

Transitions in Cameroon's Pilot Bilingualism Policy at the Federal Bilingual Grammar School Man-O-War Bay Victoria and Buea 1963-2019

Joy Langji Yafe^{1*}, Nixon Kahjum Takor, (UBa)¹, Linda Ankiambom Lawyer (ENs, Yde)¹

¹The University of Bamenda Linda Akiambom Lawyer (PhD) ens yaounde 1

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*Corresponding author: Joy Langji Yafe

The University of Bamenda Linda Akiambom Lawyer (PhD) ens yaounde 1

Abstract

Review Article

This paper critically examines the evolution of Cameroon's bilingual education policy from 1963 to 2019, a period marked by significant transitions in the efforts of implementation. The study primarily focuses on the pilot experiences at the Federal Bilingual Grammar School (FBGS) Man-O'-War Bay, Victoria where the idea took roots and extends to the Bilingual Grammar School (BGS) Molyko, when the location was shifted for logistics and political reasons to Buea. The primary objective was to identify and appreciate the extent to which the various training models aligned with the agenda of building school citizens who were linguistically proficient in French and English and who could use such connections to socially integrate into a new Cameroonian identity different from the polarised colonial French and British cultures. Using a qualitative historical design informed by primary and secondary sources, the research reveals that from 1963 to 2019, the FBGS and BGS experimented three crucial interlapping training models; immersion, coexistence and special bilingual education program (SBEP). Each of these experiences had objectives and specificities patterned to respond to the broader national vision of promoting official bilingualism in public schools and colleges. The study unveiled that the nascent immersion model that envisaged a sustainable holistic bilingualism, aborted because of the absence of a committed follow up policy with accompanying resources to ensure full compliance. The subsequent models were therefore alternatives but survival strategies to keep alive the overarching mission of the state to foster official bilingualism. The shifts ultimately compromised the original goals of engendering genuine bilingualism and cultural coexistence. The introduction of the Special Bilingual Education Program (SBEP) in 2009 rekindled hope of re-imagining official bilingualism in public secondary schools. However, it emerged from the findings that the SBEP faces substantial obstacles in its implementation, raising questions about its long-term viability and effectiveness in realizing the goals of the national bilingual policy. The paper submits that; certain contravening circumstances and flexibility to accommodate evolving trends, conditioned the transitions witnessed in the application of the National Bilingual Policy at Man-O-War Bay Victoria and Molyko.

Keywords: Transition, Bilingual Policy, Immersion, Side by Side, Special Education Program.

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INTRODUCTION

Cameroon, a country with a unique linguistic heritage, officially recognizes both English and French as its national languages. This bilingual policy was formalized during the Foumban Conference in 1961 and aimed to foster national unity and cultural exchange (Ngoh 2018: 234-35). As a country with two official languages—English and French, The Federal Bilingual Grammar School (FBGS) Man-O'-War Bay Victoria, established in 1963, and subsequently transitioned to the Bilingual Grammar School (BGS) Molyko Buea in 1970, (NAB 1968) was envisioned as an incubator for cultural exchange, linguistic proficiency, and national unity

(Fonlon, 1963: 5). The institution represented a unique educational landscape where English and French coexisted in delicate balance. This policy shaped the trajectory of bilingual education in Cameroon, with BGS Molyko playing a pivotal role. The concept of bilingualism in Cameroonian schools was thus grounded in the principles of language immersion, cultural coexistence, and special bilingualism programs, which are discussed in this article. The article begins by highlighting the concept of the National Bilingualism Policy, the immersion experiences, coexistence, and special bilingual programs, with focus on Man-O-War Bay Victoria and Molyko.

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The Federal Bilingual Grammar School (FBGS) Man-O-War Bay and later BGS Molyko serves as a classic example of the application of the national bilingualism policy in Anglophone Cameroon secondary education sector. This development was associated with the political evolution of the country as a UN Trust Territory from 1946 to 1961. Prior to and following the independence and unification of British Southern Cameroons and the Republic of Cameroon in February 1961, there was a public demand from strategic political stakeholders for the institution and promotion of bilingualism. In September 1961, a federal constitution was enacted, establishing French and English as the basis of an official national bilingualism policy. Within this context, various processes were initiated to implement the project, one of which was the application of the bilingual policy in public secondary schools. Different scholars have articulated various aspects of the bilingual policy. For instance, Spolsky (2004) explores the complex relationship between language and society, addressing issues such as language planning, language revival, maintenance, bilingual education, language rights, and language-in-education policies. He provides an overview of language policy as a multidisciplinary field, drawing insights from linguistics, sociology, anthropology, and political science, and emphasized the importance of understanding the social, political, and cultural factors that shape language policies and their implications.

Discussing the concept and evolution of bilingualism in Cameroon, Awa (2013) highlights its challenges while observing efforts to intensify the policy. She argues that a unique form of bilingualism should be promoted, ensuring that neither language is superior to the other. Fonlon (1998) on his part emphasised the need for early bilingualism, particularly in primary schools, positing that this would give children a solid foundation in language, equipping them with a rich vocabulary and a grasp of fundamental grammar. He continued by stating that in secondary schools, the study of both languages should be intensified, with the dominant language continuing to serve as the medium of instruction. While much has been discussed regarding bilingual policy, the present study is distinct in that it provides insight into the evolution of the national bilingual education policy in Anglophone Cameroon, particularly through the pilot experiences of the FBGS Man-O-War Bay and BGS Molyko.

The paper is structured into four sections, starting with the conceptual orientation of Bilingual education and then proceeding with immersion, the nascent phase of bilingual education experiment; the shift from immersion to coexistence model and the Special Bilingual Education Program (SBEP). The paper argues that, certain contravening circumstances and flexibility to accommodate evolving trends, conditioned

the shift in the bilingual education policy at Man-O-War Bay and later Molyko.

Conceptual Orientation

The history of bilingualism in Cameroon is a fascinating and complex phenomenon. Its applicability and official nature are rooted in political statements and government efforts. The absence of a clear official national language policy at independence necessitated the adoption of the foreign languages of the former colonial powers, France and Britain, as the official languages of the newly reunited republic in 1961 (Tchoungui, 1977: 61). The question of what constitutes bilingualism brings to mind various views linked directly to the ability to speak two languages (Alobwede, 2023). Scholarly debates on bilingualism, are often devoid of descriptive components (Ayafor, 2005: 42). This suggests Hoffmann's understanding of the phenomenon as multifaceted. In attempting to describe, define, or find the roots of the evolutionary process of the complex bilingual policy in the Cameroonian context, it may be most suitable to consider Spolsky's position that "the language policy of a speech community may be revealed in its practices, its beliefs, or in explicit language management" (Spolsky, 2003: 43).

In the 1961, 1972, and 1996 constitutions, English and French were designated as the official languages of Cameroon with equal status (See 1961, 1972 and 1996 Constitutions of the Republic of Cameroon). The inclusion of the section on official languages since independence has served as the national instrument supporting the bilingual policy for Cameroon, with specific efforts made in the educational domain to ensure its implementation. The 1963 West Cameroon ordinance on education emphasized the implementation of bilingualism in the educational sector, following the establishment of the Federal Bilingual Grammar School Man-O-War Bay in 1962 (Ayafor, 2005: 51).

It is important to note that, except for the 2019 law on the promotion of bilingualism and the 1996 constitution, all other legal frameworks designed to promote bilingualism as a national policy have limitations in perception and applicability. The sections that sanctioned English and French as official languages often granted more prestige and recognition to the French language than to English. A glaring example is seen in the 1961 and 1972 constitutions promoting bilingualism, where the French version was considered more authentic than the English version, placing English in a subordinate position. Despite these shortcomings, the 2019 instrument provides more recent legitimacy to the national bilingual policy, stating that the official languages shall be English and French, both having equal status, with a section dedicated to the teaching of both languages in the educational sector (Langji, 2022: 74).

Thus, the application of the National Bilingual Policy in Anglophone Cameroon is rooted in the legal framework and political ideology of the Republic. This agenda aimed to balance the cultural specificities of the colonial bifurcation of Cameroon into French and British social spheres. The case of the Bilingual Grammar School Man-O-War Bay Victoria and later BGS Molyko illustrate the efforts made by public policy stakeholders in Cameroon, to use the agency of education as an interface to institute and enrich bilingualism. This agenda experienced different mutations.

Nascent Phase of Bilingualism: The Immersion Model

The immersion experience at GBS Molyko was a transformative educational approach that immersed students in a rich linguistic and cultural environment. This helped students develop proficiency in languages, fostering effective communication and cultural understanding. For both West and East Cameroon, the educational sector was recognized as the primary agent for transforming the entire Republic into a bilingual nation, as stipulated in the constitution. To realize this ideology effectively, the government implemented special measures that became the foundation for the growth of the national bilingual policy (Langji, 2022: 33). By adopting different models to promote bilingualism, Cameroon's political leadership understood that it could only succeed through the complete transformation of students' minds, starting with the experiment at Man-O-War Bay. The alternation of the immersion model with the side-by-side model and the eventual Special Bilingual Program in the pilot school reflected a determined effort to exploit the aspect of bilingualism for national integration (Tchoungui, 1977: 78).

Echu pointed out that the immersion practice was imperative due to the significant differences between French and English cultures, which were evident within a multi-ethnic society like Cameroon (Echu, 1999: 19-26). The choice for bilingual education through immersion was rooted in what Dean (1999:11) refers to as govern mentality; an approach towards understanding the state and different mentalities of governance. Similarly, Botswick (1999: 96) highlights that language immersion is an approach to foreign language instruction in which usual curricular activities are conducted in a foreign language. In this model, the new language serves as both the medium and the object of instruction. This was particularly evident in the experience at Man-O-War Bay and Molyko.

In the absence of a national language due to the heterogeneous nature of the territory (Tchoungui, 1977: 59) and in such a multicultural setting, with pronounced colonial disparities, any form of bilingualism necessitated the total immersion of the two Cameroons. Education was identified as a critical tool for realising a

bilingual Cameroon (NAB, 1999). Proposals were made advocating for immersion to begin at the elementary level. Bernard Nsokika Fonlon, a language philosophy expert shared this sentiment, arguing that for bilingualism to be effective, it must consider the primary school sector, which he termed early bilingualism (Tchoungui, 1977: 48). Several compelling reasons highlighted the need for immersion to be practiced from the foundational level. One key argument was that children possess higher language intelligence than adults, making it easier for them to learn two or more languages at the elementary stage (Fonlon, 1998).

The immersion model was initially considered an experiment to pursue bilingualism, but the target group did not immediately focus on the elementary level as proposed by language experts. This led to the establishment of the Federal Bilingual Grammar School Man-O-War Bay/Molyko as a pilot experiment. The West Cameroon educational policy on bilingualism unequivocally stated:

There is no vernacular language that commands support outside of the narrow area in which it is spoken. The Federal Government has decided that education should be provided in English and French, and the second language should be developed in both sectors. It is currently impossible to teach the second language in primary school; the main effort must focus on secondary, technical, and adult education. In secondary schools, the audio-visual method should be used in addition to the academic method. Intensive courses should be undertaken (NAB, 1963).

Based on the educational curricula of the French and English systems, students were expected to study all subjects in both languages. Teachers from France, Britain, Canada, and Cameroon were recruited to provide 'the litmus test of moulding official bilingual Cameroonians' in line with the prescription of the 1963 West Cameroon Ordinance on Education (Aya, interviewed, 2019). When the first batch of 70 students was admitted in September 1963 at the Man-O-War Bay campus in Victoria, they were proportionately selected from both Federal States (West and East Cameroon). Their seating arrangements were designed to facilitate immersion (Ayah, interviewed 2024). The school program ran throughout the academic year, with students residing on campus, promoting interaction and exchanges as they used both inherited languages as mediums of instruction—an unprecedented practice in Africa. The students were boarders, and everything was arranged to ensure cultural and language integration. They were expected to become proficiently bilingual upon completing their secondary education (Ngalim, interviewed, 2024). Seating plans were organized to ensure students from both language backgrounds shared the same seats in classrooms. This practice extended to games and dining, encouraging interaction and mutual

learning at extra-curricular levels. (Lyonga, interviewed, 2022).

Following the bilingual immersion program, students of English and French background studied in the same classrooms, with some courses taught in English and others in French (Ayah, interviewed, 2019). This practice continued for the first three years of schooling. From the fourth year (Form IV for Anglophone students and Troisième for Francophone students), students were expected to prepare for both the Brevet D'Etudes Du Premier Cycle (BEPC) and General Certificate Examinations (GCE) Ordinary Level examinations (Ashu, 2005: 643-655). Initially, the students were unsure of how the school program would unfold until they were informed in Form IV that they were to prepare for both exams, especially the GCE Ordinary Level (Musonge, interviewed 2011 and Ayah 2024).

One unique aspect of the immersion model was the method of selection and admission into the institution. Students selected through the school aptitude test in Form Two (Cinquième Bilingue) with averages above 14 were enrolled in Form Three (Quatrième Bilingue) under the immersion model (Musonge 2011). This decision was communicated to parents via a consent letter from the administration, indicating that their children were specially selected for this purpose. Many students studied and wrote the BEPC before taking the GCE Ordinary Level exams. Notably, a significant number of students who opted for this model were those of the English-speaking background, with many successfully completing the GCE Ordinary and Advanced Level exams (Langji 2022).

However, the institution observed a drastic drop in the number of students who continued with the model in Form Three and ultimately sat for exams in Form Four (Troisième Bilingue), particularly among Anglophones who became hesitant to participate in the model. Isaac Musonge emphasized how their experience in Man-O-War Bay shaped and bridged language barriers, stating:

This experience definitely shaped my career and my outlook as a citizen of this nation. I can say without mincing words that our bilingualism and its ramifications prepared us better for our future careers both within and outside the country. I remember those who studied Law at the Federal University of Cameroon, Yaoundé, those in the Faculty of Science, and those pursuing other disciplines; their work was much easier as they navigated using French and English interchangeably in their academic work (Musonge, interviewed 2011).

The application of the immersion model did not go hitch free. The fact that French-speaking students boycotted the GCE examinations in 1968 and 1969 revealed shortcomings in the policy, despite efforts to keep them at the same level of compliance with the

English-speaking students (Langji, 2022: 80). The program increasingly resembled an Anglophone-designed assimilation agenda rather than the intended bilingual goal. The challenges in extending the policy to other institutions ten years after its initiation, prompted negative reactions and reluctance from the educated Anglophone community (Langji 2022: 81). As one of its pioneer students reported, the immersion practice of bilingual education was not only financially burdensome for the state but also difficult to replicate in other public secondary schools due to limited human resources and logistics, to keep up with the bordering structure of Molyko. (Musonge, interviewed 2011 and Ayah interviewed 2024).

This resulted to the state adjusting its implementation strategy of immersion to a new strategy of realising the state educational agenda. This gave birth to the introduction of a simplified, less costly practice known as the coexistence, cohabitation or side-by-side policy shortly after unification in 1972.

In 1973, the immersion model witnessed some major innovations, one of which was the introduction of female students into BGS Molyko and the shrinking of the entire immersion institution into a single classroom. (Etonde 2024). Prior to 1973, the practice of bilingual education through immersion at Man-O-War Bay was exclusively for the boys (males) with the students all boarders, coming from East and West Cameroon (Ayah, interviewed 2024). Opening up the institution to students of different sex (both male and female) revolutionized the effectiveness of the immersion practice, in that, the admission into form one was no longer limited to 35 students from East and West of the Cameroon, but 70 most of whom were of the English-speaking background (Ayah, interviewed 2024).

By 1973, the existence and practice of the immersion model of bilingual education had drastically lost its flare, real motive and implementation strategy. It was within this context of diminishing significance, that the immersion model was accompanied by a new model; the coexistence of side by side (Lyonga, interviewed 2022).

Shift from Immersion to Side-by-Side Model

By 1973, Bilingual Grammar School Molyko Buea, modified the format of bilingual building of students with a new strategy interchangeably perceived as coexistence, side-by-side practice or cohabitation models. By this, bilingual education was structured to operate for the two different educational sub systems within the same campus with similar curriculum (Ngwa 2015: 46; Tchoungui, 1977:75). The coexistence practice at BGS Molyko was geared to provide an open social space of interaction to foster harmony, mutual understanding and a sense of living-together between

Anglophone and Francophone students (Ngoran Interviewed, 2024).

The cohabitation model, envisioned as a pathway to bilingualism, instead created parallel educational universes. Students from English-speaking backgrounds immersed themselves fully in the English curriculum, while their French-speaking peers were similarly confined to the French subsystem. Paradoxically, the sole opportunity for cross-linguistic engagement resided in mandatory language courses: Anglais for French students and Français for their English-speaking counterparts, a requirement spanning from forms one through five. (Dubois 2018, 78).

Operating two distinct cultural systems of education within the same campus, with classrooms located in close proximity, fostered social interaction among students outside of class. Ironically, this proximity led to a phenomenon known as "Franc-Anglia," ultimately undermining the goal of genuine bilingualism, as the school presented a facade of bilingual education, a structural framework that belied the limited opportunities afforded to students to truly master a second language (Dubois, 2018, 78).

One of the challenges the cohabitation model presented to the bilingual education project at BGS Molyko was the fact that, the model brought about laxity and disinterest in many students to take either French Language or English Language as the case represented in the two sub systems. (Langji, 2022: 94). The side-by-side practice in the application of the national bilingual policy became less productive not only in the students' lukewarm attitudes towards effectively learning a second official language, but also in the limited degree at which socialization could elicit bilingualism and social integration. In 2008, the Ministry of Secondary Education (MINESEC) started drafting a new bilingual policy that could integrate the teaching curricula of both sub systems. This was the substance of the special bilingual education program launched in 2009 (Fossi, 2013: 13).

Re-imagining classic bilingualism: The Special Bilingual Education Program

The SBEP was an initiative designed to promote linguistic proficiency and cultural competence in both French and English. As the government continued to pursue its national bilingualism policy, it recognized that the side-by-side approach was not yielding the desired results. The 1995 National Education Forum, a response reviewed key discussions and proposed improvements for the bilingual situation in the country (Awa, 2013: 45). Following the National Forum on Education in 1995, a new vision for bilingualism took shape in Cameroon. The Special Bilingual Education Program (SBEP) emerged, driven by a desire to weave bilingual education more deeply

into the fabric of the nation's schools. Law No. 98/004 served as the blueprint, mandating the integration of bilingual instruction through innovative teaching modules and a carefully recalibrated curriculum. This commitment resonated at the highest levels, with the Minister of Secondary Education expressing a clear dedication to cultivating a generation of truly bilingual citizens, individuals capable of navigating both English and French with ease and fluency (Nkongho Ayuk, 2022, 9).

The Bilingual Grammar School Molyko occupied an exceptional position within the educational landscape. Unlike other institutions, it embraced a holistic approach to bilingualism, uniquely implementing all three models – side-by-side, immersion, and SBEP – simultaneously as they were introduced. This commitment transformed BGS Molyko into a de facto pilot institution, a living laboratory for bilingual education strategies. The SBEP as it came to be known, ultimately coalesced into a three-pronged approach. The first, and perhaps most crucial, module focused on intensive language development, providing targeted instruction in Intensive English for students of Francophone backgrounds and Intensive French for their Anglophone peers. This foundational element was aimed at equipping students with the linguistic tools necessary to navigate the complexities of bilingual education.

The second module implemented a cross-curricular approach, strategically integrating the second official language into select subjects. Anglophone students found themselves exploring themes of citizenship, engaging in physical education, and undertaking manual labor activities all within the French language. Conversely, their Francophone counterparts tackled the very same subjects – citizenship, physical education, and manual labor – but immersed in the English language (Cecilia, interviewed, 2022). The third module extended beyond the confines of the classroom, embracing a co-curricular approach. This involved extracurricular activities such as excursions, theatre performances, debates, singing, and various club activities, all conducted in the second official language. This was aimed at fostering a more relaxed and engaging environment for language acquisition. Even though the program did not encompass the entire curriculum, its underlying objective was unequivocally to cultivate perfectly bilingual students, individuals who could seamlessly navigate both English and French, transcending their original linguistic backgrounds.

Within the vibrant landscape of the French subsystem of SBEP, students embarked on a journey of linguistic and cultural discovery, guided by a curriculum rich in immersion experiences (Kamela, interviewed 2024). Here, subjects like Intensive English bloomed, providing a nurturing ground for Anglophone proficiency. Citizenship Education unfurled, revealing

the intricacies of civic engagement through a new linguistic lens. Sports and Physical Education became a playground for bilingual interaction, while Arts and Crafts offered a canvas for cross-cultural expression. Club activities buzzed with the energy of shared passions and collaborative language learning, and the exploration of diverse reading cultures opened doors to new perspectives and literary worlds. Meanwhile, across the campus in the English subsystem, a similar, yet distinct, linguistic dance unfolded. Ten subjects, demanding 23 hours of study each week, were taught in English, providing a solid foundation in the dominant language. However, the French language also held court in four key domains: *Français Intensif*, a deep dive into the nuances of the language itself; *Éducation à la Citoyenneté*, exploring the tapestry of civic responsibility; Arts et Cultures, celebrating the richness of Francophone artistic expression; and *Activités de Clubs*, offering a welcoming space to practice language skills in a more relaxed, social atmosphere. Thus, the two subsystems, though distinct in their approach, both wove a tapestry of bilingual education, nurturing students' linguistic abilities and fostering a deeper understanding of the world around them (Langji 2022, 79).

Importantly, outside these dedicated French-language pockets, all other subjects, regardless of whether they explored scientific principles or artistic expression, were taught in the students' first language (English or French), ensuring comprehension and a supportive learning atmosphere within the National Bilingual Educational Policy (Sama, 2022). The explicit goal of these specialized classes was to cultivate fluency in reading, writing, and speaking both French and English, a lofty ambition reflected in the curriculum's structure. To this end, five hours per week were dedicated to intensive language immersion: intensive French for bilingual English subsystem students and intensive English for their French subsystem counterparts. This time was further divided, with three hours devoted to core language skills and two hours to literature lessons and debates, a mirrored approach designed to enhance comprehension and communicative abilities (Jean et al., 2022, 43). For the French subsystem's special bilingual classes, this translated to a curriculum where ten subjects were taught in French for 23 hours per week, complemented by four subjects taught in English for 9 hours, demonstrating a clear emphasis on French language instruction within this particular program.

A crucial aspect of the Special Bilingual Educational Program was its integration within the pre-existing cohabitation model, operating concurrently within both the English and French educational subsystems. The English subsystem housed "special bilingual" classes ranging from form one to upper sixth, while the French subsystem mirrored this structure with "*Sixième Bilingue*" through "*terminal Bilingue*" classes,

with the exception of science classes at the high school level. Notably, both the "form one special bilingual" and "*Sixième Bilingue*" cohorts, comprised of approximately 60 admitted students each, benefited from a substantial commitment of ten hours per week dedicated to bilingual instruction (Lyonga, interviewed 2024).

A significant limitation of the model was its confinement to arts and science subjects in the first cycle, narrowing to only the arts at the High school level. This exclusion of science from the bilingual program in high school arguably hindered the objective of the State, as expressed to cultivate highly proficient citizens in both arts and sciences (Sama, 2022, 95). Nevertheless, the Special Bilingual Educational Program (SBEP) was deliberately merged with the existing cohabitation model, with both the English and French subsystems operating parallel bilingual classes within the same campus. This integration sought to foster bilingual proficiency through both intensive language modules and various extracurricular activities (Fossi, 2013, pp. 180-187).

CONCLUSION

This paper explored the changing nature of the practice of the national bilingual education policy in Anglophone Cameroon, with focus on the Federal Bilingual Grammar School Man-O'-War Bay and later Bilingual Grammar School Molyko Buea, experiences. The findings revealed that, in line with government policy to establish a Cameroonian linguistic and cultural identity through leveraging the French and British language heritages, a nascent phase of bilingualism by immersion, was initiated. It was a policy that aimed at providing equal values for French and English as official languages. The model that effectively ran from 1963-1973, was fraught with enthusiasm to establish veritable national bilingualism. Its subsequent reduction in space to a single classroom operation put to question its potency. The study further establishes that to expand the scope of bilingual immersion; the coexistence model was adopted. This model emerged in the gap created by the immersion model to give opportunity for students to appropriate bilingualism more or less by extracurricular socialization than by any intended curriculum. This model created a more open space for interaction, shoved cost in logistics and human resources but left to question the effectiveness of official bilingual acquisition as envisaged in Cameroon's public policy. This challenge, witnessed in ensuring that the practice met the state bilingual objective, eventually lured reflections towards the consideration for a Special Bilingual Education Program in 2009. The changes introduced by the SBEP, although not similar to the nascent immersion model of bilingualism was somehow made the bilingual education policy in Cameroon's public secondary schools more of a semblance of certification than integration. The limitation of the initiative to the arts compromised its holistic bearing on the vision of the state to connect

culture, education and scientific development. The consistent bias to few students enlisted in the program stood as exhibit of an absence of will to expand structured bilingualism in the schools. Thus the paper submits that, certain contravening circumstances and flexibility to accommodate evolving trends, conditioned the shifts in the bilingual education formats at Man-O-War Bay and later Molyko.

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