

The impact of educational policies on educational choices: a case study of Hong Kong's new immigration policy

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Abstract. As a key immigration destination within the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area, Hong Kong's educational policies profoundly influence the educational choices available to new immigrant families. This paper systematically examines how four categories of policies—school placement, language support, financial aid, and transitional adaptation—shape the decision-making logic of new immigrant children regarding school type, curriculum pathways, residential location, and investment in extracurricular education. This study finds that: first, the Band streaming system excessively concentrates children of new immigrants in lower-tier schools, creating a structural narrowing of educational pathways; second, the Chinese as a Second Language (CSL) policy, due to inconsistencies in teacher qualifications and implementation standards, has led many families to turn to international schools or cross-border education; third, while financial aid lowers the barrier to enrollment, it fails to alleviate the pressures of social stratification caused by hidden educational costs such as tutoring and school selection. This paper argues that beneath the facade of "universal coverage", Hong Kong's current policies—through a dual mechanism of explicit rules and implicit signals—actually produce a bifurcated educational track: one for mainstream local students and another that imposes higher barriers to entry for new immigrants. Policy optimization must address three dimensions—dynamic tracking, continuous transitional support, and mutual recognition of qualifications within the Greater Bay Area—to transform formal equality into substantive equity of opportunity.

Keywords: education policy, educational choice, new immigrants, Hong Kong education, educational equity

1. Introduction

Since its handover, Hong Kong has continuously faced social integration pressures stemming from large-scale population inflows. According to statistics from the Hong Kong Immigration Department, over the past decade, an average of approximately 35,000 to 40,000 new immigrants have settled in Hong Kong annually through the One-Way Permit Scheme, with school-age children accounting for more than 40% of this group [1]. Most of these families originate from mainland China, and their children face multiple challenges upon entering the Hong Kong education system, including language transition (shifting from Mandarin or dialects to Cantonese and English), curriculum transition (shifting from the Mainland People's Education Press textbooks to the Hong Kong curriculum framework), and cultural adaptation. Against this backdrop, education policy

serves not only as a technical tool for resource allocation but also as a key institutional mechanism determining whether the children of new immigrants can achieve social integration [2].

This paper focuses on the causal relationship between Hong Kong's educational policies for new immigrants and families' educational choices. Specifically, it aims to systematically examine how Hong Kong's current policies—in the areas of school placement, language support, financial assistance, and transitional adaptation—influence the decision-making logic of new immigrant families regarding school type, curriculum pathways, place of residence, and investment in extracurricular education by constructing a differentiated "menu of options". The core concern of this study is to reveal how policy design inadvertently produces divergent educational trajectories, as well as the differential effects of such trajectory differentiation on families from different socioeconomic backgrounds. The analysis unfolds around the following three progressive questions: (1) What are the core structure and internal logic of Hong Kong's current educational policies for new immigrants? (2) Through what mechanisms do these policies influence the educational choice behavior of new immigrant families? (3) What unintended, deep-seated contradictions have arisen from policy implementation, and how should they be addressed?

At the theoretical level, this paper moves beyond the traditional "top-down" unidirectional perspective of policy evaluation by situating policy analysis and household micro-level decision-making within an interactive framework, thereby providing an empirical supplement at the behavioral level to theories of educational equity. At the practical level, as integration within the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area accelerates and population mobility between Hong Kong and mainland cities becomes increasingly frequent, a structural reexamination of Hong Kong's education policies can provide direct policy references for Greater Bay Area cities such as Shenzhen and Guangzhou, which also face challenges regarding the education of migrant children.

2. Policy background: the framework and logic of Hong Kong's education policies for new immigrants

2.1. Three stages of policy evolution

Prior to the handover, policies centered on "basic placement". Beginning in 1995, the Education Department provided school enrollment assistance, a 60-hour adaptation program, and English continuation courses for children newly arriving from the mainland. In 1997, it further introduced school-based support grants aimed at addressing school-place shortages and language and cultural barriers. From the handover through the 2010s, the policy focus shifted to "diverse integration", establishing a system covering school placement, language support and financial assistance while expanding educational options through diverse school models, such as Direct Subsidy Scheme schools and international schools. Since the 2020s, as talent programs like the High-Talent Pass have attracted large numbers of mainland families to Hong Kong, the policy logic has undergone a structural shift—from "passive acceptance" to "active screening". In July 2025, the government revised the eligibility criteria for subsidized post-secondary school places, requiring that children of talent must have resided in Hong Kong for at least two years before applying for local student-subsidized places to curb the phenomenon of "exam-driven immigration". This adjustment marks a shift in policy objectives from "safeguarding educational rights" to "balancing resource allocation and talent selection", reflecting that education policies for new immigrants are being integrated into a broader framework of talent governance [3].

2.2. Four major pillars of current policy

Regarding school placement, all school-age children are guaranteed a place in a public school. The Education Bureau's district offices provide placement services for mid-year entrants, while Direct Subsidy Scheme (DSS) and international schools offer parents a diverse range of options. In terms of language support, the Education Bureau collaborates with non-governmental organizations to provide 60 hours of adaptation courses and English continuation courses for newly arrived children. It has also developed curriculum guidelines and teaching material packages for Chinese, English, and mathematics to assist schools in assessing students' academic proficiency. Regarding financial assistance, public schools receive school-based support grants based on the number of newly arrived children admitted—HK\$2,000 per student in primary school and HK\$3,330 per student in secondary school—to fund remedial classes and extracurricular activities. For transitional adaptation, the Education Bureau implements a six-month full-time induction program and school-based support plans to help students adapt to the local educational environment [2]. However, this framework was designed against the demographic backdrop of the period around the handover. Faced with the scale of recent years—in which over 210,000 professionals have moved to Hong Kong with 120,000 children—the issue of the framework being broad in scope but lacking precision has become increasingly apparent. In particular, there is a lack of systematic responses to deeper adaptation challenges, such as transferring into senior high school and special educational needs [1].

2.3. The objectives behind the policy

Hong Kong's education policies for new immigrants reveal three distinct objectives. The logic of assimilation permeated early policy design: the adaptation curriculum centered on "social adaptation", aiming to help students from the Mainland integrate into the local education system and social norms. The principle of inclusion, meanwhile, is reflected in the institutional framework—diverse school operation models, free public education, and school-based support grants all seek to provide equal access to education for students from different backgrounds. However, the 2025 revision of eligibility criteria for subsidized school places sent a clear signal of screening: by establishing a "two-year residence in Hong Kong" threshold, the policy distinguishes between "genuine residents" and "exam-driven immigrants", ensuring that public resources flow to families "truly intent on developing their lives in Hong Kong" [4]. As a Legislative Council member noted, this represents an adherence to the principle of "equivalence between rights and obligations". These three objectives are not simply interchangeable but rather build upon one another—inclusivity forms the foundation of the system, assimilation is the cultural goal, and screening serves as a response to real-world pressures [5].

3. How the policy influences parents' choices: an analysis of the mechanisms of influence

3.1. School types selection

Hong Kong's diverse school system provides "policy arbitrage" opportunities for families moving to the city. Public schools offer free education but have limited flexibility in curriculum and language of instruction; directly subsidized schools enjoy greater autonomy in management, curriculum, and admissions while still receiving government subsidies; international schools, meanwhile, offer non-local curricula, such as the IB and A-Levels to cater to the demand for overseas university admissions [6]. Policies indirectly guide these choices through funding mechanisms: Until 2025, children of talent—regardless of whether they attend school in Hong Kong—can apply for university-funded places as local students. This reduces the "urgency" of

attending public or direct subsidy scheme schools—parents can choose to have their children complete their basic education on the mainland before coming to Hong Kong to take university entrance exams. However, the new regulation requiring "two years of residence in Hong Kong" to qualify for financial aid effectively links "enrollment in Hong Kong schools" with "eligibility for university financial aid", significantly increasing the policy benefits of studying in Hong Kong [7]. It is foreseeable that this adjustment will prompt more families of talent to arrange for their children to transfer into Hong Kong schools earlier, with a particular preference for direct subsidy scheme or public secondary schools that offer a seamless transition to the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination (DSE) curriculum.

3.2. Curricula and academic pathways: DSE, IB/A-Level and the decision to return to the mainland

Curriculum selection is essentially an extension of one's higher education strategy. As Hong Kong's local curriculum, the DSE offers the dual advantages of "local student status" and "international recognition"—students with DSE results can apply for subsidized places at the eight public universities through the Joint Admission System, as well as apply to overseas and mainland universities. The IB and A-Level programs, while better suited to international academic pathways, come with high tuition costs and do not qualify students for local student financial aid. Policy adjustments have reshaped this trade-off: New regulations require "two years of residence in Hong Kong" to qualify for university financial aid, meaning families choosing the IB or A-Level programs will lose local student tuition benefits if their children study outside Hong Kong for an extended period [2]. This makes the DSE curriculum more attractive to families "seeking value for money in local higher education", while the IB and A-Level programs are better suited for families "who do not rely on financial aid and aim for prestigious overseas universities". At the same time, the "return to the Mainland" pathway has also been activated—some families choose to have their children complete high school in the Mainland and sit for the DSE as independent candidates; however, under the new regulations, this strategy will result in the loss of local student financial aid eligibility, meaning they will have to bear non-local student tuition fees (approximately four times that of local students).

3.3. Spatial strategies

Hong Kong implements the "neighborhood enrollment" principle, where place of residence directly influences placement outcomes at public schools within a school catchment area, giving rise to the "school district housing" phenomenon. For families with highly skilled professionals, the choice of residence not only concerns enrollment opportunities in primary and secondary schools but is also directly linked to the "two-year residency in Hong Kong" eligibility requirement—the new regulations stipulate that individuals may not be absent from Hong Kong for more than 90 days per year, meaning that cross-border schooling (such as residing in Shenzhen while attending school in Hong Kong) will make it difficult to meet the residency requirements [8]. This forces parents to strike a balance between "quality of living" and "school district resources": traditional elite schools are concentrated in areas such as Central and Western District and Kowloon Tong, where housing costs are exorbitant; meanwhile, while the Northern District of the New Territories offers more living space, its school district resources are relatively limited. Furthermore, the Direct Subsidy Scheme (DSS) and international schools are not subject to school district restrictions and can admit students from across districts, leading parents to prioritize transportation convenience and lifestyle amenities when choosing a place to live, rather than simply chasing prestigious school districts. Policy-driven spatial strategies are reshaping the residential distribution patterns of families moving to Hong Kong and may further exacerbate population pressure and housing demand in areas with high-quality school catchment zones [9].

3.4. Investment in extracurricular education

Caught between the "standardized" supply of public education and the "differentiated" demands of academic competition, the tutoring culture has emerged as a natural extension of policy pressures. Families moving to Hong Kong face multiple pressures, including language transition (Cantonese/English), curriculum alignment (differences between the mainland and Hong Kong education systems), and preparation for placement exams and the DSE. As a result, extracurricular tutoring has become a key component of "adaptive investment". Some parents have shared that, to help their children adapt to the Hong Kong education system, they arrange for interview training courses, subject-specific tutoring, and even agency services for university applications. Following the tightening of eligibility criteria for financial aid, more families have chosen to move to Hong Kong ahead of time; after their children transfer into local schools, they must adapt to the local curriculum and prepare for placement exams or the DSE within a shorter timeframe, further increasing the demand for tutoring. It is worth noting that the new regulations have given rise to a gray-market industry, such as "backdoor enrollment"—where mainland institutions collaborate with Hong Kong private schools to provide "enrollment registration" services for students who do not reside in Hong Kong, reflecting market arbitrage behavior driven by policy constraints. The boom in tutoring and agency services is, in essence, a market manifestation of the tension between "insufficient precision" and "substantive stratification" in policy design—gaps in institutional support are filled by market-driven services, further exacerbating the impact of family resource endowments on educational opportunities [2].

4. Deep-seated contradictions arising from policy implementation

4.1. High coverage but low precision

The current policy framework appears comprehensive in terms of "coverage"—all school-age children are guaranteed a place in a public school, school-based support grants are allocated on a per-student basis, and adaptation programs are open to all newly arrived children in Hong Kong [3]. However, this mechanism—designed around the time of the handover—suffers from a severe lack of precision when faced with the scale of over 210,000 people who have moved to Hong Kong with their children in recent years. The "universal" nature of the policy masks deep-seated differences in needs: high school transfer students face the dual pressures of entrance exams and DSE preparation, yet lack targeted bridging programs; students with special educational needs require additional support beyond language adaptation, which the current framework fails to address. Many parents who are professionals have reported difficulties in enrolling their children in high school; many schools are reluctant to admit transfer students, resulting in some children of professionals "residing in Hong Kong but lacking a school place". The contradiction between high coverage and low precision is, in essence, a mismatch between "standardized supply" and "diverse needs"—the policy fulfills the formal requirement of "enrollment" rather than the substantive goal of "appropriate education" [10].

4.2. Formal equality but substantive segregation

From the perspective of institutional design, the children of new immigrants and local students enjoy equal rights to school admission and eligibility for financial assistance—this is formal equality. However, "substantive stratification" in the allocation of educational resources is rapidly taking shape. The eligibility requirements for subsidized school places, revised in July 2025, stipulate that students must have "resided in Hong Kong for at least two years" to qualify for local student tuition rates. While this is intended to curb "exam-driven immigration", it also means that families who settled in Hong Kong earlier can continue to

enjoy the local student tuition rate of HK\$42,100 per year, whereas children who do not meet the residency requirement must pay tuition at the non-local student rate (approximately four times that of local students). The policy distinguishes between "true local students" and "new local students", maintaining fairness in form but, in substance, exacerbating the impact of family resources on educational opportunities. A deeper divide lies in the fact that access to high-quality school districts, tutoring resources, and international curriculum options remains closely tied to a family's financial standing. Formal equality masks the reality of substantive division—disadvantaged new immigrant families lack institutional support for language adaptation, curriculum transition and college planning, and must rely on market-based services to fill the gaps [11].

4.3. Short-term assistance but long-term absence

The current support system centers on "transitional adaptation" as its core objective, focusing on helping students overcome language and cultural barriers during the early stages of enrollment. However, these short-term measures do not extend to long-term needs such as curriculum transition in secondary school, DSE exam preparation strategies, and university admission planning. While "short-term assistance" addresses the question of "whether students can enroll", it fails to address deeper concerns, such as "how well they are learning" and "whether they can advance to higher education" [1]. Although the 2025 revision of the residency requirements is justified in curbing speculation, it also exposes the policy's lack of systematic support for "long-term settlement". If the children of talent cannot study in Hong Kong due to difficulties in transferring into senior high school, their academic transition and competitiveness in higher education will face challenges—even if they meet the residency requirements. The transition from "attracting talent to Hong Kong" to "retaining talent and helping them put down roots" requires more than just school admission eligibility and tuition assistance; it demands a long-term support system covering the entire spectrum of basic education. If the contradiction between the "short-term mindset" of current policies and the "long-term planning" of talent families is not effectively resolved, it may undermine Hong Kong's sustained appeal as a hub for talent [12].

5. Conclusion

Returning to the central question posed in the introduction—are immigrant families truly "making choices", or are they "being chosen"? This paper's answer is that Hong Kong's education policies for new immigrants, through four mechanisms—school placement allocation, language barriers, economic leverage and spatial signals—predefine the "set of feasible options" available to different families. The band system disproportionately directs the children of new immigrants into lower-tier schools; the Chinese as a Second Language (CSL) policy, due to inconsistent implementation standards, pushes some families towards direct-subsidy or international schools; and the "school district housing" effect, amplified by school network regulations, transforms residential choices into educational investments. These policies not only respond to demand but also produce a new stratified order. The theoretical contribution of this paper lies in shifting the analytical focus from "coverage rates" to an examination of the structural reshaping of families' decision-making space. Solutions can be explored from three perspectives: short-term, medium-term, and long-term. In the short term, CSL courses should be elevated to statutory status and staffed with full-time teachers; in the medium term, the static band allocation system should be reformed by introducing dynamic group adjustments and extending transitional support to three years; in the long term, mutual recognition of educational qualifications between Hong Kong and the Mainland should be promoted, and a cross-border education passport established.

This paper has three limitations: it does not include a sample of cross-border students, lacks longitudinal observations of the same households, and does not provide a systematic comparison with other Greater Bay Area cities, such as Shenzhen. Future research could focus on three areas: the discretionary power of grassroots bureaucrats, the student's perspective, and the institutional design of educational integration in the Greater Bay Area. The ultimate criterion for evaluating educational equity depends neither on the nominal coverage of policies nor on the total volume of resources, but rather on whether the institutional design preserves the possibility for the most marginalized groups—that is, students who are systematically marginalized due to household registration status, differences in native language, or a lack of social capital—to redefine their own developmental trajectories. The true litmus test for the fairness of an educational system lies in whether it imposes a label that solidifies a group's class origin or provides an institutional pathway for continuous progress.

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