‘British-Chinese Pupils' Identities, Achievement and Complementary Schooling’

FULL REPORT

Background

An unanticipated finding from our previous research on British-Chinese pupils’ identities and attitudes to education (see e.g. Francis & Archer, 2005a; 2005b; Archer & Francis 2006; 2007) was the very high value placed on complementary education among some pupils and (particularly) parents. Complementary Chinese schools were positioned by these respondents as providing a pivotal role in the transmission of the Chinese language and culture, and in their provision of an additional source of learning. In this sense, these parents and pupils portrayed complementary schools as contributing both to the educational achievement of British-Chinese pupils, and to their ethnic identity (see also Martin et al, 2003). The present study aimed to document the practices of Cantonese-Chinese complementary schools and to explore the social and learner identities of their pupils.

A diverse range of purposes of ‘complementary’ schooling has been noted, from educating pupils about their cultural origins, language, and history, to supplementing mainstream education (Rutter, 2003). The Resource Unit for Supplementary and Mother-Tongue Schools lists over 2000 of these schools across the UK (RUSMTS, 2005), highlighting the presence of an established and growing educational sector that reflects the diasporic practices existing beyond mainstream education. Yet the practices of complementary schools, though extremely diverse in both form and purpose, have been little documented by researchers (Martin et al, 2003; Li Wei, 2006).

The diverse benefits of complementary schooling for minority ethnic children, are identified in the existing literature, including: provision of social networks; space to negotiate identities; space from racism; transmission and celebration of aspects of ‘culture’; and additional education (in community language and/or other subjects and skills) (Dove, 1993; Reay & Mirza, 1997; Strand, 2000; Hall et al, 2002; Martin et al, 2003, 2006; Zhou & Li, 2003; Creese et al, 2006). Further, such schools can constitute a powerful medium through which minority-ethnic parents (who often feel alienated by the mainstream education system) can influence their children’s education (Reay and Mirza, 2005). However, as yet this body of work has paid little attention to the perceptions among user populations (particularly pupils), of the purposes and benefits of complementary schools. Our research sought to make a distinctive contribution by addressing these gaps, and by relating our findings to mainstream schooling.

Chinese complementary schooling is particularly long-established in the UK. As the majority of Chinese migrants to Britain arrived from Hong Kong and the New Territories in the 1950s and ‘60s, the majority of Chinese complementary schools focus principally on teaching in Cantonese rather than Putonghua. It might be assumed that as these schools are ‘Mother-tongue’ institutions their sole purpose is to perpetuate the Chinese spoken and written language in younger generations.
However, a diverse international literature asserts a range of other purposes and benefits. These include for example the replication of ‘culture’ (Wang, 1996; Chow, 2004); the provision of educational capitals in relation to mainstream schooling (Zhou and Li, 2003; Zhou & Kim, 2006); and a shared community space to facilitate intra-ethnic interaction (Zhou & Kim, 2006).

We have drawn on Foucault’s work on discourses and discursive power (e.g. 1972; 1980) and Chun’s application of poststructuralist discourse analysis to the notion of ‘Chinese culture’ (1996) to recognise how identities, and concepts such as ‘culture’, are produced by discourses which delineate ‘truth’, fixity and status and that are infused with desire and morality. In contrast to positions (often reflected in existing literature on complementary schooling) that produce ‘culture’ as a fixed, static and definable entity, our theoretical approach recognises that the construction of boundaries around ‘culture’ (what ‘counts’ and should be taught/preserved, and so on) is a social and political process (Hall, 1992; Chun, 1996, Creese et al, 2006).

Objectives:

1. To provide ethnographically informed understandings on the populations and practices of Chinese complementary schools
2. To investigate teachers, pupils and parents’ perspectives on the purposes and benefits of the schools
3. To explore British Chinese pupils’ experiences of complementary schooling and the apparent impact of these experiences on their constructions of social and learner identities
4. To relate findings to broader issues of race, gender and class identities and achievement in mainstream compulsory schooling

These objectives have been achieved. Below we have structured our account of our findings in relation to our objectives, to show how our data collection and analysis has enabled us to address them.

Methods

The research was conducted across six different Chinese schools and included interviews with 60 pupils, 21 teachers and 24 parents in addition to ethnographic observations in all six schools over a seven month period. Three schools were located in London (where a third of the total Chinese population in Britain reside; Census 2001); the others in different English metropolitan areas – Manchester, Liverpool and Birmingham. The sample included only schools primarily teaching Cantonese (although Putonghua is in some cases taught as a secondary language), as these represent the established British-Chinese community rather than new migrants (Parker, 2000).

Ethnographic observation was conducted to document the school environment, organising practices, teaching methods and curriculum, and classroom interaction. Working in classes with the greatest concentration of 11-13 year old pupils, three full sessions were observed at each school.
As many Chinese school classes are based on ability rather than age, we took a
decision to focus the research on classes where 11-13 year old pupils were most
heavily concentrated. The 60 pupil interviewees included 36 girls and 24 boys, of
whom 52 (87%) were British-born Chinese (of the remaining 8 pupils, seven were
born outside the UK, and one pupil was mixed heritage). 25 (42%) of these
respondents were from working-class backgrounds\textsuperscript{iv}, with an additional 17 (28%)
from families with small businesses. 27% were from middle-class families, and a
further 3% unassigned. The 21 teacher respondents included 15 women and six men,
of a mixed age-range. Nearly all of them (18) were Hong Kong Chinese (the three
others were Cantonese speakers born overseas). Just over half the teacher sample
were classified as middle class, with four in working-class occupations, and five small
business owners. The 24 parents included 20 mothers and four fathers, of whom all
but five were born overseas (13 are Hong Kong Chinese). In terms of their social
class, the largest group (10 parents) could be categorised as working class, with a
further six small business owners. The remaining eight parents were middle-
class/professional.

Interviews were largely conducted by Chinese, bilingual interviewers, though a
portion of pupil interviews were conducted by White-British researchers. The vast
majority of pupil interviews were conducted in English, the primary language for
virtually all the pupil respondents. Interviews were fully transcribed, and a sample of
the translated interviews with Chinese-speaking respondents was sent to a third party
for verification. We subjected the ethnographic and interview data to a fine-grained
qualitative analysis that involved both a broad thematic analysis to highlight patterns
of behaviour and response, and an in-depth discursive analysis (Foucault, 1980;
Burman and Parker, 1993; Francis, 1999), to identify discourses mobilised by
participants in their constructions (Burr, 1995). Our organization of the qualitative data
was facilitated by use of the NVivo package, and counting of responses to certain key
questions was undertaken in order to illustrate how far these were representative of
the sample (Silverman, 1993).

All respondents were assured of full confidentiality and anonymity, and their right to
withdraw from the research at any time. All names used in research publications are
pseudonyms. The project conformed to ESRC and BERA ethical guidelines. In line
with our previous research, the team were sensitive to issues around ethnicity, class
and gender both within the research team and between interviewers and participants
(see Archer, 2002). We have used regular team reflexive discussions to consider these
issues and encourage an inclusive approach, and to inform analyses.

Results
We report our findings below under headings corresponding with our four research
objectives.

1) The populations and practices of Chinese complementary schools

We found that the key practice of Chinese school remains the teaching of Chinese
language and literacy, with additional classes often offered in traditional activities
related to Chinese heritage (e.g. Chinese dance, calligraphy, Kung Fu, etc). There is
little evidence of Chinese schools offering academic support with regards to
mainstream education (as in the case of Chinese Schools in the United States; Zhou
and Li, 2003). Teaching practices vary across schools and often depend on individual teachers. Although teaching is consistently partially didactic due to the nature of the language and limitations with resources and time, methods such as discussions, groupwork, and games are regularly incorporated into lessons to promote pupils’ engagement.

All the schools in our sample face a constant struggle to provide a high-quality education experience from extremely limited resources. This lack of funding has a range of consequences for schools, in terms of the quantity and quality of education offered. Individual schools, and organisations such as the UKFCS, are highly attuned to these issues, and are going to great lengths to meet the needs of teachers and users of complementary schooling (for example, addressing some of Wong’s [1992] recommendations in providing extra-curricular activities, and publishing textbooks locally). Yet other issues such as teacher training and school facilities remain harder, and far more costly, to address. We would draw attention to the limited ways in which mainstream schools rent their premises to complementary school – without providing access to basic facilities available within the school – and the detrimental impact that this has on complementary schooling. Certainly such practices appear out of keeping with current government policy to “encourage premises to be made available at no or low cost as appropriate to supplementary schools in extended schools” (DfES 2006), or for schools to “open up suitable facilities to community users” (TDA 2007). Such policy of encouraging ‘partnership’ between mainstream schools and community services appears as yet to have had little impact in the case of Chinese complementary schooling: in these cases ‘partnership’ remains unequal and one-sided.

Our mapping revealed that the population of Cantonese Chinese Schools is overwhelmingly comprised of second generation, rather than third generation pupils. In our sample, 97% of children had at least one parent born overseas, and 88% reported speaking Chinese at home (63% of pupils speaking only Cantonese at home). In addition, a high proportion have parents who work in the catering trade, rather than representing those second-generation parents who have moved to less ‘ethnicized’, middle-class/professional areas of work. This raises two key issues: 1) the extent to which schools are fully representative currently of the British Chinese community; and 2) whether schools will need to invest in adapting to meet the needs of a changing British Chinese demographic. Our ethnographic data shows that teachers overwhelmingly speak in Chinese within lessons: the extent of use of English by teachers depended on both the English proficiency of individual teachers and the policies of individual schools. The high number of pupil respondents speaking Cantonese at home suggests a relatively high level of basic proficiency in, and practical support in the home for, oral Cantonese among the pupil population. These findings are important, raising clear implications for issues around teaching practice and inclusion in the future. The increasing third generation of children of Chinese heritage are less likely to speak Chinese at home (their parents may have limited Chinese language abilities themselves); and the question is raised as to whether Chinese schools will have the resources, or desire, to incorporate and support them. Certainly to do so will demand the increasing use of English in schools, with a consequent bearing on the necessary English proficiency levels of teachers (Martin et al, 2006). Our analyses emphasize how, like mainstream schooling, Chinese schooling cannot be isolated from the social, political, historic and economic factors that impact on schools and their users, and position them in particular ways.
2) Teachers, pupils and parents’ perspectives on the purposes and benefits of the schools

Our findings show that the overwhelming majority of British-Chinese pupils attending complementary schools see the purpose of these schools (and their attendance of them) as perpetuating proficiency in the Chinese language. 48 pupils (80%) said that they attend Chinese school to learn/improve their Chinese, with only negligible portions volunteering other reasons: this was the case irrespective of respondents’ social class and gender. This construction of Chinese Schools as Mother-Tongue institutions contrasts with findings elsewhere – the United States, for example – that Chinese schools are seen as supplementary to mainstream education, intending to improve the social and educational capital of users. As Zhou and Li (2003) and Zhou and Kim (2006) have elaborated, Chinese schools in the United States include an often explicit focus on improving mainstream educational performance in various subjects, as well as providing information and preparation for successful college entrance. Some young people in our study did see learning Cantonese as instrumentally beneficial; as a practical skill with which to increase their marketability in the global workplace. We maintain that this constitutes an interesting example of pupils refusing the discursive ‘Othering’ of their mother-tongue education as irrelevant in Western culture and rather re-investing this language skill as an ‘ethnic capital’. The small number of pupils articulating this position were all middle-class, raising the likelihood that their social class positioning provides the social capital necessary to facilitate this re-working of ‘community language’ as ethnic capital. Yet this instrumentalism was a) in some cases linked to possible trajectories back to Hong Kong, rather than more broadly, and b) in all cases related exclusively to the language proficiency gained at Chinese school (as an additional skill on their CV), rather than to any broader capitals (e.g. information on educational and career markets) transmitted at complementary school.

We would suggest that this understanding of the purpose of complementary school as being to perpetuate ‘mother-tongue’ may reflect the demographics of those attending Cantonese complementary schools. As we reported above, the vast majority of pupils were second generation Chinese, and often speak Chinese (at least to some extent) at home. The young people in our study maintained very close links to Hong Kong, and often to non-English speakers in the immediate or extended family. Yet as we noted above, such experiences may be decreasingly representative of the British-Chinese community as a whole.

For those attending Chinese school, however, we found the schools to play an important role in supporting the diasporic existence of the Chinese in the UK. They may be read as pivotal institutions for facilitating the continued interface with the ‘Mother Country’ and its popular culture, and communication between generations. Such functions were illustrated by the range of secondary purposes and benefits of Chinese schooling that pupils noted in addition to, or resulting from, learning the Chinese language. These additional benefits included communication with relatives; the interface with Hong Kong; instrumental benefits of having an additional language; replication of ‘culture’; and language and identity. We categorised these as: a]
language as various forms of capital, and b] language as supporting (and often as constitutive of) identity.

Pupils often saw proficiency in Chinese as the key signifier of Chinese identity. Our analysis of the emergent view of language as culture/identity raises important questions around the conception of ethnic identity. The young people’s discussion of the importance of knowing Chinese, and what they saw as the implications of failure (disgrace, embarrassment, exclusion) raises more uncomfortable questions. The moral and penalising discourses of pride/shame, duty/rejection, inclusion/exclusion, proficiency/deficiency underpinning their statements clearly exercised a discursive power evident in the emotional response produced, and may be argued to constitute a strong and not necessarily benevolent pressure on children of Chinese heritage to conform to this reproduction. It may be of course that these discursive mobilisations are produced to counter the dominant discourses circulating in Western society which position Western epistemologies and practices as normative and superior, and ‘Other’ practices as abject and invalid (Ang, 1998) – and the consequent inducement to abandon those values and language practices deemed as constituting Chinese ‘culture’ within a Western society. Anthias & Yuval-Davis (1992) have discussed how such anxieties and experiences of ‘threat’ among minority ethnic groups may be expressed in a tightening of boundaries regarding what is seen to constitute authentic identity and ‘culture’.

Many of the themes represented in the adult participants’ perceptions of the purposes and benefits of Chinese complementary schooling replicated those in the pupil sample: for example, the importance of learning the Chinese language in terms of identity; Chinese language as an ‘ethnic capital’ in the neoliberal marketplace; Chinese school as a positive ‘community space’, and so on. However, there were important distinctions: adults – particularly parents – saw a more diverse range of benefits offered by Chinese schooling than did pupils. Adult respondents were less likely to emphasize issues of migrant trajectory (connections with Hong Kong, inter-generational communication and so on), but far more likely than pupils to see benefits of Chinese schooling as inculcating ‘cultural values’ in the younger generation. This may of course reflect the vested interests of the older generation in controlling what such values are seen to be.

The moral discourses mobilized around ‘Chinese culture’ and it’s apparent content, and the positioning of these constructions as constituted through the Chinese language and/or inherently linked to Chinese bodies, were specific to the adult sample (represented particularly among teacher respondents). Our argument is that these productions, and especially the binary constructions of ‘Chinese culture’ (noble and civilized) as relational to ‘Western’ attitudes (unruly and degenerate) are problematic both theoretically and ideologically. They assume a) a fixed, replicable ‘Chinese culture’ that can and ought to be inculcated in future generations; b) this ‘culture’ as transmitted via Chinese language which constitutes ‘Chinese identity’; and c) that Chinese culture is preferable to others. Arguably, a sense of collectivity is being constructed through processes of Othering. The deployment of cultural fixity within such productions appears to counter critical academic notions of diasporic identities as occupying a culturally syncretic ‘third space’. Again, we caution that these articulations need to be read in the context of a minoritised experience where minority lifestyles and values tend to be denigrated, and experienced as under threat (Hall,
1990; Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1992). These tensions and responses to
minoritisation may also be highlighted by the theme of the ‘essential Chinese body’,
and the demand for production of correlation between ‘raced’ ‘Chinese’ bodies and
Chinese language/identity, which emerged frequently. This demand was sometimes
made by Chinese respondents themselves (irrespective of gender), but also frequently
reported as demanded by non-Chinese, illustrating how British Chinese are positioned
in particular discourses within Western contexts, creating discursive positions that
interpolate subjects ‘raced’ as Chinese into particular productions of ethnic selfhood
(Foucault, 1980; Ang 1994).

These reflections on complementary schooling as reproducing reified aspects and
readings of language and culture stimulated our thinking in relation to certain
concepts relating to movement and migration, including for example Deleuze and
Guatarri’s (1987) influential metaphors of nomadism and the rhizome. We maintain
that the case of Chinese schooling challenges these metaphors as applied by Deleuze
and Guatarri, but that it also evokes a more literal application of the rhizome
metaphor in their morphing and cross-fertilisation; the material productions of
complementary schooling and their representations of ‘Chineseness’ being diverse
and heteroglossic at both macro and micro levels.

3) British Chinese pupils’ experiences of complementary schooling and the apparent
impact of these experiences on their constructions of social and learner identities

Our analyses of the pupils’ constructions of their experiences of Chinese schooling
highlight a range of tensions (both conceptual and in practice) arising from the
positioning of Chinese schools as explicit cultural projects. For instance, where
schools authorize particular hegemonic notions of Chineseness, these tend to involve
an ossification of culture that is conceptually problematic, politically charged
(representing a Cultural China discourse) and practically potentially undesirable
(being viewed by young people as outmoded). Our findings show that whilst schools
tend to have the explicit aim of ‘preserving culture’ and encouraging pupils to feel
‘more Chinese’, their success in this respect is complicated. Pupils were divided as to
whether attendance made them feel more (or less) ‘Chinese’: 31 pupils (52%) agreed
that it did make them feel more Chinese, 28 (47%) disagreed and one was undecided.
Those who felt that the schools did bolster a sense of ‘Chineseness’ declared this not
on the basis of the school’s formal cultural agenda, but predominantly as due to
learning the language and through the mere fact of being with other Chinese. In terms
of the latter, Chinese schools provided a valued space in which the imagined
community could be tangibly experienced, hence facilitating discourses of
‘community’ and ‘belonging’. This provision of a ‘critical mass’ may be especially
important for Chinese groups due to their distinctive geographical dispersal in the UK
resulting in their frequently comprising a ‘minority of minorities’ within mainstream
schooling.

The other main factor in the schools’ ‘success’ in promoting Chineseness was
identified as providing young people with the opportunity to engage in/practice
contemporary youthful cultural forms with their peers. Young people constructed a
range of ethnic identities (e.g. as Chinese, British-Chinese, British-born Chinese and
British), which evoked more complex notions of identity and ‘Chineseness’ than their
elders. The young people’s constructions of ethnic identity were far more likely to
draw on contemporary, disporic, youth cultural formations than the more ‘traditional’ perceptions of parents and teachers. So ironically, the pupils’ constructions of Chineseness were often set against dominant school versions and may be indicative of the young people’s attempts to find ways to rework their own notions of cultural authenticity.

The study also explored pupils’ constructions of their experiences within Chinese schools in relation to their learning and learner identities. Pupils tended to feel that they learn best in mainstream schooling; however, this was predominantly explained as due to the shorter duration of complementary schooling. Pupils also identified a range of practices within Chinese schools that they felt supported their learning and fitted with their learner identities. These included: the competition and reward culture (which girls as well as boys relished); greater teacher involvement and closer relations between teachers and pupils; and small teaching group sizes. These perceptions were not dependent on social class or gender. Especially, pupils appreciated the ‘holistic’ pedagogic approach adopted by many teachers. These are important findings given criticisms in the wider literature about the quality of teaching in complementary schools (Li 2005; Peng 1996).

Many students (male and female) felt that they were able to celebrate their love of learning in a way not possible in mainstream schooling, and that they could do so among like-minded peers. Moreover, our analysis reveals a construction of Chinese schooling among pupils that appeared to facilitate adoption of more ‘playful’ learner identities in Chinese school, in relation to their reported (more diligent) attitudes to mainstream schooling. Young people reported feeling more comfortable and relaxed in Chinese schools and felt able to be ‘noisier’ and sometimes ‘cheekier’ than in mainstream schools (such behaviours were indeed recorded in our classroom observations). This was facilitated by factors such as the absence of racism, no formal punishment systems and less pressure to achieve (the Chinese language qualification being rarely linked to A Level or university entrance requirements).

4) Relationship with broader issues of race, gender and class identities and achievement in mainstream schooling

The fewer numbers of boys we observed to attend Chinese schools (reflected in the lower number of male than female respondents that we were able to recruit to our study) may be seen as salient to education policy concerns around an apparent lack of educational engagement among boys from various ethnic groups (especially in relation to language and literacy subjects). And of the pupils in our sample, boys were particularly likely to report that they attended not by choice, but due to their parents’ wishes (social class also impacted here, as those most likely to attend of their own volition were middle-class girls). As we have reported elsewhere, British-Chinese boys appear even more likely than White boys to dislike language subjects (Francis & Archer, 2005b), and our findings in this study may further illustrate this. Likewise, incidents of disruptive behaviour recorded in the ethnographic observation tended to involve boys, often performing particular ‘rebellious’ and ‘playful’ constructions of masculinity. Yet it is important to consider how such constructions are (according to the pupils in this study, and from teacher evidence in our previous research) apparently constrained in mainstream classrooms. This more ‘playful’ or ‘relaxed’ approach in Chinese schools was articulated by both boys and girls. We consider that
constraint reported in mainstream schools may reflect how Chinese pupils are perceived in (and experience) mainstream classrooms, due to their positioning in gendered/racialised dominant Western discourses of Chinese subjectivity as passive, repressed, and obedient (Archer & Francis, 2005). These findings, coupled with the pupils’ valuing of a ‘Chinese’ space where they escape minoritisation (albeit briefly) highlight the implications for mainstream schooling in the exoticisation and pathologisation that British Chinese pupils frequently experience therein (Archer & Francis, 2007).

Half of all pupils felt that Chinese school had no impact or connection whatsoever with their achievement in mainstream schooling, and these responses were not patterned by gender or social class. This is indicative of the current level of separation between mainstream and complementary schooling, a relation in which complementary schooling is systematically marginalised. However, some pupils were adamant that their complementary schooling did help their wider learning and achievement. The most popular reason given for this was that learning Chinese helped them to learn other languages at school. Other benefits included the emphasis upon revision and memorisation in Chinese schools and the way attendance helped build confidence and motivation to learn.

The pupils’ perception of a near total separation between mainstream and complementary schooling raises important issues in light of the government’s extended schools and community schools agenda. There seems to be little evidence currently of a cross-fertilisation of views and expertise between the two spheres. Our findings suggest that any such interaction should not be conceived as ‘one-way’ with regard to using mainstream educational institutions to ‘professionalise’ complementary school teachers: there may also be a range of useful messages that can flow back into mainstream education. For instance, pupils’ valuing of a ‘culture-rich’ approach to learning via holistic teaching methods may raise interesting questions for the National Curriculum. Hence we would suggest that more work might usefully be undertaken to facilitate a mutual exchange between mainstream and complementary schools.

**Activities**

We have presented five external conference papers on our findings: two papers given at British Educational Research Association Conference (Institute of Education, Sept 2007); two papers given at European Conference for Educational Research (University of Ghent, Sept 2007); and an invited paper drawing on our findings at International Studies in Sociology of Education Conference (London, Jan 2008).

We have shared project developments and findings with an external group of academic experts in the field, working on ESRC-funded projects on complementary schooling and minority languages: This group represents Goldsmith’s College, King’s College, Birkbeck College, University of East London, Birmingham and Roehampton Universities, and has met regularly since our project’s inception. We have also presented findings within our local academic communities including at an invited seminar, Roehampton University (31/10/07), and an internal conference paper (Roehampton University, 14/12/07).
We have engaged users of research in a range of ways: in our project advisory group meetings (members included representatives from complementary schooling organisations and leading academics); in our liaisons with complementary schools users and practitioners throughout the project; and via our end-of-project Dissemination Event (11/1/08). This event at King’s College presented our findings and launched the Executive Report: it was attended by 60 users of research, including representatives from Chinese complementary schools, the UKFCS, Runnymede Trust, CILT, and academics from a range of universities including SOAS, Nottingham and Manchester. Feedback on the event and our findings has been both positive and plentiful. Details of the Executive Report were disseminated by the UKFCS at their annual conference at the University of Reading (2008), with numerous requests for the report from Chinese school practitioners as a result, facilitated by the UKFCS. We continue to engage in dialogue with users to ensure ongoing and broad dissemination of our research (see ‘Dissemination’ section, form).

Outputs

To date the project has generated five journal papers (of which two are accepted for forthcoming publication in international, peer-refereed journals, and three are under review); a press release (leading to publication of an article in The Runnymede Bulletin and coverage in Race Equality Teaching journal, 26 [2] p. 8); and an Executive Report written in Chinese and English, which has been distributed to 155 research users, complementary school practitioners and policy makers.

Impacts

The research has generated considerable interest both within and beyond the academic community. News of our work has led to Professor Francis being invited to join the steering group of a large-scale DCSF funded project at CILT, developing links between mainstream and complementary schooling; and she and Dr Archer have been invited to present their findings on British-Chinese experiences of education in Britain to The Monitoring Group – an influential independent racial equality organisation who have committed to organising an invited meeting in order to disseminate our findings directly to policy-makers.

60 research users attended our project Dissemination Event, and we have been contacted by many more interested parties (these have been sent our Executive Report). Via the Executive Report and Event we have disseminated key recommendations for practice directly to schools (these were welcomed by Chinese school representatives at the Event). The new knowledge detailed in the findings section will (via our journal publications) inform debates across both the sociology of education and language education fields; and we hope that our contribution to sociological theorising around identity and culture provides a research contribution that is broader than the specific subject matter of the project.

Future research priorities

Our findings have suggested that Cantonese-led complementary schools are not fully representative of the British-Chinese community. This begs the question as to why third-generation pupils appear largely absent from Cantonese Chinese schools: is it...
that they no longer see the Mother-Tongue as important, or perhaps that the teaching methods and expected oral proficiency practiced at Chinese schools exclude them? These questions constitute important areas of further research.

A further and related question may be whether not learning Chinese impacts on young people of Chinese origin’s ethnic identities and sense of ‘Chineseness’. Of the 60 pupils interviewed in our study, only three saw attendance of Chinese school as a pointless exercise, with a further five pupils providing ambivalent responses about the importance of learning Chinese. However, we only interviewed young people engaged in this Mother-tongue schooling: it is likely that research with British-Chinese not attending complementary schooling might reveal very different constructions.

The distinct constructions of ‘Chineseness’ and values therein between adults and pupils in our sample suggest more attention might fruitfully be given to generational differences in such productions of identity, and further research is required to explore this.

References


These schools have variously been termed ‘supplementary schools’; ‘Mother Tongue schools’; ‘community schools’ and ‘complementary schools’. We opt for the latter term in relation to schools where language teaching is the primary endeavour (see Martin et al [2003] for justification).

There is currently a new wave of migration to Britain from Mainland China, however, many of these migrants remain ‘outside the system’, and/or have not been in Britain long enough to establish families with school-age children.

‘Putonghua’ and ‘Mandarin’ refer to the same language of mainland China: there are arguments about the use of both terms, but we adopt ‘Putonghua’ here as the official term.

Categorising British-Chinese respondents according to social class is particularly challenging; see Archer & Francis (2007) for discussion. For pragmatic purposes we have distinguished between clearly ‘working class’ respondents (e.g. restaurant waiters, and those working for others in takeaways), and small business owners (owners of takeaways and small restaurants) – the latter of whom might be automatically categorised as middle-class in British social class categorisations, yet actually may have few (if any) educational qualifications and be working in challenging circumstances.

Social class and gender had an impact here: only middle class girls said they preferred learning in Chinese schools.