections to local identity while still providing opportunities for global engagement. Finally, the current findings provide a foundation for further research into inclusive educational practices that respect linguistic diversity and promote cultural identity. Future studies should explore the impact of integrating multiple languages on student engagement and identity formation using larger sample sizes. Moreover, research is needed to investigate the long-term effects of language instruction policies on students' sense of belonging and academic success. Implementing these recommendations can help Hong Kong's education system better address the complexities of identity formation. Policymakers should consider adopting an inclusive framework that embraces linguistic and cultural diversity, enhancing students' experiences and fostering integration. This approach ensures all students feel valued and empowered, promoting a sense of belonging and community in a complex socio-political landscape.

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