

Tuesday English News Report

Cantonese or Putonghua in schools? Hongkongers fear culture and identity 'waning'

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When Lau Chaak-ming was **casting around** for a kindergarten for his daughter, he had trouble finding one that used Cantonese. It was a strange, if not **ridiculous**, situation for a city made up primarily of Cantonese speakers, he thought.

"Most nursery schools have adopted Putonghua and English as their medium of instruction. Parents see playgroups as a way to learn a new language ... But I want to send my daughter to playschool for fun and interaction with other children, not for learning a new language," Lau says.

The increasing emphasis on Putonghua (Mandarin) at the expense of Cantonese among local schools is causing concern - and some **resentment** - among Hongkongers. While educators are split about the **efficacy** of adopting Putonghua as the medium of instruction, some residents fear that Hong Kong's identity may be lost as the special administrative region is integrated into mainland systems.

It is particularly **galling** for Lau, a lexicographer with a professional interest in analysing language development.

As a cognitive science student at the University of Hong Kong, he studied how the brain processes languages, spent three years compiling a glossary of spoken Cantonese and a Cantonese-English dictionary, and went on to earn a Masters in linguistics.

Now lecturing part time at the university, Lau has taken on an even more ambitious project - compiling an **exhaustive** online dictionary of Cantonese words in common use.

With help from 30 volunteers, he has already posted more than 30,000 entries on the site, words.hk, which features explanations written in Cantonese, Cantonese pinyin and English, and examples of usage. They hope to compile 100,000 words within two years, and are also working on an English language interface.

Although Lau concedes it could take **decades** to complete the Cantonese dictionary, he says: "I want to do what I can to preserve this **vibrant** language."

There are an estimated 120 million Cantonese speakers across the world. But if the trend of local schools switching to Putonghua continues, Lau says, "the importance of our mother tongue will be **eclipsed** by Putonghua and our sense of local identity and culture will keep waning".

