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What is This?

Stakeholder experiences of a dual-language international school

A qualitative case study of a private international school

in Hong Kong

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Dual-language education has many different meanings and there is much variation to be found among international schools. Is it possible to combine both concepts to the satisfaction of all stakeholders? This article reports the findings of a qualitative study at a dual-language international school that examines the views of the students, parents and teachers/leaders on the success of the school in achieving its multiple aims.

Introduction and context

Many English-language international schools around the world aim to produce 'internationally minded' students. However, a problem often arises as they also aim to incorporate the language and culture of the host country in the life of the school. Such dual aims are complex and this article explores the effectiveness of their implementation through a qualitative case study of a dual-language, private international school in Hong Kong. The article begins with a description of the research question, some background to the case school and a literature review of the meanings of 'dual-language' and 'international' education in the context of the case school. Data analysis follows explanations of the standpoint of the researcher, the selection of the participants and the methodology. The main findings and implications/strategic recommendations for the case school then precede a discussion of wider theoretical perspectives and suggestions for further research.

The case school is a thriving private international school in Hong Kong, called here the 'Mandarin International School', or MIS, although this is not its real name. The school has a primary section and a secondary

210

section; the latter is the focus of this study. The case secondary school aims to produce students who appreciate both Chinese and Anglo-Western cultural traditions, and to provide dual-language education in English and in Mandarin, the official language of China. However, Mandarin is a single compulsory subject, while English is the main language of teaching, learning, communication and self-expression. Socially, at school, the students speak mainly English and to a lesser extent Cantonese, the vernacular of Hong Kong, although it is not one of the two official school languages. Thus, English language and Anglo-Western culture appear to dominate the school, and it is therefore questionable whether the current English-Mandarin dual-language goals are achievable. Accordingly, the main research question upon which the study was based asked: 'What do the three main stakeholder groups (students, parents, and teachers/leaders) expect and experience from the dual-language approach and the international education ethos at the Mandarin International School in Hong Kong?'

The case secondary school caters for ages 11−18 and has a population of around 800 students, who are predominantly Hong Kong Chinese. All students follow an English medium curriculum, which comprises the International Baccalaureate Middle Years Programme (IBMYP) in Years 7−11 (ages 11−16) and the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IBDP) in Years 12−13 (ages 17−18). Cantonese use is strongly discouraged at the school, in order to encourage students to develop fluency in Mandarin and English, but students often revert to communicating in Cantonese when they are discussing issues among themselves or socializing. Street-level opportunities for students to practise Mandarin and English in Hong Kong are both very limited, particularly in the case of Mandarin.

The MIS parents recognize that now more than ever, the ability to do business in English and Mandarin is vital for Hong Kong's entrepreneurs (Davison and Lai, 2007). However, English proficiency is more easily attainable for MIS students than Mandarin proficiency, since they have easy access to English-language television and cinema and many take frequent holidays to English-speaking western countries. The school leaders and teachers have mainly western cultural backgrounds and are from Australia, Britain, Canada, New Zealand and the USA; some have Chinese cultural backgrounds, coming from China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and other countries. As Cambridge (1998) points out, such a rich cultural mix of teachers promotes intercultural understanding among both the staff and students. However, apart from teachers of Mandarin, others are not required to have any Mandarin language skills, so these staff cannot fully promote the dual-language goals.

Dual-language international education: the context of the case secondary school

While English retains its high status in the 'post colonial reality of Hong Kong' (Davison and Lai, 2007: 131), native English-speaking residents make up less than five percent of the population. The lingua franca is Cantonese with English the language of commerce and finance, and it is becoming increasingly advantageous for schoolchildren to learn Mandarin (also called Putonghua) as the socio-economic links between Hong Kong and China develop (Davison, and Lai, 2007; Lai and Byram, 2003; Li and Lee, 2004; Wright, 1996). Davison and Lai (2007: 131), referring to mainland China as the 'giant' next door, suggest that the Hong Kong government is aiming for 'a kind of Cantonese-speaking, English and Putonghua-using Hong Konger, identified with, but separate from, the "awakening giant"'. This is an interesting depiction perhaps of the 'Hong Kong government's goals in its language-in-education policy: biliteracy (written Chinese and English) and trilingualism (Cantonese, English and Putonghua)' (Li and Lee, 2004: 756).

Genesee et al. (2004) describe children in dual-language settings as being able to be placed on a language continuum. In this respect students at MIS may range from being bilingual in English and Mandarin through to being learners of both English and Mandarin. Students may enter the secondary school at any year level without any Mandarin at all and take a beginners class, but proficiency in English is a requirement for admission.

Educationalists and the public at large recognize that bilingualism is a very desirable quality and in a view supported by Fantini (1991) and Li (1996), Aronin and Ó Laoire (2004: 11) contend that linguistic ability is a highly significant personal characteristic, suggesting that 'language constitutes one of the most defining attributes of the individual'. Educational research appears to support the view that bilingual adolescents have a cognitive advantage over their monolingual peers (Kusuma-Powell, 2004; Lindholm-Leary, 2001; Shin, 2005) and, interestingly, according to Haywood (2007: 123) 'Bilingualism … is increasingly one of the defining characteristics of the international school'. However, Shin (2005) and Coulmas (2005) contend that bilinguals are rarely equally fluent in both languages and this emphasizes the reality that native-speaker competence is not the expectation for all students in a dual-language setting, such as at MIS.

The pragmatic MIS parents are of course fully aware of the growing importance of Mandarin and of the realization in the business world that 'an understanding of other languages and cultures is an invaluable lubricant in transactions and negotiations' (Edwards, 2004: 86). Indeed, the

212

significance of language and culture are recognized in the descriptors 'intercultural understanding' (Hill, 2006: 14) and 'international mindedness' (Bartlett and Tangye, 2007: 5) used by the International Baccalaureate (IB) and the Council of International Schools (CIS) as valuable attributes of students in those schools either offering IB programmes or being accredited by CIS, one of the main accrediting agencies for international schools worldwide (CIS, 2009). 'Intercultural understanding' includes as features 'exposure to cultural diversity within/outside the school, teachers as role models of international mindedness and a ... curriculum with an international perspective' (Hill, 2006: 14). The term 'international mindedness', meanwhile, suggests that an internationally minded student 'appreciates diversity ... communicates well in several languages, has a sense of personal responsibility to a wider community' (Bartlett and Tangye, 2007: 5).

The high cultural homogeneity (Hong Kong Chinese) of students in the MIS secondary school student population means that Hill (2006) would be likely to describe them as national students who attend an international school. The study on which this article is based aimed to reveal the reasons for such students attending the school, and to identify the facets of international education (Codrington, 2004; Hayden, 2007; Hayden et al., 2000; Lam and Selmer, 2004; Roberts, 2003) perceived by the three stakeholder groups at the case school. The literature reveals that there has been very little qualitative research conducted into the international schools sector in Hong Kong (Yamato, 2003), and parental perceptions in research concerning international schools and international education are largely missing (MacKenzie et al., 2003). Knowing the importance of education to the parents of MIS students, the researcher considered it vital to listen to their voices in this research project as, having worked at the case school for a decade, he had a genuine academic and intellectual desire to understand the complex situation involving the languages and cultures of the school and the local society. There appeared to be a dissonance between the rhetoric of the school about its dual-language goals and the perceptions of students, teachers and parents, which was both puzzling and intriguing, and served to stimulate this research study.

Participants

Data were collected through individual interviews with eight members of each of the three stakeholder groups. The aim of the purposeful maximum variation sampling strategy adopted, together with snowball sampling (Gall et al., 1996; Marshall and Rossman, 1999; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Punch, 1998), was to maximize the diversity of potential perceptions.

213

Eight participants were selected from each group as a balance between practicality, feasibility and the requirement for sampling the full range of views. Thus, from each stakeholder group, participants were selected who had been members of the school community for different numbers of years and who represented the range of ethnicities within the group.

In the student population selected for study, a year group numbering approximately 100, one or usually both parents were Chinese and only a very small number had two non-Chinese parents. This year group was selected as the researcher was head of year and had good access to them; the parents of this cohort formed the parent population for study. Teachers and leaders, representing a range of departments and years of service at the school, formed the teacher/leader group. Interviews were voice recorded, with the permission of participants. Following complete transcription, the researcher emailed the transcript of the interview to the participant in question to gain 'respondent validation' (Pidgeon, 1996: 84). See Table 1 for a summary description of the participants and note that, in order to protect anonymity, ethnicity details are not included.

Research design and method of analysis

This ethnographic study (McMillan, 2002), which was 'concerned with the cultural context' (Merriam, 1988: 23), employed a qualitative research approach within the interpretive paradigm (Coleman and Lumby, 1999), using inductive methods to analyse data collected through semi-structured interviews conducted with eight members of each stakeholder group. The interpretive approach epistemologically views the social world as 'based on experience and insight' (Cohen and Manion, 1989: 7) while,

Table 1 **Summary description of study participants**

	Parents		Students		Teachers/leaders	
Number	Gender	Years having had children at MIS	Gender	Years at MIS	Gender	Years of service at MIS
1	F	6	M	4	F	5
2	F	2	M	11	M	11
3	F	6	F	8	F	7
4	F	14	F	2	M	4
5	F	17	F	4	M	5
6	M	12	M	4	M	3
7	M	11	F	2	M	8
8	M	12	F	10	F	10

214

ontologically, the social reality is a product of the subjective experience of the individual.

The interviews were all conducted in English, the native language of the researcher, who does not speak either Mandarin or Cantonese but was confident that participants were able to express their views in English, and considered that the involvement of a translator would have had a detrimental effect on the dynamics of the interview process. The interviews with all participants followed the same semi-structured format, with six specific research questions literally guiding the conversation with probes and prompts used as necessary. The specific research questions were either derived from the school's objectives (numbers 1, 3, 4 and 5: see below) or designed by the researcher (numbers 2 and 6), and clustered into two groups as follows:

Dual-language approach

(1) How does the school help develop dual-language proficiency in English and Mandarin, and to what extent does the school ensure that competency in these languages includes fluency in use and their employment as the working languages within the school? Does it manage to achieve a successful balance between the two?

(2) How does Cantonese, the lingua franca of Hong Kong, affect the acquisition of English and Mandarin dual-language proficiency? What effect does Cantonese have on the other two languages and cultures?

International education ethos

(3) How successfully does the school develop in students an awareness and appreciation of Chinese artistic, literary, and cultural traditions along with those of the rest of the world, in particular, the Anglo-Western?

(4) With what success does the school prepare students to deal proactively with the challenges that face them both at MIS and in later life, perhaps in international settings?

(5) Does the school successfully develop in students a strong sense of multi-cultural values, especially emphasizing the need for altruism in a global community where people of different cultures, traditions and backgrounds regularly interact?

(6) What does the concept of 'international school/education' mean? Does the school provide this? How important is the International

215

Baccalaureate curriculum 'through-train' (Middle Years Programme into Diploma Programme) in years 7–13 in enhancing 'internationalism' in the secondary school?

The technique of analytic induction (Punch, 1998; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Marshall and Rossman, 1999) provided for the extrapolation of meaning from the complex web of concepts and categories that emerged from the data. Analytic induction is a process where 'concepts are developed inductively from the data and raised to a higher level of abstraction and their interrelationships are then traced out' (Punch, 1998: 201). The first step involved the systematic application of a set of labels to portions of the interview text to create 'bags of indexed data' (Mason, 2002: 157). The labels emerged from the data and the process of interviewing, transcribing, labelling, and collecting 'like data' took place simultaneously for all stakeholder groups until all of the data had been categorized and tabulated. The next step was to organize all of the data tables according to each specific research question, to keep the data analysis sharply focused on the questions. From the assembled data tables, notable areas of convergence between the stakeholder groups emerged. The process of labelling and tabulation of 'data-bits', and the subsequent organization, ensured the 'grounding' of the eventual findings in the original data, while the analytic process neatly linked the conclusions back to the epistemological and ontological considerations.

Findings and implications

Table 2 shows the notable areas of convergence, a term used to indicate similar comments made by four or more out of the eight participants, within and between the stakeholder groups, and gives the numbers of participants who made such comments in each case. Abbreviations used are P (parent), S (student) and T/L (teachers/senior leaders).

The following main findings and implications arise from the data relating to the two aspects of the main research question, namely the dual-language approach and the international education ethos.

Dual-language approach

The gap perceived by all stakeholder groups between the dual-language aims and the reality, in that the school was actually an English medium secondary school with compulsory Mandarin as a subject for study, indicates dissonance between rhetoric and reality. The parents and teachers/leaders agreed that the English and Mandarin dual-language commitment enriched the school

216

Table 2 **Notable areas of convergence**

Notable areas of convergence between all three groups	P	S	T/L
The case secondary school was an English medium school with compulsory Mandarin and not a dual-language school in a generally understood sense	4	5	6
A Cantonese family background had a negative impact on English and Mandarin language learning	4	5	5
Cultural diversity of the teacher population was an important criterion for defining the school as international	4	5	5
There was insufficient celebration/incorporation of Chinese culture	5	5	6

Notable areas of convergence between two stakeholder groups	P	S	T/L
The dual-language commitment enriched the school and was, for the parents, important in their choice of school	6		5
A heterogeneous, culturally diverse student population was a typical characteristic of an international school but MIS did not meet the criterion, having a largely homogeneous (Hong Kong Chinese) student population		5	6
The school culture was oriented towards Anglo-Western culture	4	5	
Project Week service activities were important in engendering effective intercultural understanding		5	4
The IB 'brand' was seen as indicative of a high educational standard	4		4

Notable areas of convergence within one stakeholder group	P	S	T/L
That Mandarin was not a lingua franca of the secondary school was a cause for disappointment	4		
The English medium of instruction was an essential benefit of the programme that allowed students access to university education in English-speaking countries			4
The status of Cantonese was not transparent since, although not officially allowed, it was widely spoken by the students. The concern was that the fundamental link between Cantonese and the local Hong Kong culture is too important in the lives of the students for the school to ignore			5

while, for the parents, it was an important factor in their choice of school. Parents were disappointed that the students did not usually speak Mandarin socially at school, and all stakeholder groups strongly agreed that Chinese culture was under-represented in the Anglo-Western culture-dominated school. However, the teachers/leaders recognized that the English medium curriculum was essential in enabling access to top universities in the English-speaking world, which is the goal of almost all students at the school.

All groups agreed that when Cantonese dominates the home lives of students, this negatively affects the success of the school in achieving its dual-language goals. However, the teachers/leaders were unclear about the status

of Cantonese at school and agreed that, by not including Cantonese and its associated culture, the school is missing the opportunity to explore a rich cultural heritage (Simandiraki, 2006) and perhaps implies to the students that the host language and culture is somehow inferior. Thus, the emphasis on English and Anglo-Western culture with the 'reduction of the power' (Shin, 2005) of the host language and culture could contribute to a loss of Hong Kong students' cultural identity, and be seen as a form of 'cultural imperialism'.

International education

The exposure to diverse cultures was perceived as a core requirement for students to develop 'international-mindedness'. All stakeholder groups strongly agreed that cultural diversity of the teacher population in a school is necessary for the students to gain a 'world view' and develop intercultural understanding. This concurs with the view of Codrington (2004: 181) that the teachers 'define the identity of an international school' and 'implement the long term vision'. Opportunities for intercultural experiences through overseas service learning projects and exposure to cultural diversity outside the school were also believed to be important factors. Indeed, Arenas et al. (2006: 38) contend that 'service may be one of the mechanisms by which a healthy sense of 'meaning' can be developed as an adult, along with a sense of compassion'.

Students and teachers/leaders agreed that a heterogeneous, culturally diverse student population was a typical characteristic of international schools but was not a feature of the case school. Interestingly, parents were not concerned about this factor but were of the opinion that, when compared to local schools, the student population was indeed diverse. The parents' measure of cultural diversity focused on the teacher population – this is perhaps what they were paying for. Parents and teachers/leaders identified the IB 'brand' as representing a world-renowned high educational standard. However, they felt that the meaning of the 'international' part of the name was not clear.

Conclusion and recommendations

The findings of this study suggest that Mandarin cannot reach an equal status with English under the present circumstances because English dominates the curriculum, and the fact that most students aspire to enter English medium universities also highlights the importance of the language. Further, English is the main social language of students at school and opportunities for students to practise Mandarin in Hong Kong are limited, compared to English. Also, if the host language of Hong Kong, Cantonese, is a student's

218

home language this negatively affects the development of both English and Mandarin. Hence, the study suggests that English and Anglo-Western culture will continue to dominate the dual-language, dual-culture balance at the case secondary school.

To meet the dual-language goals more effectively, the secondary school could choose to operate a true '50:50' English/Mandarin stream in Years 7–11. All curriculum subjects would be available in both languages and the students would take half of their courses in each language. Students in this 'dual-language stream' would not speak Cantonese at school but would practise Mandarin, and be exposed to art, music and culture at home, through the medium of Mandarin, requiring a commitment from parents to work with the school to realize the dual-language goals.

The school could also continue to operate the current model as the 'English stream' in Years 7–11, with English as the medium of instruction for the whole curriculum, apart from Mandarin class, which would have the same time allocation as any other subject. These students would not necessarily speak Mandarin at home and could speak some Cantonese casually at school. The students in both streams would learn about local Hong Kong culture. The school could operate two Years 7–11 streams on the present campus or it could open another campus for one of the streams, with the other staying on the present campus. The two streams could either merge in Year 12 to form one International Baccalaureate Diploma cohort on one campus, since all would study the IBDP through the medium of English (the IBDP is currently only available in English, French and Spanish), or each campus could run the IBDP. The latter alternative would allow for the expansion of student numbers on both campuses and the two streams could complement each other through working together towards furthering intercultural understanding.

Dissonance between the rhetoric of a school and the reality experienced by its stakeholders might indicate underlying tensions that may eventually emerge to question the *raison d'être* of the school, which must be aware of changes in its environment and be prepared to respond proactively if it perceives threats to its position. Sharing of the institutional vision by existing and new staff is crucial for any school as Deveney (2007: 326) recommends: 'the whole school culture should be one of cultural responsiveness and this should be reflected in the school's ethos'. Indeed, the senior leadership of a school must never overlook the fact that, as Walker and Shuangye (2007: 201) suggest, 'diverse groups – be they students, teachers or others – can hold very different values and expectations'.

This study suggests that unless the students in a dual-language school use both languages informally and with equal desire, then it is not 'dual-language'

219

in a generally understood sense. The study also suggests that incorporation of the host country language (and its associated culture) in the life of an international school is probably necessary, especially when it may be the mother tongue of many students. The balance of the dual-language relationship should be transparent to all stakeholders, although there is, of course, a very broad typology of dual-language schools. Schools offering dual-language education (whatever it may mean in a particular context) must make sure that all stakeholders understand the terminology and concepts of the particular dual-language/bilingual education on offer.

The label 'international school' represents an umbrella term for a diverse range of schools offering a wide range of programmes and, in this context, dual-language schools form a complex sub-set. However the case school, which does not include the host language, presents unusual characteristics. Finding out how other schools with similar characteristics operate would be interesting. Limiting such a study to schools offering one or more of the IB programmes might further elucidate the core characteristics of international education, where the emphasis clearly focuses on diversity (Hayden, 2007). The qualitative in-depth interview method adopted in this study could be equally applicable to any school needing to understand the perspectives of different stakeholder groups within its community, whether in relation to a dual-language programme, intercultural awareness, or any other substantive issue.

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