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Language and Education

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A considerable literature focuses on language and education in Hong Kong. Parts of this literature are related to policies, and other parts focus on processes of teaching and learning. The literature on language and education in Macao is smaller, but is also significant. In the space available, this chapter cannot present a comprehensive summary of these literatures. However, it does highlight core themes, particularly in the domains of policy formulation and implementation. It shows that, as in other topics, instructive insights can be gained from juxtaposition of patterns in the two territories.

The chapter analyses patterns within the framework of colonialism and post-colonialism, and accordingly commences with broad remarks on those matters. It then looks separately at developments in Hong Kong and Macao in historical sequence. A further section focuses on international schools; and the final part identifies major lessons from the comparison.

Colonialism and Postcolonialism

In the literature on colonialism and education, language has been recognised as a crucial determinant of identity and power relations (see e.g. Carnoy 1974; Phillipson 1992; Pennycook 1994; Clayton 2000). Language was often used as a tool of domination and exploitation, allowing those in power to reinforce their will and privileged position.

Beyond such general observations, Hailey (1957, pp.1226-1229), in remarks which focused on Africa but which also had wider application, noted differences in the policies of different colonial powers. French colonial policies, he observed, stressed the use of the French language from the first day of primary school. British policies, by contrast, encouraged the use of vernaculars in primary school and the shift to English only at higher levels. Portuguese policies were in some respects similar to French ones, but the Portuguese colonial authorities gave little encouragement to the education of local peoples in any language. In all colonies, of course, policies and practices moved through different phases at different points in time.

Postcolonial eras brought both expansion and reorientation of education. Some postcolonial states vigorously promoted local languages in place of colonial ones. For example, the Tanzanian government replaced English with Swahili in much of its education system; the Pakistan government emphasised Urdu instead of English; the Indonesian government stressed Bahasa Indonesia instead of Dutch; and the Malaysian government emphasised Malay rather than English.

Nowhere was the shift unproblematic, however. The choice of single national languages in those countries was made despite the existence of other languages. Also, the emphasis on national languages reduced channels of communication with external communities that did not use those languages. Further, national languages were easier to justify at lower levels of education than at higher levels, since essential domains of scientific and technical knowledge could not all be translated into national languages.

In other postcolonial contexts, policy makers retained an ongoing major role for the colonial languages. In some cases this was because their countries did not have single dominant languages which could become national languages without serious dispute. In this sense, the colonial languages had an element of neutrality in the face of competing claims among other national languages. Thus Kyrgyzstan, for example, retained Russian as the only official language despite the existence of significant local languages; and similarly Papua New Guinea retained English as the only official language. Other states, such as India and Madagascar, did make local languages official ones, but did so alongside the colonial ones. In some settings, the colonial language was a force for unification and for differentiation from neighbouring states. This was a strong emphasis in Singapore, for example, which used English to bring together different racial and language groups and to distinguish Singapore from Malaysia and other countries. More recently, Portuguese has been made an official language in East Timor in order to strengthen the country's identity and distinguish it from Indonesia.

Some patterns have however changed with the advance of globalisation and the need for strong international discourse (Watson 2001; Crystal 2003). Perceptions of international isolation caused a relaxation of advocacy of national languages in Pakistan and Malaysia, and some resurgence of what had been the colonial language but what was now perceived more as an international language than as a colonial one. With a similar goal of access to international affairs, English has become the favoured foreign language in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, displacing the French colonial language; and in Rwanda, English has been made an official language alongside French and Kinyarwanda. Hong Kong has the benefit that its colonial language is also an international language (Johnson 2001), whereas Portuguese has much more limited use as a lingua franca. Yet even if English can be described as an international rather than a colonial language, its spread and use still has political implications and is arguably part of a neocolonial framework which has replaced one form of colonialism with another (Phillipson 1992; Maurais 2003).

Language and Education in Hong Kong

The Main Colonial Period

Sweeting (1991b) presented a comprehensive account of the history of language policies in Hong Kong, from which key elements may be extracted here. He began by noting (p.67) that the first government-aided schools in the initial years after 1842 had been founded by Chinese people in some of the villages on Hong Kong island. The language of instruction in these first government-aided schools was Chinese. After about a decade, attempts were made to spread the use of English in some schools, though they formed a small minority.

In 1862, the authorities opened the first government-run institution, the Central