

S.C.M.P.

23 April 1983

# A lesson to learn in compromise

A panel of overseas experts has opted for what it calls a typically Hongkong solution to resolving the controversial language issue — compromise.

Their proposal is for the development of "genuinely bilingual curriculum strategies."

Their report on the overall review on Hongkong's education system said: "The Government should mandate that English be taught formally in kindergarten to primary six as a second language or first foreign language, (depending on which instructional methodology is the more suitable

for the pupils in particular schools)."

And putonghua is to be offered as a publicly-financed but extra-curricular — and therefore optional supplement — for those who wish to enrol from primary three or primary four onwards.

Putonghua lessons are to be given on Saturdays or after normal school hours.

In advocating this middle path, the report said that in the long term, there should be a shift towards complete mother tongue education in the early compulsory years "through abandoning the notion that the Anglo-Chinese and Chinese middle schools

use only one language as the medium of instruction."

This envisages "a whole-hearted push towards genuine bilingualism after primary six, including the tertiary level."

From form one there should be a progressive shift to genuinely bilingual programmes so that by the end of form three, students are receiving about half of their instruction in each language, with putonghua continuing to be an option which can be built into the secondary school timetable as well as being offered on an extra-curricular basis at public expense.

The panel said that in theory an obvious way out of the current language muddle would be for the Government, from the outset, to impose Cantonese as the medium of instruction in forms one to three of all secondary schools so that the first nine years of schooling (from primary one to form three) would be in the "language of the heart."

It is a fact that the mother tongue is, all other things being equal, the best medium of teaching and learning, the panel said.

However, it rejected this "sound option" because in reality such a course is unavailable to the policy makers for practical and political reasons, the report said.

"In Hongkong, where proficiency in English is necessary for economic and political reasons, there is a classic-public policy dilemma: whether to jeopardise the educational progress of the majority (and perhaps endanger the culture itself) in order to guarantee a sufficient number of competent English speakers; or to value the whole group (and in so doing conserve the culture) but accept the loss in capacity to deal with the international environment and hence a possible decline in the economic prosperity."

Therefore the need to compromise.

## Five areas that need attention

The panel puts the spotlight on five critical areas which demand urgent attention.

● One priority is the establishment of a comprehensive language policy for the education system which does not neglect the current emphasis being placed on English in schools.

The panel favours a shift towards the universal use of the mother tongue in the formative years accompanied by the formal teaching of English as a first foreign language. This would lead progressively to genuine bilingualism in the senior secondary years.

● A second priority is related to teacher improvement.

"A critical issue is the language competency of teachers in Hongkong schools, which largely falls short of the bilingual proficiency needed for effective teaching," the report said.

● Examinations dominate the Hongkong education system "to its detriment" and there is a need to relieve the strain of the examination system on both teachers and students.

The panel saw the need to improve the curriculum by making it more relevant to the developmental needs of students rather than allowing it to be dominated by administrative procedures within the system.

● A fourth priority is related to the organisation of post-school education and access to it.

The panel advocates greater diversification of the educational opportunities available beyond form seven, so that pressure on tertiary institutions can be relieved and individuals can choose the type of education most closely related to their interests, to the requirements of the labour market, and to the community generally.

● A fifth priority is the need to build up a capability to conduct research, to analyse and formulate policy options and to plan developments.

## Exam proposals a blow to Chinese U

In a bid to reduce some of the examination stress at the matriculation level the panel has made proposals that are likely to come as a bitter pill for the Chinese University.

The panel has called for matriculation courses to be arranged in a two-year programme leading to the "A" level examination so that entry qualification to the two universities and the polytechnic is harmonised.

This in turn led to the suggestion that the first year of general studies at the CU be eliminated and the length of its course be shortened from four to three years.

It also called for the Higher Level Examination to be scrapped.

The report said that if in future all schools were encouraged to develop a two-year post-HKCEE programme, "ultimately a matter for the Government to decide," there could remain little justification for the continuation of the first year at CUHK as it now exists.

"In our comments on CUHK we have emphasised the difficulties created in form six and form seven by the existence of the four-year degree structure of that university which makes student entry possible one year after passing the HKCEE and success at the Higher Level Examination," the report said.

The report said there were many within the university who would argue with conviction that the current course structure provides an option which is ideally suited to the social and academic needs of many young people in Hongkong.

Noting that the importance of reducing the number of examinations is immense, the report said that at a minimum, if the two universities are to continue with courses of different lengths, admission to the CU should be based on performance in the HKCEE at the end of form five.

Matriculation would then be conditional on continuing success in form six, attested to by the school.

Students who have passed their A levels would be granted exemption from the first general year at the Chinese University.