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Policy Forum

Professionalism, Trust and Accountability : Supporting Conditions for Curriculum Reform

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A gathering of school leaders is an important occasion at any time. This moment may be as important as any time in the past decade. We are 5 years into the 10 year time frame set out by the Curriculum Development Council for the changes we are making in the learning environment for the young people of Hong Kong. In less than 4 years the first cohort will benefit from the change to the 334 academic structure.

There are claims and counter claims about the nature, coherence, timing and benefits of complex changes involving 50,000+ education professionals in kindergarten to post-secondary and nearly 1 million students. This enterprise is funded 2006/07 at \$56.5b taking up 21.3% of government expenditure.¹

We are all involved in something very important. There should be rigorous debate. Sometimes however, less constructive criticism can lead to 'labels' which disguise quite complex matters: 'excessive workload', 'too many changes all at the one time' 'chaotic implementation', 'insufficient resources', 'conflicting policies', 'excessive accountability' etc. We are in danger of believing all these descriptors to be equally robust and valid across time and place, and, in the intense media spotlight of Hong Kong, may become conventional wisdom. The problem with criticism rather than critique is that it spills outside the profession and has a tendency to wash back and

¹ The education share of GDP has grown from 3% in 1996/97 to 4% in 2005/06.

undermine our confidence as we engage daily in trying to establish the conditions for improved learning at system, school, and classroom levels.

Where do we stand?

It is worth reflecting on some headline data which gets lost in the cacophony surrounding discussion about education in Hong Kong.

- Professional upgrading

Percentage of teachers with a degree and teacher training

	1999/2000	2005/06 (provisional)
Primary teachers	29	68
Secondary teachers	68	88

Percentage of kindergarten teachers with/in progress to a Certificate of Early Childhood Education or equivalent

	2000/01	2005/06
Kindergarten teachers	6	45

- High and improving learning standards

Throughout key stages we can find evidence of high and improving standards of students learning. We all know the critical importance of languages and mathematics as foundation for deep understanding.

- (1) Program for International Reading Literacy Survey (PIRLS) (Dr. Tse and colleagues HKU) study of biliteracy of P4 students indicates improved Chinese literacy and that our top bi-literate students are excellent by international standards.
- (2) While it is too early to establish any trend, TSA P3 results, improved in 2005 over 2004, at territory level in Chinese, English and Mathematics.

- (3) The pre-S1 HKAT scores show consistent improvement.

Mean Scores of Pre-S1 HKAT²

	<u>2001</u>	<u>2002</u>	<u>2003</u>	<u>2004</u>	<u>2005</u>
Chinese	53.7	55.8	56.7	58.4	60.3
English	50.6	51.0	52.6	54.1	56.6
Mathematics³	53.2	52.4	49.8	50.1	52.7

- (4) The percentage of day school students in HKCEE English Syllabus B achieving C or above (benchmarked to an ‘O’ level pass) has risen from 8.6% in 1997 to 12.35% in 2005.

- (5) Hong Kong’s 15 year old students in 2003 in PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) ranked 1st in Mathematics, 3rd in Science and 10th in Reading (with only 5 jurisdictions ahead). PISA also establishes HK among the most effective education systems (investment and achievement) and having higher levels of equality in learning outcomes.

- (6) Our university Graduates have taken the International English Language Testing System (IELTs) over the past 3 years in increasingly large numbers on a voluntary basis. The average IELTs score has risen each year (6.46 in 2002/03, 6.51 in 2003/04 and 6.64 in 2004/05). The great majority have been assessed at level 6 and above (competent users).

- Stakeholder perceptions

We have been monitoring the perceptions of principals, panel heads and teachers in our KLA surveys for three years.

² Scores quoted have been converted to the equivalent scores of 2001.

³ As for the Pre-S1 HKAT mean score for Mathematics, a new Primary Mathematics curriculum was introduced in 2002. Schools are at a stage of transition from the old to the new curriculum. Slight fluctuations in students' performance in 2003 and 2004 are understandable. The recent trend is on the rise.

There is consistent support for the objectives of the curriculum reform, indications of steady implementation of key strategies suggested in the first phase (5 years) and confidence that students are benefiting from the changes taking place in our schools.

However, in order of levels of agreement about the changes and perceived improvements, principals are followed by panel heads and then further back by teachers. For all groups primary educators have higher levels of agreement than secondary educators. These stakeholder views are consistent with those found in other reform efforts overseas.

- Quality assurance

Our quality assurance processes, including QAI, ESR and Focussed Inspections also indicate steady improvement in embedding the curriculum reform in classrooms and schools over the past 5 years. However, as expected, the variation within and between schools remains marked.

- Resources

As professional educators we will always insist the quantum of resources available to education should be as high as possible. The investment in education can be illustrated by the pupil/teacher ratios over a sustained period.

Pupil/Teacher Ratio

	<u>1995</u>	<u>1999</u>	<u>2000</u>	<u>2003</u>	<u>2005</u>
Primary	24	22	22	19	18
Secondary	20	19	18	18	17

We also need to acknowledge the increasingly rich evidence base which suggests that while the quantum of resources *matters*, the effective use of those resources *matters more*.

Is this the evidence we would cite for a system in chaos and crisis?

As we all know these headline data only tell a part of the story. However, without

data I am just another person with an opinion.

So how do we account for persistent perceptions that standards are falling, that morale amongst the profession is low, that students are placed under too great pressure, that there are too many changes all intersecting at this moment in time?

Connecting up the reform

Part of the problem is our inability to clearly articulate the interconnectedness of the changes underway. At the risk of making a similar mistake to those who challenge the work we are doing, it is possible to define a 20 year change process (10 gone, 10 ahead) as one reform which is broken down into the 3 major questions :

- What should students learn? (balance of knowledge, skills, values; scope and sequence : the '**curriculum**')
- How should we help students learn? (building on prior learning, organising for learning : '**pedagogy**')
- What have students learned? (feedback, formative/ summative : '**assessment**')

Education professionals ask and answer these questions every day at student, class, school and system levels. All the so-called initiatives and changes are to assist us with the answers to these questions (some tentative, some more certain). Professionalism is underpinned by the improvements we make to our understanding and implementation in practice of these three questions. Our role as system and school leaders is to un-clutter the "busy-ness" of schools so we can focus on the core issues.

There are probably only a handful of documents which are policy imperatives and which articulate our directions. These would be

- Reform Proposals 2000;
- Learning to Learn and the Basic Education Curriculum Guide;
- The MOI Guidance and Review;
- The SCOLAR Action Plan; and
- 334 Road Map

These are significant documents which map out the next 10-15 years. All other documents are connected to these major ones : they have different target groups;

different time lines; different levels of details; different expectations. As education leaders we must make 'sense' and demonstrate the 'coherence' of our measures.

An example : School Based Assessment

The implementation of SBA for Chinese and English languages for HKCEE 2007 is creating lots of anguish.

It has been argued that teachers have been bombarded with changes; having to manage a wider diversity of students, and deal with the introduction of SBA, suggesting they are unrelated.

Even without more recent changes to banding and SSPA etc, teachers have faced a wider range of students staying longer in secondary schools. In 1990 77.5% of S1 students progressed to S5; in 2005 93.8% had stayed on. In line with community aspirations for higher levels of education our young people will stay on to S6 in future. This increased participation is a radical change faced by all developed jurisdictions.

It is not possible to turn back the clock and concentrate all our efforts on educating an elite. Student diversity becomes more apparent as we focus more on learning and develop a better understanding of individual differences. School based assessment, rather than additional to managing diversity, is a key curriculum, pedagogical and assessment process to assist teachers to answer our three questions.

20% of HKCEE English (Syllabus A+B) students did not attend or attempt any part of oral language paper in 2004. We cannot accept this as a given. The design of SBA in English is to motivate students to build on what they know, their interests, support for each other, and in a less threatening formative environment, demonstrate their learning. This does not in any way diminish the need for us at a system level to better prepare the ground for change. Our evaluations indicates we have under-estimated the preparation necessary, particularly in a high stakes environment. The response needs to be strategic implementation and stepped up support. It cannot be abandonment.

Balancing the need for reforms and at the same time supporting our professionals

The 'crisis' of SBA can also help us understand better the workload issue.

The education changes underway are both ambitious and necessary. They have directly or indirectly created accumulative workload on every individual teacher and school leader (and bureaucrat!). Yet, we share a dilemma. The children and young people of Hong Kong deserve the best preparation possible to nurture their motivation and capacity to learn so that they can contribute to the economy and society of Hong Kong/China and be life-long learners. Hence finding ways to implement and sustain improvements without creating excessive workload for school heads and teachers is imperative.

Changed work and excessive workload

Curriculum development and changes in learning and assessment is an on-going task for school leaders and teachers. Improving the quality of learning for all students has always been the core work of teachers. Supporting this process means that teachers need the opportunity to reflect on their teaching practices and to try out new ideas. This means that where curriculum reform suggests changes in the way learning might be organized and implemented, it cannot be interpreted as only “adding to the workload” and were somehow separate from the core function of teaching, to support and assess the progress of student learning.

We must find ways to reduce unnecessary burdens on schools, principals and teachers which detract from the essential process of supporting student learning. However, we should not conclude that excessive workload and pressure are an inevitable consequence of reform.

School level influences on excessive workload

Excessive workload is a powerful factor in causing a distressing school climate. The links between workload, morale and the role of supportive leadership are well known. Along with health-checking system influences for which EMB must take responsibility, we need to consider how school based solutions might help alleviate current workload issues.

Many studies show that a major cause of teacher workload is the school level design of core processes. The percentage of non teaching time for subject teachers can vary considerably from around 20% of their working week in one school to over 50% in another.

The teacher stakeholder survey being administered by schools over the past two years indicates that teacher morale varies considerably from one school to another. When teachers were asked to respond to the statements “the teachers have a good morale” and “I have a strong sense of satisfaction working in this school” the differing levels of satisfaction between schools were marked, displaying a range of almost 60 percentage points on the first question, and 40 percentage points on the second. Since these teachers as a group in each school are subject to the same external influences, it is clear that the school’s organization of the work environment has a profound influence on teacher morale and satisfaction. This means that there is no one size fits all solution to the workload issue.

The Committee chaired by Prof. Edmond Ko will consider the way forward based on the evidence at hand. Findings here and overseas provide practical steps that schools and system can take to reduce teacher workload.

Higher levels of accountability as a source of pressure

A clear source of pressure on the profession is the heightened expectations of our community for higher levels of student learning. This is not unique to Hong Kong.

The world is changing, China/HK is changing, our schools are changing and therefore education professionals feel the increasing strength of the winds of change. The term ‘accountability’ is often used to describe outcomes being pursued.

There are several levels of this ‘accountability’. Teachers have always been, and will continue to be accountable to their students and parents for the highest possible standards of learning. Schools will be accountable to their communities for creating the best learning environment for their students. The government is accountable to the HK community for the overall standards of our students, for the effectiveness of the substantial investment in education and to ensure our economy and society benefit from highly capable graduates of our education system.

It is not surprising that often the first things which are targeted as creating additional pressure are elements such as basic competency assessment (TSA), new forms of school based assessment, school self evaluation and external school review, qualifications and professional upgrading of the profession and the like. The focus on the ‘three assessments’ is symptomatic of these pressures. However these accountabilities are the basis of a hard won professionalism. They, in different forms,

provide evidence of the success of our teaching and learning at student, class grouping, school and system level. If we look outside the education sector, in other professions and services, similar accountabilities and tensions can be seen and heard : health and social welfare, disciplined services, the legal sector are examples.

Despite the tensions caused by these accountabilities we have worked very hard with educators to ensure they provide quality feedback and are improvement oriented.

It is true that the confounding factors of demographic change and enrolment decline have led to some undesirable consequences during the early implementation of External School Review and TSA. Our response has been to develop protocols on the use and access to school level data to ensure feedback and information is improvement oriented. Active and honest seeking of feedback is at the heart of informed professionalism. We need to manage the distortions rather than returning to times when systematic, balanced and benchmarked evidence about student, school and system performance was sadly lacking.

Trust

Finally, I want to address the issue of 'trust'. There have been many commentators suggesting excessive accountability, top-down control and insufficient support of schools. This conception is often bundled with a view that there is breakdown of trust at different levels of the education sector. Conversely, we are charged with leaving too much to schools in the area of school based curriculum development. In fact there is always a balance of top-down and bottom up in all change processes. Values and perspective of the participant will generally determine their stance on this dichotomy.

The sentiment of a breakdown of trust is hard to unpack and understand at a deeper level. There would hardly be a person who would not value 'trust' and hold that it is crucial to our success. However, if we set about discussing it now, we would find it an elusive concept.

The different connotations of trust become apparent if we consider the SSE/ESR process. One version is that any review process at all is tantamount to not trusting schools. An alternative version is that moving from an inspectorial model, such as QAI, to an empowering model where reviewers value-add to the schools own evaluation shows a significant shift towards trust in schools and their professional

staff. Schools need to own the process and not treat it as compliance and a one-off event. Our inspectors base their work on trust that schools will honestly assess their strengths and weaknesses. Another version is that schools opening themselves up to external scrutiny and seeking improvement indicates a desire that their school community trust their professional work. Yet another version is that the Hong Kong community can trust the effectiveness and quality of evaluation and review processes undertaken by their schools.

Building these levels of trust requires a great level of sophistication and careful balance and acceptance of the different interests of stakeholders.

All leadership models tell us ‘looking outside’ and ‘outsiders looking in’ is critical to a vibrant healthy organization. “The fish is the last to discover water”. Schools are no different to any other organization.

Our evaluations show most schools have valued the SSE/ESR model we are adopting, and adapting, during its first cycle. We have made significant modifications based on a mutual trust that we would evaluate as we proceed. The ESR can only be valuable if schools trust the processes and honestly use all available data to evaluate their progress.

I would also argue that the introduction of TSA and SBA are based on professional trust. For TSA, the competencies have been professionally defined and assessed by teachers. We started out with class teachers doing the marking on the basis it would be excellent embedded professional development and would assist all teachers to understand and internalise the new standards framework. Similar thinking, though in a significantly higher stakes environment, is behind SBA. Ironically, we changed to central marking for TSA in 2005 for two reasons; to reduce workload and to combat suggestions that the results would not be sufficiently valid.

Michael Fullan has suggested trust involves

- reaching shared understanding;
- assumptions of good faith;
- trusting yourself as well as others; and
- trusting processes as well as people.

There are, in his view, three forms of trust that need to be built.⁴

1. Competence trust, which involves
 - respecting people's knowledge, skills and abilities;
 - respecting people's judgment;
 - involving others and seeking their input; and
 - helping people learn.

2. Contractual trust is concerned with:
 - management expectations;
 - establishing boundaries;
 - delegating appropriately;
 - encouraging mutually-serving intentions;
 - honouring agreements; and
 - being consistent.

3. Communication trust focuses on:
 - sharing information;
 - telling the truth;
 - admitting mistakes;
 - giving and receiving constructive feedback;
 - maintaining confidentiality; and
 - speaking with good purpose.

Together, we need to take the time on building trust. Time is a relative concept. Too fast a pace to us could be appropriate or too low in the eyes of others. However, it is fair to say that given the time we have spent in Hong Kong education reforms, we have achieved a lot in less than 5 years. We should celebrate, and, proceed with the reforms with trust, confidence and careful steps. Our students trust that we will do our best to help them learn to learn.

⁴ From Reina, D. & Reina, M. (1999) *Trust & Betrayal in the Workplace*, Berrett-Koehler, San Francisco.