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## Students' and parents' perceptions of trilingual education in Hong Kong primary schools --Manuscript Draft--

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| <b>Abstract:</b>          | <p>After the handover back to Mainland China in 1997, the Hong Kong government adopted a 'biliterate and trilingual' policy to help Hongkongers develop an ability to read and write Chinese and English, and to speak and understand Cantonese, English and Putonghua. However, there are no clear government guidelines on how and when the three languages should be introduced and taught in primary schools, and individual schools have adopted their own medium of instruction (Mol) policies, but these policies are decided by the school policymakers, without much consultation with the students and their parents. In this study, questionnaire surveys and interviews on students' and parents' perceptions of trilingual education were conducted. The research findings suggest that students' and parents' views towards the use of different Mols vary, and these will be discussed in the paper. Schools need to take these factors into consideration when developing Mol policies.</p> |
| <b>Author Comments:</b>   |   |

# **Students' and parents' perceptions of trilingual education in Hong Kong primary schools**

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# Students' and parents' perceptions of trilingual education in Hong Kong primary schools

## Abstract

After the handover back to Mainland China in 1997, the Hong Kong government adopted a 'biliterate and trilingual' policy to help Hongkongers develop an ability to read and write Chinese and English, and to speak and understand Cantonese, English and Putonghua. However, there are no clear government guidelines on how and when the three languages should be introduced and taught in primary schools, and individual schools have adopted their own medium of instruction (MoI) policies, but these policies are decided by the school policymakers, without much consultation with the students and their parents. In this study, questionnaire surveys and interviews on students' and parents' perceptions of trilingual education were conducted. The research findings suggest that students' and parents' views towards the use of different MoIs vary, and these will be discussed in the paper. Schools need to take these factors into consideration when developing MoI policies.

*Keywords:* trilingual education; primary schools; Medium of Instruction (MoI); Hong Kong

## Introduction

Studies in trilingual education are of great importance across the world. Malaysia has recently decided to abandon its five-year project through which it introduced the teaching of science and maths through English in all schools (Gill, 2012). These subjects will now be taught in Malay from 2012. Meanwhile, in response to studies by scholars such as Bernardo (2005), Gonzalez (2007) and Walker and Dekker (2008), the Philippines Government has revisited its decades old bilingual education policy whereby Filipino and English were the two media of instruction and introduced *Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education*. This new policy allows children to use one of nineteen gazetted languages as the medium of instruction for the early years of primary school (Kirkpatrick and Liddicoat forthcoming).

1 At the 2008 South East Asian Ministers of Education (SEAMEO) Centre Directors'  
2 Meeting, which was held in Bangkok, the SEAMEO-World Bank project on the *Use of the*  
3 *Mother Tongue as Bridge Language of Instruction in Southeast Asian Countries* was a key  
4 item for discussion (Haddad, 2007). In short, many governments and educational institutions  
5 are coping with issues connected with language education and the respective role of local  
6 languages, the national language and English within national curricula. This interest extends  
7 beyond Asia. For example, the creation of citizens who are 'plurilingual' is a key component  
8 of the language education policy in the European Union (Beacco & Byram, 2003). Our study  
9 focuses on trilingual education in the Hong Kong context.

10 The overwhelming majority of the population of Hong Kong are first language speakers  
11 of Cantonese. Language education policy has a complex history and Bolton (2012) provides  
12 an excellent overview, and summaries of the policy are provided in Wang and Kirkpatrick  
13 (2013, 2015). Here we provide a brief summary of developments since the Handover of Hong  
14 Kong back to China in 1997. The official language policy of the Hong Kong government  
15 since 1997 has been to promote a 'trilingual' and 'biliterate' society. This aims to develop  
16 students' proficiency in writing English and Chinese, and their capability to communicate in  
17 Cantonese, English and Putonghua. To try and ensure this, the Hong Kong SAR government  
18 has made a series of language policy reforms, trying to create a reasonable balance among the  
19 three languages: Cantonese, English and Putonghua. Educationalists want more teaching in  
20 Cantonese on the basis that learning is more effective through that language, parents prefer  
21 more teaching in English sooner to prepare children better for university, while those seeking  
22 approval from Beijing want a higher priority for Putonghua, the national language. However,  
23 Article 9 of the Hong Kong's constitution, the Basic Law (p. 3) states that "In addition to the  
24 Chinese language, English may also be used as an official language by the executive  
25 authorities, legislature and judiciary of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region", but it  
26 does not state what Chinese language means. The new language education policy enacted in

1 1997 included the introduction of teaching Putonghua as a subject in all Hong Kong primary  
2 and secondary schools. Meanwhile, Cantonese is used as the medium of instruction for  
3 teaching content subjects in CMI primary and secondary schools. In 1998, the Curriculum  
4 Development Institute (CDI) of Hong Kong announced that Putonghua would be included in  
5 the core curriculum, meaning that all local schools in Hong Kong would offer Putonghua for  
6 the first nine years of school. Although the indigenous Hong Kong population uses Cantonese  
7 for daily communication, the written Chinese taught in school is Modern Standard Written  
8 Chinese (MSWC), the written equivalent of Putonghua (Tse, 2009). Meanwhile, almost all  
9 the schools use *hanyu pinyin* (the alphabetic writing system developed for Putonghua)  
10 (Davison & Lai, 2007, p. 122). Later in 1999, the Hong Kong government set a ‘long term’  
11 goal to ‘adopt Putonghua as a medium of instruction in the Chinese Language Education’  
12 (Curriculum Development Council, 1999, p. 9), while retaining Cantonese as the medium of  
13 instruction for other subjects in primary schools. It became part of the official curriculum and  
14 a subject for the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE) in 2000.  
15  
16 Several schools which use Putonghua as the MoI for Chinese Language subject offer several  
17 additional Putonghua lessons with the aim to strengthen pronunciation and oral skills. In  
18 2003, the government-appointed Standing Committee on Language Education and Research  
19 (SCOLAR) released an action plan to raise language standards in Hong Kong, announcing  
20 that ‘more studies should be conducted to further understand the conditions necessary for  
21 schools to make a successful switch to using Putonghua as the MoI for Chinese language and  
22 prevent possible negative outcomes before a firm policy and timetable can be formulated’  
23 (Standing Committee on Language Education and Research, 2003, p. 14). The ultimate  
24 language goal of this policy is to achieve trilingualism in order to facilitate communication  
25 and exchange with the Mainland and the outside world (Pan, 2000, p. 61).

26  
27 The policy of ‘biliteracy and trilingualism’, now guiding the curriculum design in Hong  
28 Kong language education, has created controversy. One reason for this is that there are no

1 government guidelines on the medium of instructions for primary schools. In practice, Hong  
2 Kong primary schools do not have an agreed approach for the implementation of trilingual  
3 education (Wang & Kirkpatrick, 2013). Wang and Kirkpatrick conducted a further study on  
4 trilingual education in Hong Kong primary schools during the period Feb-April 2014. A  
5 questionnaire was sent to the principals of 474 primary schools in Hong Kong. The  
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questionnaire was designed to find out how the ‘biliterate’ and ‘trilingual’ language policy was being implemented in Hong Kong primary schools and demographical information was also gathered. Altogether 155 schools responded to the survey, representing a response rate of 32.7%. It was found that, without government guidelines, individual primary schools have adopted their own policies regarding the use of medium of instruction in teaching different subjects (Wang & Kirkpatrick, 2015, p. 24). The researchers suggested that follow-up case studies in selected primary schools would be needed to answer some unanswered questions including students’ and parents’ views towards trilingual education. In addition, the focus of most research on multilingual education is student learning outcomes and test data, rather than students’ experiences (Lefebvre, 2012). The present study therefore surveys students’ and parents’ perceptions towards trilingual education in three of the 155 originally surveyed schools, with the intention of bridging a gap in both the international and local literature. We deliberately chose three schools which were quite different from one another in their demographic make-up, as explained further below.

### **Methodology**

In order to understand the students’ perceptions of trilingual education, we collected both qualitative data and quantitative data in the three schools. To collect quantitative data, a 5-point Likert scale (Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly Disagree) questionnaire survey in both Chinese and English was designed. The content of the questionnaire was first validated by experts in this field. Revisions were made based on their

1 feedback, and two items were deleted, resulting in 17 items. A test-retest for reliability was  
2 then carried out by using the draft questionnaire. 9 students from School C completed this  
3 and the completed questionnaires were collected for reliability analysis. The interval period  
4 between test and retest was four weeks. The test-retest reliability coefficient was 0.793 and  
5 no item was discarded. After the validation, 405 P4 to P6 students in the three schools  
6 completed the validated questionnaire. As for qualitative research, we conducted Students'  
7 Focus Group Interviews in Cantonese in School B and School C, while mixed code was used  
8 in School A. One student Focus Group Interview was conducted in each of the three schools.  
9 In each Focus Group, there were 8-10 P4-P6 student interviewees. In total, 27 students were  
10 interviewed (eleven from School A, eight from School B and eight from School C) and each  
11 Focus Group Interview lasted for about an hour. Moreover, about ten parents from each of the  
12 three schools were interviewed individually so that their views on trilingual education could  
13 be collected. On the whole, 31 parents (ten from both School A and School B and eleven  
14 from School C) were interviewed and each interview lasted for about 20-25 minutes.  
15 Cantonese was used when interviewing local parents, Putonghua was used for parents from  
16 the Mainland and English was used for overseas parents. All the interviews, including student  
17 Focus Group interviews and parent interviews, were transcribed into English, using the set of  
18 transcription conventions developed by Gail Jefferson (1984).

### **Information of the researched schools**

#### **School A**

47 A co-educational school established in 1967, School A is located on Hong Kong Island.  
48 It was initially a CMI school in which all subjects, apart from English, were taught in  
49 Cantonese. In September 2008, the language policy regarding the use of MoI in the Chinese  
50 subject changed: Putonghua became the MoI for Chinese. The school is unusual in that it  
51 attracts a large number of international students. In the 2014-2015 school year, 271 students  
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1 were enrolled comprising 23 nationalities , including Chinese (whose mother tongue is  
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3 Cantonese or Putonghua), Filipino (English and Filipino), British (English), Canadian  
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5 (English), Indian (Hindi and English), Nepalese (Nepali), American (English), Australian  
6  
7 (English), French (French), Japanese (Japanese), Thai (Thai), Egyptian (Egyptian Arabic and  
8  
9 English), Indonesian (Indonesian), Pakistani (Urdu), Cameroonian (French), Singaporean  
10  
11 (English), Sri Lankan (Sinhala and English), Venezuelan (Spanish), Spanish (Spanish), Swiss  
12  
13 (German and French), German (German), Dutch (Dutch), and Nigerian (English) . In order to  
14  
15 help the students to strengthen their bi-literacy and tri-lingualism, the school implemented its  
16  
17 own school-based Internationalized Curriculum (I.C.) in the academic year 2011-2012. The  
18  
19 I.C. is based on the structure of the Hong Kong Primary Curriculum, set by the Hong Kong  
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21 Education Bureau (EDB) Curriculum Development Institute  
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(Table 1 here)

### **School B**

School B is another co-educational school, which is the first ‘through-train’ mode whole day primary school in Tung Chung, the New Territories. Aided or government primary and secondary schools implementing the ‘through-train’ mode should have the same philosophy and aspiration for education and strive to enhance continuity in primary and secondary education. Moreover, a P6 pupil of a ‘through-train’ school may proceed to its linked secondary school direct without going through the central allocation process.

(<http://www.edb.gov.hk/en/edu-system/primary-secondary/applicable-to-primary-secondary/through-train/introduction.html>).

This school started to operate in September 2000. Since its establishment, Putonghua had been used as the MoI in the teaching of the Chinese subject until September 2008. After

1 seeing the ineffectiveness of using PMI in the teaching of the Chinese subject, the school  
2  
3 decided to replace Putonghua by Cantonese as the MoI for Chinese. Table 2 shows the MoI  
4  
5 policies of School B.  
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9 (Table 2 here)  
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### 11 **School C**

12 Located in Kowloon, School C is a single-sex boys' school. It has a long history as it  
13  
14 opened in 1930. The language policy in the school has changed several times throughout the  
15  
16 years. In 1972, Chinese was the medium for teaching and learning. Today Putonghua is the  
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18 MoI for the Chinese subject for P1-P4, and Cantonese is used for P5-P6. Table 3 shows the  
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20 MoI policies of School C.  
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27 (Table 3 here)  
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30 In Table 4, a summary of the demographic information of the 3 researched schools is shown  
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32 for easy reference.  
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35 (Table 4 here)  
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## 38 **Results and discussion**

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40 In this section, we will report the findings concerning the student survey questionnaire,  
41  
42 the student Focus Group Interviews, and parent interviews. The student survey questionnaire  
43  
44 (see Table 5) consisted of seventeen questions: Q. 1 was about using Putonghua to teach the  
45  
46 Chinese subject; Q. 2 was about the major language(s) used for communication in school; Q.  
47  
48 3 was about the overall evaluation of trilingual education; Q.4-7 were about the role of code-  
49  
50 switching / code-mixing in teaching and learning; Q.8-12 were about students' learning  
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52 progress in the three languages; and Q.13-17 were about students' confidence in achieving  
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54 good proficiency in the three languages on graduation.  
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1 (Table 5 here).

## 2 **The appropriateness of using Putonghua to study the Chinese subject**

3  
4 As more and more primary schools are using Putonghua as the MoI for teaching the  
5 Chinese subject, largely as a result of parental preference, there has been much public debate  
6 about the effectiveness of using Putonghua versus Cantonese as the medium of instruction in  
7 Chinese language lessons (Tse, 2009, p. 245). This is why it is important to study the  
8 students' attitudes towards using Putonghua as the MoI in the study of the Chinese subject.  
9

10  
11 Both School A and School C use Putonghua as the MoI for teaching the Chinese subject.  
12 However, School C changed its MoI policy in teaching the subject in the school year 2014-  
13 2015. Cantonese is now used for P5 and P6, while Putonghua is used from P1 to P4. In the  
14 survey, students from School C were more negative towards using Putonghua in studying the  
15 Chinese subject, as Figure 1 shows that 30% of students from School C chose 'strongly  
16 disagree' regarding this item compared to only 4% in School A.  
17  
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19 (Figure 1 here)

20  
21 Figure 1. Students' feedback on the appropriateness of using Putonghua in studying the Chinese  
22 subject  
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26  
27 In the interview, the interviewees who are not ethnic Chinese in School A noted that it  
28 was easier for them to learn how to speak Putonghua (PTH) than to learn how to write in  
29 Chinese. This is because it is easy to learn the *pinyin* (the alphabetic writing system  
30 developed for Putonghua) of the words, but it is difficult to learn to write Chinese characters.  
31 Although there are Romanization methods for Cantonese, they are not taught in school. Some  
32 teachers allowed them to use English to raise questions in the Chinese lessons. The teachers  
33 would then show the students how to ask the questions in Cantonese or Putonghua and then  
34 require them to repeat the questions in Cantonese or Putonghua. A Canadian student in P4  
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1 stated, 'When we ask questions in English, the teachers will show us how to say it in  
2 Cantonese/PTH and we are encouraged to repeat it in Cantonese/PTH.' As a result, they could  
3 learn the two languages, Cantonese and Putonghua.  
4  
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6  
7 P5-P6 student interviewees from School C said that they preferred Cantonese as the MoI  
8 for the Chinese subject. A P6 student (who had been using PTH to study the Chinese subject  
9 in the past five years) said, 'I think it's better to use Cantonese to study the subject. It is  
10 because some students could not understand the teacher well when PTH is used.' A P5  
11 student (who had been using PTH to study the subject in the past four years) said, 'I prefer  
12 using Cantonese. My Dictation performance would be affected if the words are pronounced  
13 in PTH as there are always misunderstandings when hearing the pronunciations.'  
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24 From the student Focus Group Interviews, we feel that the Cantonese speakers who  
25 prefer using Putonghua to study the Chinese subject think they can learn both Putonghua and  
26 Cantonese. However, students who do not favor the use of Putonghua are, not surprisingly,  
27 those who do not understand Putonghua. As a result, they are inattentive and noisy in class as  
28 they find the Chinese lessons boring. There are fewer interactions between teachers and  
29 students and fewer students are willing to answer the teachers' questions when using PTH.  
30 For example, a student from School C said, 'I also prefer using Cantonese because some of  
31 the words in PTH are retroflex and when we do not pronounce them properly, they will  
32 become other words with different meanings, making classmates laugh. Since we learnt  
33 Cantonese when we were very young, it is easier to understand the teachers.'  
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### 50 **Students' acceptance of the trilingual education model implemented in the schools**

51 Students from School A enjoyed the trilingual education the most as they gave this item  
52 the highest mean score of 3.99 (average mean score across the 3 schools being 3.73). The  
53 interviewees who are not ethnic Chinese of School A showed their willingness to learn more  
54 languages, especially Cantonese, so that they can communicate with local people. A P6  
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1 student from Africa in School A said, 'I like learning the three languages because it will be  
2 more convenient for me to order food in a restaurant either in Cantonese or in PTH.' A P4  
3  
4 Filipino said, 'If I learn Cantonese, I can help my mom to translate when buying things in the  
5 market.' Another Filipino student remarked, 'In the past, I could not understand even one  
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7 word in Cantonese, but now I am happy that I can understand more and more words in  
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13 Cantonese'.

14  
15 The P5-P6 interviewees of School C preferred using Cantonese in the study of the  
16 Chinese subject and this may explain the reason why students of this school enjoyed the  
17 trilingual education the least. Moreover, they gave this item a mean score of only 3.52, which  
18  
19 is below the average mean score of 3.73. An interviewee from School C said, 'I preferred  
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21 using Cantonese in the study of the Chinese subject. If PTH was used, some classmates  
22  
23 would find the lesson boring and became inattentive or fell asleep. Some even failed to  
24  
25 answer the teacher's questions, affecting their academic results and thus their learning  
26  
27 attitude became worse. This year the situation is improved as Cantonese is used.'  
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34 Figure 2 shows a comparison of students' acceptance of the trilingual education model in  
35 the 3 schools.  
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40 (Figure 2 here)  
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43 Figure 2. Students' acceptance of the trilingual education model in the researched schools  
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### 46 **Students' perceptions of code-switching/code-mixing in learning**

47  
48 According to Li (2008, p. 76), 'code-switching' (CS) refers to "the alternate use of two or  
49 more languages in an extended stretch of discourse, where the switch takes place at sentence  
50 or clause boundaries. When the switch takes place within a sentence or clause, the term  
51  
52 'code-mixing' (CM) is preferred". Researchers generally agree that code-mixing/code-  
53  
54 switching benefits student learning. Li (2008, p. 75) believes that "code-switching has great  
55  
56 potential for helping the bilingual teacher to achieve context-specific teaching and learning  
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1 goals like clarifying difficult concepts and reinforcing students' bilingual lexicon...". Hirvela  
2 and Law (1991, p. 37) claim that "in certain forms and in the teaching of certain subjects,  
3 mixed code teaching might be the most effective means of instruction..." The findings in the  
4 study show that, to a certain extent, code-mixing/code-switching benefits students' learning.  
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10 Students from School A were more accepting of switching from one language to another  
11 when studying different subjects in the school as they gave the highest mean score of 3.83 to  
12 Q4 which is above the average mean score of 3.69. Students from this school also found  
13 code-switching/code-mixing in different subjects most useful for their language development  
14 in general as they gave a mean score of 4 to Q7 which is above the average mean score of  
15 3.68, while the mean scores of the other two schools are below the average mean score. The  
16 P5 interviewees who are not ethnic Chinese in School A would like their teachers to code-  
17 switch between Cantonese/Putonghua and English in Chinese subject lessons, and between  
18 Cantonese and English in Mathematics lessons. A P5 Filipino said, 'I prefer the teachers  
19 code-switching between English and Cantonese/Putonghua in Chinese lesson so that I can  
20 remember the content better and learn more Chinese words.' Another P5 Filipino said, 'Most  
21 of the subjects are taught in Cantonese and we really do not understand if the teachers do not  
22 explain in English. I would like the teachers to use English to help me understand the  
23 content.' Two P4 Filipinos pointed out that they sometimes used code-mixing when  
24 communicating with local students because they thought this would be easier and could be  
25 understood, e.g.,  
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47 '你有冇 finish your homework?' meaning 'Have you finished your homework?'

48 '我爸爸 (in PTH) is good.' meaning 'My father is good.'

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51  
52 Students' opinion on code-switching/code-mixing varied in School B. On one hand, the  
53 mean scores of Q4-Q6 from School B are above the average mean scores while the mean  
54 score of Q7 is a bit below the average. In School B, about half of P4-P6 students found code-  
55 switching/code-mixing in different subjects useful for their language development in general,  
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1 while 15% of them did not agree and 27% of them were neutral (Q7). On the other hand, five  
2  
3 out of eight interviewees did not find code-switching in different subjects useful for their  
4  
5 language development in general. One student said, ‘We can’t learn a language if we are too  
6  
7 dependent on teachers’ translation.’ More students from School B found themselves code-  
8  
9 switching between English and Cantonese during the study of the English subject as they  
10  
11 gave the highest mean score of 3.53 to Q5 which is above the average mean score of 3.41.  
12  
13 One student said, ‘We can easily understand what the teachers say if Cantonese is used to  
14  
15 explain the English vocabularies.’  
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18  
19 Fewer students from School C found code-switching/code-mixing acceptable as the  
20  
21 mean scores of Q4-Q7 of this school are below the average mean scores. There are reasons to  
22  
23 explain this phenomenon. First, all the students in School C are local Hongkongers. Second,  
24  
25 Cantonese is the major MoI in most subjects in the school. Third, teachers insist on using  
26  
27 almost 100% English in English lessons and almost 100% Putonghua in Chinese subject  
28  
29 lessons (P1-P4) and in Putonghua subject lessons (P1-P6). Fourth, P6 students were anxious  
30  
31 about their promotion to secondary education. For example, a P6 interviewee said, ‘I  
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33 appreciate my teacher using 100% English in English lessons. It is because we need to well  
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35 prepare ourselves now and adapt to such a learning environment; otherwise, it will be more  
36  
37 difficult for us to adapt to an EMI secondary school.’  
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43 Figure 3 shows a comparison of students’ feedback on code-switching/code-mixing in  
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45 learning.  
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50 (Figure 3 here)

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53 Figure 3. Students’ feedback on code-switching/code-mixing in learning  
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### 56 **Students’ learning progress of the three languages**

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58 Students from School A were most satisfied with their progress in the study of written  
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1 English (Q8) and spoken English (Q10), while they were least satisfied with their progress in  
2 the study of Putonghua (Q12). A P4 Filipino said, 'I am most satisfied with my progress in  
3 the study of English and I am trying to learn more Cantonese and PTH.' Nine out of eleven  
4 interviewees in School A showed that they were not satisfied with their progress in the study  
5 of Putonghua. A P4 Canadian pointed out, 'I can't speak in PTH, but only know how to count  
6 the numbers in PTH.' The one student who was satisfied with her progress in the study of  
7 Putonghua comes from Taiwan, and Putonghua is her mother tongue.  
8  
9

10 Students from both School B and School C were most happy with their progress in the  
11 study of Cantonese (Q11). They gave the highest mean scores to this item (4.29 and 4.24  
12 respectively) which are above the average mean score of 4.15. They were also happy with  
13 their progress in the study of written Chinese (Q9). The mean scores of this item from both  
14 schools are 3.81 which are above the average mean score of 3.7. Students from School B  
15 were least satisfied with their progress in the study of written English. For example, they  
16 gave a mean score of 3.56 to Q8 which is below the average mean score of 3.61. Indeed, only  
17 two out of eight interviewees were satisfied with their progress in the study of written  
18 English, while all were satisfied with their progress in the study of spoken English, and five  
19 were satisfied with their progress in the study of Putonghua. Students from School C were  
20 least happy with their progress in the study of Putonghua. They gave a mean score of 3.41 to  
21 Q12 which is below the average mean score of 3.47. And only four out of eight interviewees  
22 reported that they were happy with their progress in the study of Putonghua.  
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25 Figure 4 shows a comparison of students' feedback on their learning progress of the three  
26 languages.  
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29 (Figure 4 here)

30 Figure 4. Students' learning progress of the three languages  
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### **Students' confidence in achieving good proficiency in the three languages**

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2 Students from School A were most confident in achieving good proficiency in both  
3  
4 spoken and written English on graduation as they gave Q15 & Q13 the highest mean scores  
5  
6 of 4.31 and 4.24, above the average mean scores of 3.77 and 3.73 respectively. A P4  
7  
8 interviewee said, 'Both my spoken and written English can be enhanced when I complete P6  
9  
10 because we have a good English-language environment in school.' Students in this school  
11  
12 were least confident in achieving good proficiency in Putonghua as they gave the lowest  
13  
14 mean score of 3.36 to Q 17 which is below the average mean score of 3.47. A P5 local student  
15  
16 said, 'My Putonghua is bad. I lose my confidence in it and I don't think I can make progress  
17  
18 in PTH when I graduate next year.'

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22  
23 Students from both School B and School C were most confident in achieving good  
24  
25 proficiency in Cantonese as they gave the highest mean scores to Q16 (4.11 and 4.19) which  
26  
27 are above the average mean score of 4.05. Students from both School B and School C were  
28  
29 also confident in achieving good proficiency in written Chinese as they gave Q14 the second  
30  
31 highest mean scores but only the mean score of School C (3.95) is above the average mean  
32  
33 score of 3.78. The reason accounting for their confidence in achieving good proficiency in  
34  
35 Cantonese is because Cantonese is their mother tongue. Students who speak Cantonese at  
36  
37 home will not worry about their proficiency in Cantonese, regardless of the languages used in  
38  
39 school. Students from School B were least confident in achieving good proficiency in written  
40  
41 English when they graduate as they gave the lowest mean score of 3.54 to Q13, which is  
42  
43 below the average mean score of 3.73. In the Focus Group Interview, all the interviewees in  
44  
45 School B showed that they were confident in achieving good proficiency in spoken English  
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47 when they graduate as they agreed the school has provided them with a rich English language  
48  
49 environment. However, only one out of eight interviewees showed confidence in written  
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51 English.  
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59 Students from School C were the least confident in achieving good proficiency in  
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1 Putonghua when they graduate as they gave the lowest mean score of 3.47 to Q17 which is  
2 below the average mean score of 3.49. Only four out of eight interviewees expressed  
3 confidence in their language proficiency in Putonghua. One P6 interviewee said, ‘I have more  
4 confidence in English than in Putonghua. In English, we just need to spell the words but we  
5 need to put more time on practicing pinyin (聲母及韻母) in PTH which is rather difficult.  
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7 Otherwise, we cannot learn PTH well.’  
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15 Figure 5 shows a comparison of students’ views on their confidence in achieving good  
16 proficiency in the three languages.  
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22 (Figure 5 here)  
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24 Figure 5. Students’ confidence in achieving good proficiency in the three languages  
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27 In summary, students in School A (a mixture of many nationalities) were most positive  
28 about the trilingual education model adopted in their school. Students in School C (100%  
29 local Hongkongers) were least positive about the trilingual education model adopted in their  
30 school. Students in School B (67% local Hongkongers, the rest from other ethnic  
31 backgrounds) hold a view in-between. Using Putonghua to teach the Chinese subject in Hong  
32 Kong is still controversial. Local Cantonese students seem to prefer using Cantonese as the  
33 MoI, but students from other ethnic backgrounds seem to be more positive towards using  
34 PTH. Students seem to be quite positive towards code-mixing /code-switching. The trilingual  
35 education models adopted in different schools seem to affect students’ respective proficiency  
36 level in the three languages, and their confidence in achieving proficiency in these languages.  
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### 51 **Parents’ perceptions of trilingual education in Hong Kong primary schools**

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53 Ten female parents of different nationalities in School A were interviewed: five were  
54 locals, three came from the Mainland, and one each from the Philippines and Australia. The  
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1 three agreed that the trilingual education model in the school was an attractive feature when  
2 choosing the present primary school for their children, while the other two disagreed. The  
3 latter two chose the present school because of the small-class teaching and because of family  
4 connections. As one of them said, 'I chose this school for two reasons. First, this is the alumni  
5 school of my husband and second, it is close to our home.' The three parents from the  
6 Mainland chose the present school because Putonghua is used as the MoI in the study of the  
7 Chinese subject while the two parents from other countries chose the school because English  
8 is the major language used in teaching and because the school was introduced to them by  
9 their friends. In general, the local parents and those from the Mainland were happy to see that  
10 English was the major language used in school as they all wanted their children to have good  
11 proficiency in English. One parent pointed out, 'Using more English is advantageous to  
12 students as most popular secondary schools are EMI schools. I know many schools use  
13 Cantonese in teaching Mathematics which poses a problem to students when they go to EMI  
14 secondary schools.' The local parents and those from the Mainland thought the school  
15 provided the students with a rich language environment, especially there are many students  
16 who are not ethnic Chinese in the school. Also, they noted that their children were eager to  
17 communicate with these students in English and as a result their language proficiency in  
18 English had been enhanced. 'My son is now brave enough to speak in English with the  
19 students who are not ethnic Chinese. He now understands what the teachers teach in class.  
20 His speaking and listening skills in English are improving. His English proficiency will be  
21 enhanced because the school provides students with a rich English-language environment.'  
22 Eight parents (the locals and those from the Mainland) were also supportive of using PMI in  
23 the study of the Chinese subject as they all agreed that PTH is becoming more and more  
24 important in the world, and they felt that, with the use of Putonghua as the MoI in Chinese,  
25 the students' writing skill in Chinese can be enhanced. 'The advantage of using PMI in the  
26 study of the Chinese subject is that students can write down what they say', said by one  
27

1 parent. The two parents from overseas were neutral about this policy. The parents from the  
2  
3 Mainland found that their children could catch up with Cantonese and English very easily. In  
4  
5 contrast, the parents from overseas found that it was difficult for their children to learn  
6  
7 Cantonese and Putonghua, especially written Chinese. They all agreed that small children  
8  
9 could learn other languages in the early years of school, especially the more able students.  
10  
11 One parent pointed out, ‘I think students can learn other languages as soon as possible. You  
12  
13 see there are many students who are not ethnic Chinese in this school because their parents  
14  
15 want their children to learn PTH, which is a very important language.’  
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18  
19 Ten female parents were interviewed in school B. Two did not have a good  
20  
21 understanding of trilingual education policy in school. One had come from Shanghai about a  
22  
23 year ago and she chose the present school because of its Christian religion and the closeness  
24  
25 of the school. She said, ‘I searched for Christian schools nearby on internet. I found this  
26  
27 Christian school with English, Cantonese and Putonghua.’ Another parent pointed out that the  
28  
29 trilingual education model in school was not typical because Cantonese is used as the MoI for  
30  
31 the Chinese subject and Putonghua is only used as the MoI in the Putonghua subject. Also,  
32  
33 most of the other subjects are taught in Cantonese. She stated, ‘Trilingual education is not  
34  
35 very obvious in this school. It is because only the PTH subject is taught in PTH, Mathematics  
36  
37 is taught in English and the other subjects are taught in Cantonese and I find this is not a  
38  
39 typical trilingual education model.’ Two other parents, however, agreed the trilingual  
40  
41 education model in the school was an attractive feature when choosing the primary school for  
42  
43 their children, although one claimed she was a bit indecisive when she knew that English was  
44  
45 used as the MoI for Mathematics as she said, ‘I did take this into consideration. But I was a  
46  
47 bit indecisive when I knew that Mathematics is taught in English.’ The other parents chose  
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49 the present school for their children for different reasons, including the school motto, the  
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51 closeness of the school, the school religion and family connections. One parent claimed,  
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60 ‘Trilingual education is not the reason I chose this school for my child. The reasons are that I  
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1 am a graduate of this school and this school has a good reputation among the parents in this  
2  
3 community.’ Three parents were against the use of Putonghua in teaching the Chinese subject  
4  
5 for a range of reasons. For example, one parent said, ‘I do not agree with the use of PMI in  
6  
7 teaching the Chinese subject because I am afraid of the insufficiently qualified PTH teachers.’  
8  
9 Another claimed, ‘I personally oppose the use of PTH as the MoI in the study of the Chinese  
10  
11 subject. Our mother tongue is Cantonese and we speak in Cantonese at home and thus we  
12  
13 cannot provide her with a rich PTH-language environment.’ One parent pointed out that using  
14  
15 PMI is more advantageous to the able students and that the less able students can benefit  
16  
17 more when using Cantonese in studying the Chinese subject. Another parent suggested that  
18  
19 Putonghua could be used in studying the Chinese subject for senior grades, like P5 and P6.  
20  
21 The parents were happy about using English in teaching Mathematics and science topics in  
22  
23 General Studies (GS). One noted,  
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28  
29 “To small children, it will be difficult for them to learn GS in English because GS  
30  
31 is a subject with a variety of learning content and they may not easily handle the  
32  
33 terminologies and cannot express themselves well in English during lessons. It’s  
34  
35 ok if the science topics are taught in English as they may pave the way for their  
36  
37 learning Liberal Studies in secondary schools.”  
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41 The parents also suggested that the school could consider using English as the MoI in  
42  
43 teaching Computing. The parents felt that their children’s spoken English could be enhanced  
44  
45 if there were students who are not ethnic Chinese in class as this might provide opportunities  
46  
47 for them to communicate with these students in English. ‘He was shy to speak in English  
48  
49 when he was in kindergarten, but now he will take the initiatives to communicate with others  
50  
51 in English. He is now more confident and this may be due to the reason that there are students  
52  
53 who are not ethnic Chinese in school’, said one parent.  
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57 Generally speaking, the parents were confident that their children could achieve good  
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59 language proficiency in English, especially spoken English, when they graduated. Half of the  
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1 parents agreed that small children should learn knowledge in their mother tongue in the early  
2 years in school. 'I think students should learn in the mother tongue. Once they can master  
3 their mother tongue, they can learn another language. I always find students are only good at  
4 one language', claimed one parent. Meanwhile, others felt that small children could learn any  
5 languages easily once they were given the chance. One of them said,  
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11  
12 "As I know some Japanese, I sometimes talk with them in Japanese. I find my  
13 children can adapt well when I speak different languages with them without any  
14 confusion. Other than mother tongue, they can learn other languages well if they  
15 have motivation and take the initiatives to learn. Children can absorb knowledge  
16 well when they are young and so learning several different languages will not  
17 have a negative effect on their learning."  
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27 Eleven parents (3 males and 8 females) were interviewed in School C. Most of them had  
28 an understanding of trilingual education policy: that three languages, i.e., Cantonese, English  
29 and Putonghua are used as the MoI in teaching and students need to learn how to write in  
30 Chinese and English. However, one said that she did not really understand the policy of  
31 trilingual education. They all could point out the goal of trilingual education policy being to  
32 develop students' language proficiency in the three languages. When asked if the trilingual  
33 education model in the school was an attractive feature when they chose the present primary  
34 school for their children, only two agreed. One claimed that the use of Putonghua as the MoI  
35 in teaching the Chinese subject was a decisive factor in her choice of school, saying, 'I  
36 considered several schools that used PMI in teaching the Chinese subject and this is one of  
37 the deciding factors.' Meanwhile, the reasons the other parents gave for choosing the school  
38 were: the school ethos, family connections, the school's religious affiliation, the school motto  
39 and the closeness of the school.  
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57 While, generally speaking, the parents were satisfied with the trilingual education model  
58 as implemented in School C, there was controversy among the parents on the use of PMI in  
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1 teaching the Chinese subject. Five parents supported using PMI, but two did not understand  
2 why the school had changed the MoI of the Chinese subject for P5-P6 from Putonghua to  
3 Cantonese. Six parents objected to the use of PMI in teaching the Chinese subject, while four  
4  
5 pointed out that they had not seen any significant impact from using PMI on the improvement  
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10 of their children's language proficiency in written Chinese. One said,

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12 "I think he has made improvement in written Chinese, but this may not be a result  
13  
14 of PMI. It is because he is becoming more mature and has learnt a lot of  
15  
16 vocabularies by reading more books, resulting in his better writing in Chinese and  
17  
18 this is not because of speaking more PTH."  
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24 Eight parents agreed that the school might consider using English as the MoI, or as a  
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26 supplementary MoI at higher grades in Mathematics, the science topics in General Studies  
27  
28 and Computing. One parent said, 'I think English can be used as the MoI in the Computing  
29  
30 subject, as we usually say 'mouse' instead of 滑鼠 and much software has English version  
31  
32 only and after some time students are getting used to bilingualism.' Their desire for an  
33  
34 increased use of English as a MoI stemmed from their wish for their children to enter EMI  
35  
36 secondary schools in the future and they felt that using EMI in these subjects in higher grades  
37  
38 could help bridge the gap between primary and secondary education. 'The school can use  
39  
40 mainly Cantonese, supplemented by English in Mathematics in senior grades so as to bridge  
41  
42 the gap between the primary and secondary schools' pointed out one parent. Another said,

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46 "I don't see the need (of introducing more EMI subjects) for junior grade  
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48 students. However, English can be used as a supplement in Maths and GS for P5-  
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50 P6 students. As most parents would like to have their children being admitted to  
51  
52 an EMI secondary school, in which most subjects, including Liberal Studies, are  
53  
54 all taught in English. It is a burden for those who are coming from CMI primary  
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56 schools to adapt to such a change."  
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1 All the parents at School C thought their children were confident of achieving good  
2 proficiency in the three languages when they graduated. Three parents thought students  
3 should start learning in the mother tongue and only start learning the other languages at a  
4 later stage. One parent explained,  
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9 “I agree with some experts that point out children should learn their mother  
10 tongue well before six, and after that they can learn English and PTH gradually.  
11 Mother tongue should come first so that the children can learn the knowledge and  
12 the reasons. Then they can absorb more knowledge supplemented by other  
13 languages. If children are brought up in an English environment at an early age,  
14 they may not know how to communicate with the elderly in Cantonese, leaving a  
15 gap between the two generations.”  
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26 Seven parents, however, felt that children should learn the three languages as early as  
27 possible. ‘I think the three languages should be developed in parallel, starting from an early  
28 age. We’d better use 100% English in English lessons’ said one parent.  
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34 In summary, to the parents, the trilingual education model implemented in the three  
35 schools might not be the most compelling feature when choosing the primary schools for  
36 their children as only seven (22.6%) took the trilingual education model in school into their  
37 consideration. In fact, parents gave priorities to the closeness of the school, the school motto,  
38 and the school ethos etc. Parents from the Mainland were supportive of their children  
39 language learning in Cantonese as they realized Cantonese is the mother tongue of local  
40 people in Hong Kong. This echoes Bacon-Shone and Bolton’s (2008, p. 27) view that  
41 immigrants and their children from the different dialect areas of Guangdong and Fujian  
42 provinces quickly adapted their speech to meet the norms of urban metropolitan Cantonese in  
43 Hong Kong. The parents were not in opposition to the teaching of Putonghua as a subject, but  
44 nine (29.03%) disapproved of using PMI in teaching the Chinese subject.  
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60 When considering if English could be used in teaching other subjects in school, 27  
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1 parents (87.1%) suggested that Computing, Mathematics and the science topics in General  
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3 Studies could be taught in English so that their children could adapt well to the EMI  
4  
5 secondary schools that they all wanted to send their children to. These parents are thus no  
6  
7 different from the majority of parents in Hong Kong who favour EMI schools (Kan, Lai,  
8  
9 Kirkpatrick & Law, 2011). Parents prefer EMI secondary schools and are reluctant to send  
10  
11 their children to CMI schools (Pan, 2000, p. 61). A major reason for this desire for an EMI  
12  
13 secondary school is that six of the eight government-funded universities are all English  
14  
15 medium, as are all of the private universities (Kirkpatrick, 2014). Parents from School A and  
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17 School B were confident that their children's English language proficiency would be  
18  
19 adequate when they graduate as the schools have provided students with an English language  
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21 environment with students who are not ethnic Chinese in the schools.  
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26 Parents' views vary on whether children should learn other languages together with  
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28 mother tongue in the early years in schooling. 79.97% of parents agreed that children should  
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30 learn the three languages at the same time in the early years in schooling. They believed that  
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32 small children can learn languages easily, especially the able students. Those who did not  
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34 agree did so because they were afraid that learning three languages at the same time would  
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36 cause confusion to their children and they believed that children learn better in mother tongue  
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38 and this should be taught first. On the whole, parent perception of the benefits of different  
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40 trilingual education models in the school is closely linked to languages spoken and written at  
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### 48 **Conclusion**

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50 In general, students and parents from the three schools were happy with the different  
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52 trilingual education models implemented in the schools. Having said this, both students' and  
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54 parents' views vary towards the use of different MoIs, especially regarding the use of PTH as  
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56 the MoI in the study of the Chinese subject. Students' and parents' ethnic backgrounds and  
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58 their mother tongue as well are likely to be the major reason for these differences. Despite  
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1 their ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, most of the parents argued for an increased use of  
2 English as the MoI in teaching different subjects, especially Computing, Mathematics and the  
3 science topics in General Studies. It would seem wise for policy makers and schools to take  
4 these factors into consideration when making MoI policies and seek the views of parents and  
5 students as a matter of course. There remains no single model of trilingual education and that  
6 each school is developing its own contextually sensitive model.  
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14 The significance of the study is that, it attempts to bridge a gap in both the international  
15 and local literature and provide a better understanding of students' and parents' perceptions of  
16 the trilingual education in Hong Kong primary schools. Due to the limited sample size of  
17 three researched schools, we must be cautious about generalizing the findings but  
18 nevertheless, feel that this study could have important implications for research into  
19 multilingual education and the implementation of trilingual education.  
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Table 1. MoI policies of School A

| Subject  | Medium of Instruction (MoI)   |
|--|---|
| Chinese  | Putonghua   |
| English  | English   |
| Putonghua<br>(subject not offered)                       | N.A.  |
| Mathematics  | English (P2-P4)<br>Cantonese mainly, supplemented by English (P5)<br>English mainly, supplemented by Cantonese (P1)<br>One group in English and another group in Cantonese (P6) |
| General Studies  | Cantonese (P5)<br>English (P1)<br>English mainly, supplemented by Cantonese (P2-P4)<br>Half English and half Cantonese (P6)   |
| Visual Arts, Music,<br>Physical Education<br>& Computing | Cantonese mainly, supplemented by English (P5-P6)<br>English mainly, supplemented by Cantonese (P1-P4)  |

Table 2. MoI policies of School B

| Subject  | Medium of Instruction (MoI)                       |
|--|---|
| Chinese  | Cantonese   |
| English  | English   |
| Putonghua  | Putonghua   |
| Mathematics  | Cantonese (P4-P6)                                 |
|  | Cantonese mainly, supplemented by English (P1-P3) |
| General Studies  | Cantonese   |
| Visual Arts, Music,<br>Physical Education &<br>Computing | Cantonese   |

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Table 3. MoI policies of School C

| Subject  | Medium of Instruction (MoI)            |
|--|--|
| Chinese  | Putonghua (P1-P4)<br>Cantonese (P5-P6) |
| English  | English                                |
| Putonghua  | Putonghua                              |
| Mathematics  | Cantonese                              |
| General Studies  | Cantonese                              |
| Visual Arts, Music,<br>Physical Education &<br>Computing | Cantonese                              |

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Table 4. Demographic information of the researched schools

| Area             | School Code | Origins of students (Mother tongue) |                         |   |   |
|------------------|-------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------|---|---|
|                  |             | Local Hongkongers (Cantonese)       | Mainlanders (Putonghua) | come from a South Asian area (Hindi, Thai, Urdu, English, Filipino and etc. | come from other areas (English, French, German, Japanese and etc. |
| Hong Kong Island | A           | 51%                                 | 2%                      | 10%   | 37%   |
| Kowloon          | B           | 67.4%                               | 6.8%                    | 21.8%   | 4%  |
| New Territories  | C           | 100%                                |                         |   |   |



Table 5. Student survey questionnaire items

|     |   |
|-----|---|
| Q1  | I find it appropriate to use Putonghua to study the Chinese subject.  |
| Q2  | I find it appropriate using both English and Cantonese as the major languages for communication in the school.                |
| Q3  | I enjoy the trilingual education model implemented in the school.   |
| Q4  | I find it acceptable switching from one language to another when studying different subjects in the school.                   |
| Q5  | I find myself code-switching/code-mixing between English and Cantonese regularly during the study of the English subject.     |
| Q6  | I find myself code-switching/code-mixing between Cantonese and Putonghua regularly during the study of the Putonghua subject. |
| Q7  | I find code-switching/code-mixing in different subjects useful for my language development in general.                        |
| Q8  | I am satisfied with my progress in the study of written English.  |
| Q9  | I am satisfied with my progress in the study of written Chinese.  |
| Q10 | I am satisfied with my progress in the study of spoken English.   |
| Q11 | I am happy with my progress in the study of Cantonese.  |
| Q12 | I am happy with my progress in the study of Putonghua.  |
| Q13 | I am confident that when I graduate I will achieve good proficiency in written English.                                       |
| Q14 | I am confident that when I graduate I will achieve good proficiency in written Chinese.                                       |
| Q15 | I am confident that when I graduate I will achieve good proficiency in spoken English.  |
| Q16 | I am confident that when I graduate I will achieve good proficiency in Cantonese.   |
| Q17 | I am confident that when I graduate I will achieve good proficiency in Putonghua.   |









