

# ***“Student Assessment and its Social and Cultural Contexts: How Teachers Respond to Assessment Reforms”***

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# ***Barriers to Innovative School Practice: A Socio-Cultural Framework for Understanding Assessment Practices in Asia\****

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## **Introduction**

Lee (2001, p.10) identified a trend in Korea and Japan where assessment reform policies appeared to be moving towards “Diversification/Loosening” compared to England and the United States where assessment policies were characterized as moving towards “Unification/Tightening”. Lee (2000, p.11) described the different operational approaches to assessment reform:

*...more uniform curriculum and high-stakes assessment with a focus on academic achievement were expected in England and the U.S., whereas more adaptive curricula and flexible assessments towards whole-person education were expected in Korea and Japan (Lee 2001, p.11)*

Lee’s analysis is only partially correct. While there is certainly a widespread curriculum reform agenda across the region, this paper will show that curriculum reform has not been accompanied by equally broad assessment reform. There are two key issues that shed light on why Lee’s initial analysis appears to have been somewhat premature.

The first issue is related to the increasing importance attached to participation in international large scale assessments such as the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) run by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and similar literacy, civics and science studies run by the International Association for Educational Evaluation and Assessment (IEA). Asian countries are usually well represented in these studies<sup>1</sup>. What is more, Asian students are often seen to perform very well. Yet on closer analysis, this performance is not uniform across the region. East Asian students – from Hong Kong, Korea, Japan and Taiwan, along with students from Singapore,

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<sup>1</sup> The IEA Civic Education Study was an exception with Hong Kong being the only Asian society represented.

are often ranked close to the top. Yet students from other South East Asian countries - Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia – often come near the bottom. Clearly, geography is not the key factor since Singapore students situated in South East Asia do very well. These regional disparities are not easy to explain. Thus one outcome of such international studies and their results is that assessment has remained centre-stage across most of the region although, it is not the kind of assessment referred to by Lee (2001). It seems important to understand assessment reforms in this broader context of increased emphasis on large scale assessment.

A second issue relates to the purposes of assessment and the cultural contexts in which they are embedded. Biggs (1996) has argued that the focus on examinations in the so called “Confucian heritage cultures” (CHC)<sup>2</sup> is a distinctive feature that has impacted on student learning. By extrapolation, it might also be argued that the kind of learning that has habituated CHC students to examinations may also assist them to do well in large scale international assessments. This cultural argument has not been uncontested (Morrison 2006) but the issue remains that certain forms of assessment such as examinations have been privileged in some Asian countries in ways that they are not many western countries. Yet this argument does not directly address the issue of regional disparities because examinations are as prevalent in South East Asia as they are in East Asia. Nevertheless, for whatever reasons, examinations remain an important part of assessment cultures in many Asian countries and their influence needs to be taken into consideration when assessment reforms are discussed.

The issues outlined above provide a rich yet complex backdrop against which to examine assessment policy and practices in Hong Kong schools. The purpose for discussing them here is to locate teacher action and practice in broader socio-cultural contexts that help to construct that practice. The purposes of this paper, therefore, are to:

- Provide a background for understanding Hong Kong teachers’ responses to assessment reforms;
- Identify the distinctive characteristics of assessment across the Asia-Pacific region and seek to account for this distinctiveness.
- Explore the cultural contexts of assessment in the region and identify the way such contexts facilitate or restrict assessment practices.

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<sup>2</sup> CHC cultures include broadly Korea, Japan, China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore (although in the latter there are also representatives of other cultures).

## **The Purposes of Assessment – Selection or Learning?**

### **Assessment for Selection**

Public examinations remain a topic of community interest and concern in many Asian countries. The reasons for this interest vary. It might be the 15,000 students in Bangladesh who were expelled for cheating in the 2001 public examination (Lawson 2001), the threat to stability and cohesion now said to be posed by the competitive college entrance examinations in China (Hartman 2006) or the extensive public consultations that were undertaken in Hong Kong in 2005 when the government decided to do away with both the Hong Kong Certificate of Education (Form 5) and “A” levels (Form 7) and introduce a single public examination at the end of Form 6 (Education and Manpower Bureau 2005). Examinations attract this public attention because they are part of the social structure of many Asian societies providing the main pathway to further study in elite institutions such as prestigious secondary schools or universities. It has been pointed out that “the first written public examinations were introduced over 2000 thousand years ago, in China, to select the most able citizens for positions in the civil service and to reduce the effects of patronage” (The World Bank 2001). This historic function of public examinations is now widespread although the destinations of successful examinees are now more diverse. It is in this sense that public examinations are seen as a selection mechanism screening out some students and endorsing others for further education. This process of selection does not operate in a vacuum, despite the continuing belief in public examinations as an objective selection mechanism. Examination systems create their own distinctive social practices that become part of the competition associated with limited places in elite institutions and the almost unlimited demand for them. Discussed below is the the most noticeable of these practices and certainly the most well documented.

Known as “juku” in Japan, “buxiban” in Taiwan, “hagwon” in Korea and “tutorial school” in Hong Kong, “tutorials” in India - Bray and Kwok (2003, p.611) have conceptualized the activities of these ‘cram schools’ under the broader more positive practice of “private supplementary teaching” since not all private tutoring arrangements take place in dedicated tutorial centres Kwok (2004a, p. 64) has also pointed to the negative connotations of “cramming” in the sense “that it is related to rote learning”. The broader terms is preferable in describing the breadth of activities in which students engage outside the formal schooling system. Nevertheless, the negative aspects of “cramming” for examinations cannot be dismissed “because a major purpose of tutoring is to help pupils to gain qualifications, demand tends to increase close to the major public examinations, and then abruptly to decline once the examinations are over” (Bray & Kwok 2003, p.614). “Cram schools” private tutoring and public examinations are, therefore, inextricably linked.

There are significant pedagogical implications that flow from this link. Kwok (2004a, p.71) has referred to the “idol” tutors who “delineated piecemeal educational processes and outcomes, entirely determined by open examination results. Their marketing styles and pedagogical characteristics reinforced open examination pressure and encouraged students to value the importance of open examinations to their life/career”. From the point of view of students themselves, cram schools provided “shortcuts to learning, thorough past examination paper analysis, and even seemingly reliable open examination tips in Hong Kong, Taipei and Tokyo (Kwok 2004a, p.70). Foondun has also reported in the South East Asian context the negative aspects of what he refers to as “private tutoring” that results in an:

*emphasis is on specific examination skills... (and)... inordinate cramming and learning by heart lengthy lists of verbs, comparatives, masculine and feminine, singulars and plurals etc ... But there is worse. In one examination, examiners found 40 scripts of 40 pupils identical. The teacher admitted that “he had prepared about 100 possible questions and made his pupils learn the answers to them by heart (Foondun 2002, p.505)*

Given the negative impact of cram school and private tutoring activities, why do they persist? As Foondun (2002, p.503) has noted, it is not that governments are unaware of either the purpose of function of such extra-classroom activities. Yet whether it is in Singapore, Korea, Indonesia or Myanmar, attempts at control have been largely unsuccessful. In the terms of Kim and Lee (2002, p. 2), cram schools are “perfect substitutes” for public schools and therefore at least as important to the community which provides direct support for them.

The reasons for such support are multiple. Kim and Lee (2002, p.25), with specific reference to the Korean context, point to government policies themselves:

*The theory and empirical evidence provided in this paper strongly suggest that rampant private tutoring is a market response to the under provision of public education and the heavy regulation and strict controls of the government. It is predicted by our model and confirmed by our empirical finding that students with high academic ability, high family income, and whose parents are highly educated, spend more on private tutoring because their educational demands are not properly met by the formal school system that is provided by the government.*

Foondun (2002, p. 491) agrees that it is the element of competition in the education system that gives private tutoring its edge as families seek to gain a relative advantage for their children “in the education race”, whether it is at primary or secondary level. While ever there is a prize at the end of the race – whether it is entry to an elite secondary school or university, then competition becomes the

dominating force that guides the behaviour of parents. Kwok (2004b, p. 8), with special reference to Hong Kong, has argued that modernization, economic growth and technological advancement provided “the ultimate causative forces” influencing the availability of private tutoring in a meritocratic society where “education was the major screening device for upward social mobility”. Herein lays the real outcome of the “race”: cross-generational social and economic gain. It is this for which parents are willing to pay and for which so many students suffer what the Koreans call, “*ipsi-jiok* ... entrance examination hell” (Kim & Lee 2002, p.4).

While Kwok (2004b, pp. 10-11) has highlighted the social and economic contexts in which cram schools and private tutoring seem to thrive, he has also referred to the broader cultural contexts of Confucian heritage societies as a factor that helps to explain why it is that success in examinations is so important. He makes the very interesting point that while such an explanation is widespread, he does not believe that there is sufficient evidence to support it at this stage. Other writers, however, have been less reticent to attribute cultural factors as causes of parental commitment to examination success. Gray (2001), in his review of Zeng (1999), makes the point that “the test is not viewed primarily as an aptitude or I.Q. test, as in the West; rather, what is being measured is how well trained a student is. In other words, what is valued is not the ability to acquire information, to efficiently learn new things, and make connections between them, but the personal qualities--discipline, obedience, 'spirit,' a good memory, the ability to postpone gratification--of the individual who can successfully pass the test”. These are Confucian virtues that both Gray (2001) and Zeng (1999) see as operating principles in modern Confucian heritage cultures.

Nguyen, Cees and Pilot (2005, p.407) have summarised a range of literature supporting the idea that cultural factors do play a significant role in different aspects of teaching and learning for students in Confucian heritage cultures. This is an issue that will be returned to in the third section of this paper. Yet as Kwok (2004b, p.10) has pointed out, cram schools and private tutoring are also features of many non- Confucian heritage societies in which case the ‘cultural’ argument becomes less persuasive. Even in a mainly Confucian heritage culture like Singapore, it has been argued that the examination system is not so much a relic of Confucianism as a sorting device to ensure racial equality and harmony (Moore 2000). It is this meritocratic aspect of the exam system that maybe generalizable across Asian cultures, even if it is most deeply embedded in Confucian heritage culture countries. Meritocracy implies competition for limited opportunities and it is this competition that seems to encourage parents to seek whatever means they can to assist their children to do well.

### **The role of large scale assessments in assessment reform policy**

Kellaghan and Greaney (2001, p.87) have commented that “the most remarkable development in assessment towards the end of the 20th century has probably been the growth in its use to measure the



achievement outcomes of national systems of education, either considered uniquely (in national assessments) or in the context of the performance of other education systems (in international comparative studies of achievement)". While examinations and national and international assessments can broadly be grouped together as "modes of assessment", there are nevertheless, a number of significant differences between them including purposes, focus and uses.

The World Bank (2001), for example, has identified differences of purpose and focus. Examinations provide information on individuals whereas national assessments usually provide information on entire education systems. The purpose of providing information on individuals is to facilitate selection processes whereas the purpose of system wide data is to monitor general education levels as well as making a general assessment about the "health" of the system as a whole. Kellaghan and Greaney (2003, pp.10-12) have pointed out in the African context that examinations are not good tools for enhancing the quality of an education system, but indeed may do the opposite. Powdyel (2005, p.47), on the other hand, has argued that in Bhutan examinations have served this system level function. Yet both are agreed, that the specific role of national assessments is that they can be directed at system level issues thus enabling policymakers to address concerns about the education system.

While examinations are pervasive across Asia, national assessments, in the sense mentioned above, are not. (Kellaghan & Greaney 2001, p.91). Thailand has included national assessments focussed on the quality of individual schools as part of its education reforms (The World Bank 2006, p.66) as has Hong Kong with its Basic Competency Assessment (Curriculum Development Council 2001, p.81). Under the influence of The World Bank, Vietnam, Cambodia and Bhutan have also embarked on the development of national assessments as tools for monitoring the quality of their education systems (Griffin & Thanh 2006; The World Bank 2007; Powdyel 2005). In addition, a number of Asian countries has taken very deliberate decisions to participate in international large scale assessments such as the Program on International Student Assessment (PISA), and the various international assessments conducted by the International Association for the Assessment of Educational Achievement (IEA) in areas such as mathematics, science, reading, civic education and information and communications technology. The outcomes of these international studies have provided some interesting and keenly debated results. They have also raised important issues about the nature and purpose of student assessment.

In terms of results, it is the dominance of students from East Asian countries that is a hallmark of these assessments. The outcomes of the *Trends in Mathematics and Science Study* (TIMSS) consistently ranked students from Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, Japan and Korea as the top performers. In Grade 4 Mathematics, students from Singapore, Hong Kong, Japan and Taiwan were the top four performers out of twenty five countries (Mullis, Martin, Gonzalez, & Chrostowski 2004, p.31). In Science, it was the same four countries, although with a different order: Singapore, Taiwan, Japan and Hong Kong.

Yet such results were not Asia wide: students from the Philippines ranked 23/25 in both Mathematics and Science (Martin, Mullis, Gonzalez, & Chrostowski 2004, p.37) In Grade 8 Mathematics students from five Asian countries were ranked in the top five (Singapore, Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Japan) with Malaysia at 10, Indonesia at 34 and the Philippines at 41 (Mullis, et al. 2004, p.38) In Science, students from Singapore, Taiwan, Korea, Hong Kong and Japan were ranked 1-4 and 6 respectively. Malaysia was ranked 20, Indonesia 36 and Philippines 42 (Martin, et al. 2004, p.41) The TIMSS' assessment is curriculum related, but there is also evidence from the more skills related PISA assessments that Asian students also do very well.

In mathematical literacy for example, Hong Kong's fifteen year olds outperformed all students from both OECD and non-OECD countries. Korean, Japanese and Macau students also did very well, coming within the top ten countries. Yet, as with TIMSS, students from countries such as Thailand and Indonesia were ranked towards the bottom of the participating countries (OECD 2004a, p.94). The results for problem –solving were much the same. Korea, Hong Kong, Japan and Macau ranked 1, aeq. 2, 4 and 6 respectively. Again Thailand and Indonesia ranked towards the bottom (OECD 2004b, p. 42) For science literacy, the story is similar with some variation in the positions taken by the East Asian countries, but the same gap between East and South East Asian countries (OECD 2004a, p.294). These results from both TIMSS and PISA raise a number of issues.

With international studies such as these, there seems little reason for the participating countries to run national assessments of their own. In an important sense, large scale internal assessments can take the place of national assessments, pointing as they do to strengths and weaknesses in the performance of students. The international context adds to the weight of such assessments because governments can get some sense of where their education systems stand vis à vis their international economic competitors. Whether this is a valid educational reason for such assessments is another question, but it is certainly a reason that has some currency with governments in the region. Of course, the news is not good for all such governments so that in countries like the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia these results give caused some soul searching.

Of course, the results presented above are very basic and there are much more sophisticated analyses that seek to explain the pattern of results (for example, Chui & Ho 2006). In East Asian countries, however, these results coincide with the widespread education reforms that have been the focus of much of this book. On the one hand, radical change is being proposed to the school curriculum and in some jurisdictions (e.g. Taiwan and Hong Kong) the examination system. Yet the results of international assessments seem to suggest that current arrangements for curriculum and assessment are capable of producing outstanding comparative results. Yet the status quo in many East Asian classrooms has been highlighted by Leung (2001, p35) as “content oriented...examination driven...teaching is very traditional and old fashioned”. It is this tension between tradition and results

that characterise much of the debate about the performance of East Asian students in international assessments and in some instances draws into question the rationale for current educational reforms.

There has been a considerable amount of literature attempting to account for the way the traditional curriculum, teaching and assessment methods that characterize East Asian classrooms lead to superior student performance. Biggs (1996) and Marton, Alba and Tse (1996) argued that part of the explanation related to learning styles. What many western observers thought was rote learning these scholars identified as memorisation that led to deep understanding. Ironically, an assessment strategy such as an examination had the potential to reward memorisation so that there was a clear link between assessment and learning. Leung (2001) has pointed to both the conception of teachers in East Asian societies and the focus on their scholarly as distinct from pedagogical role. He has argued that culturally teachers in East Asia are more concerned with the class as a whole than with individuals so that the care of a large group of students is not overly problematic. When this is coupled with the deep subject matter knowledge of teachers then the context is one in which knowledgeable teachers take on the responsibility to ensure that their students are equally knowledgeable. The high regard in which teachers are held facilitates this process and creates a learning context that values knowledge acquisition. For Leung, these are deeply cultural issues reflective of what are now popularly called “Confucian heritage cultures”. Thus the explanation advanced for the dominance of East Asian students in international assessments is largely a cultural one. It is an argument that has been examined in some depth by Kennedy and Lee (in press) but further attention cannot be devoted to it here.

### **Assessment for Learning: Alternative Approaches to Assessment and their Impact in the Asia Pacific Region**

Public examinations systems and large scale assessments can be characterised as promoting “assessment *of* learning” rather than “assessment *for* learning” (Assessment Reform Group 1999). Such a distinction is an important one in educational terms. Assessment *of* learning is a summative process that seeks to find out what students know at a particular point in time – at the end of a unit of work or a key stage of schooling. It is a measure or judgment about what learning has taken place. This is what public examinations and large scale assessments do: measure what students know so that they can be ranked from most knowledgeable to least knowledgeable. Assessment *for* learning, on the other hand, is any form of assessment that provides feedback to students on the progress they are making in their learning. It can take many forms ranging from questions asked by a classroom teacher, to classroom tests and checklists that students themselves can use to check their own learning progress. The purpose of such assessment is to improve learning and move students from where they are to where they need to be. It does not compare students in any way – its purpose is to assist students to improve their learning. This approach to assessment has gained in popularity in many Western countries in recent times. The importance of this trend was best demonstrated when the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) declared that “teachers using formative

assessment approaches guide students toward development of their own learning to learn" skills that are increasingly necessary as knowledge is quickly outdated in the information society" (OECD 2005, p.22)

Whether such an approach is called "assessment for learning" or "formative assessment", what is clear is that such approaches seek to make assessment a more relevant and meaningful process for students. It stands in contrast to the structural rigidity represented by public examination systems and large scale assessments across the region. Yet, unlike in the West, there is not a widespread movement across the Asia Pacific region to promote and adopt these classroom based forms of assessment. Nevertheless, the examples that do that are worth noting. An external evaluation of Thailand's current approaches to assessment articulated a rationale for adopting new forms of assessment that could well be applicable across the region (Office of Commercial Service [Queensland University of Technology] 2002, p.28):

*The current understanding of assessment models and procedures used in Thailand rewards conformity, memorisation, recall and knowledge reproduction. Teachers need a significant amount of training and guidance in new and alternative methods of assessment.*

This view was supported within Thailand when the Secretary-General of the Office of the National Education Commission proclaimed publicly that (Kaewdang 1999).

*.... assessment is the key factor that can affect the learning behavior. Without the reform of assessment, it is rather difficult to reform learning. In order to expand the scope of evaluation and assessment beyond the multiple-choice type of tests, Section 26 [i.e. of the National Education Act, 1999 ] states that educational institutions shall assess learners' performance through observation of their development; personal conduct; learning behavior; participation in activities and results of the tests accompanying the teaching-learning process commensurate with the different levels and types of education.*

Thailand's emphasis on more classroom based assessments of learning is related to its current educational reform agenda. Thus there is little indication of how successful these attempts will be.

Hong Kong, on the other hand, has had a relatively long history of attempting to introduce new forms of assessment (Yu, Kennedy, Fok & Chan 2006). The current reform agenda in Hong Kong is no exception but there seems little reason to believe that it will be any more successful than previous attempts (Fok, Kennedy, Chan & Yu 2006). Carless (2005, p.51) has shown how difficult assessment reform is in Hong Kong and proposed a somewhat complex framework to try and account for Hong Kong teachers' resistance to such reforms. It includes micro level factors such as personal beliefs and

values as well as macro level factors such as the existence of high stakes examinations. Assessment reform, at least in Hong Kong, does not appear to be an easy task.

Hong Kong and Thailand are not alone in their attempts to introduce new forms of assessment into their education systems. There is also evidence of similar reform in countries like China (Gu & Berry in press; Gao, 2005; Han 2006), Philippines (Department of Education [Philippines] 2004)) and Singapore (Singapore Examinations and Assessment Board (2006), Sellan, Chong, & Tay 2006, Fan and Quek, 2005). Yet such reform agendas in no way challenge the public examination systems in these countries. Perhaps more importantly, such attempts at innovation differ in form from jurisdiction to jurisdiction and across the region there is no agreed definition of these classroom based assessments. Table1 shows different approaches to classroom based assessments being used in different countries.

**Table 1: Exemplars of Classroom Based Assessments in Selected Asia Pacific Countries**

Country	Source	Example of Classroom Assessment
China	Gu and Berry (in press) Gao (2005)  Yan (2006)	Oral assessment Assessment Saloon: A Developing Technique for Student Assessment Cambridge Young Learners Test
Malaysia	Lim and Zhao (2005)	“Mathematics assessments are usually given in the form of formative tests such as short tests or monthly tests”
Indonesia	SEAMEO Secretariat (1998)	“Continuous (formative) student assessment is practiced widely and is the responsibility of each school. There are several types of formative assessment, i.e., monthly mid-term and final term examination. The results of the formative assessment would affect the result of the final term exam, the summative assessment”
Philippines	Department of Education [Philippines] (2004)	“Assessment for Learning: Practices, Tools and Alternative Approaches”
Singapore	Singapore Examinations and Assessment Board (2006) Sellan, Chong, and Tay(2006) Fan & Quek (2005)	“Formative Assessment Strategies” Project work Integrating New Assessment Strategies Into Mathematics Classrooms: What have we learned from a CRPP Mathematics assessment project?

There are a number of points to make about Table 1. Apart from China, there is no evidence in any of these countries that assessment reform is part of a broader reform agenda. The China examples,

however, appear to be forms of assessment that are outside the mainstream – additional to the examinations that remain the real high stakes events for students. The Singapore example of Project Work is somewhat different. Project Work is a compulsory GSE A Level subject and the nature of the subject requires new approaches to assessment. The real reform is in the nature of the subject, new approaches to assessment simply follow. The Mathematics example in Singapore is part of a research project and does not appear to be systemic. Similarly in the Philippines, where what is on offer is a single set of teacher inservice activities focused on assessment for learning and seemingly outside of any broader assessment reform process. What SEAMEO refers to, however, under the guise of “formative” assessment, is really a regime of testing geared to preparing students for the final examination. Thus apart from the assessment policy directions referred to earlier in Hong Kong and Thailand, there is no coherent approach to assessment reform in the region. As Table 8.1 shows, attempts at changing assessment practices or highlighting alternative practices across the region are fragmented and piecemeal

Examinations continue to reign supreme as the dominant mode of assessment in the Asia Pacific region. This suggests that the so called “international transfer of assessment” (Sebatane 2000) has been limited to large scale assessments but not to classroom based assessments. Yet it can be detected in other forms of assessment. The dominant assessment cultures in the region are summative rather than formative, competitive rather than learning oriented and increasingly used by governments to measure national educational progress. Together, the importance attached to examinations and large scale assessments do not seem to provide any incentive for innovative classroom based assessment practices.

## **Conclusion**

Western assessment literature suggests the possibility of broad changes in assessment practices focussed on student learning and encapsulated in the slogan “assessment for learning”. Yet such an approach to assessment is not characteristic of much of Asia, with notable policy exceptions in Hong Kong and Thailand. Examinations remain a key assessment strategy across countries. The importance of examinations is reinforced not for any genuine educational rationale but for social reasons concerned with the allocation of limited places for much sought after secondary schools and universities. Even in Hong Kong where there has been considerable support for alternative methods of assessment, the newly designed terminal school examination will still allocate the same limited number of university places. This high stakes social function of assessment gives it a role and function that can trivialize other modes of assessment. The potential for assessment reform in this context may well be limited.

International large scale assessments have not challenged the role of examinations but rather may well have reinforced them, at least in East Asia. Students from East Asian countries tend to outperform not

only their peers in the West but also in other parts of Asia. Research has suggested that the reasons for this are largely cultural. Yet perhaps more importantly for the purposes of this paper, the strategies used for success in examinations - memorisation for the purpose of deep understanding and teacher dominated classroom that involves deep caring for the whole class – are also the ones that account for success in international large scale assessments. This culturalist argument has been questioned by Kennedy and Lee (in press) since it has the potential to stereotype of East Asian students and at the same time misrepresent the values of students in South-East Asia who do not do as well as their East Asian peers. Yet the point to note here is that in many parts of the region the results of international large scale assessments do not suggest the need for different approaches to assessment.

As far as alternative approaches to assessment are concerned the Asia Pacific region faces two problems. First, in most countries there is no systematic reform agenda for assessment to accompany curriculum reforms: conservative approaches to assessment have been retained to meet the needs of new curriculum designed to produce creative, innovative and problem solving students. Second, in those countries where policy change advocating assessment reform have been advocated, examinations still play an important social function that is difficult to ignore. Assessment reform, therefore, remains a distant goal across the region. At this point in time it is difficult to see how it can be given greater priority since it would involve confronting significant social and cultural issues that are deeply embedded in many societies across the region.

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# ***Shifting from ‘Assessment of Learning’ to ‘Assessment for Learning’: Creating New Assessment Cultures in Hong Kong\****

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## **Introduction**

Hong Kong was dominated by external examinations and in-school testing for the second half of the twentieth century but even so, attempts were made to introduce assessment reforms. As early as 1992, new modes of assessment were highlighted introduced through the Target and Target-related Assessment. Since the return of sovereignty to Mainland China, a series of government policies proposed changes in assessment, both for basic education and the senior secondary years. These have presented a considerable challenge both for policymakers and schools that were used to traditional approaches to student assessment.

The changes to assessment being proposed in the current reforms are radical. Before portraying these new assessment practices, delineating the new assessment approach will be helpful to understand the development of assessment in recent curriculum reform in Hong Kong. In the past, assessment mainly focused on ranking of students. According to Curriculum Development Council (CDC) (CDC, 2002, booklet 5, p.2), “assessment is the practice of collecting evidence of student learning in terms of knowledge, skills, values and attitudes through observation of at student behaviour when carrying out tasks, tests, examinations, etc.” This definition focuses on collecting evidence of student learning, which has broadened the scope of assessment when compared to “assessment of learning”. The aims of assessment are:

For students to

- understand their strengths and weaknesses in learning;
- understand what they should try to achieve next and how best they might do this;
- improve their learning based on feedback from teachers and other assessors.

For teachers and schools to

- diagnose the strengths and weaknesses in the learning of their students;
- provide quality feedback and specific advice to students so that they know how to improve their learning;
- review and improve their learning objectives / expectations of students curriculum design and content, strategies and activities so that they are better suited to the needs and abilities of students.

For parents to

- understand the strengths and weaknesses of their children

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- consider how to help their children to improve their learning
- have reasonable expectations on their children

For the government to

- evaluate the standard of students in specific areas
- rank and select students for admission purpose (CDC, 2002, booklet 5, pp.2-3).

In simple terms, the aims of assessment are mainly concerned about providing diagnostic assessment and feedback for various stakeholders. According to the definition and aims of assessment portrayed above, the nature of assessment has been changed. These aims put the emphasis of assessment in “for learning”, while still upholding the ranking and selection of students for the government. To portray the essence of this recent assessment reform, it includes important targets both “for learning” and “of learning” (CDC, 2001, p.80).

Drawing on documentary evidence from the Education and Manpower Bureau and the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority, as well as responses of the public, this paper will analyse the proposed changes to assessment. This paper, therefore, will include two main parts:

1. to review on new assessment practices as a policy innovation in Hong Kong;
2. the public responses to the suggested changes.

## New Assessment practices

The new assessment practices are outlined in the “Reform proposals for the education system in Hong Kong, are confirmed in “Learning to learn” (CDC, 2001) and are substantiated in “Action plan for investing in the Future of Hong Kong” (EMB, 2005d). The line of thought in these documents is consistent, moving towards assessment for learning (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Recommendations of assessment practices or measures in government documents (summarizes from EC, 2000, pp.15-16; CDC, pp.81-82; EC, 2005d)**

	EC (2000)	CDC (2001)	EC (2005d)
<b>Practice</b>	<b><i>Internal Assessment Mechanism</i></b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Use various modes of assessment, including flexible formative assessment.</li> <li>● Eliminate excessive dictation exercises, mechanical drilling, tests and examinations to allow more useful learning activities.</li> <li>● Put in place BCA in Chinese, English and Mathematics at various</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Schools can develop a school assessment policy and practices consistent with widening the learning space and emphasizing independent learning capabilities.</li> <li>● Primary schools can make better use of the space left by the abolition of the Academic Aptitude Test (AAT) for more meaningful learning activities</li> <li>● Schools and teachers can use feedback to inform students.</li> <li>● Teachers can share with students the goals of learning and targeted standards in order to enhance students’ ownership of learning.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Replace HKCEE and HKALE by HKDSE.</li> <li>● Wider range of assessment approaches will be used to reflect curricular intentions, including the use of school-based assessments.</li> <li>● Adopt SRA approach to enable student</li> </ul>

	<p>stages of basic education to improve learning and teaching.</p> <p><b>External Assessment Mechanism</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Vis-à-vis internal assessment, public examination serves the functions of certification and selection, playing a crucial role in directing students' learning.</li> <li>● Improve the examination system starting from the modes, contents and assessment methods.</li> <li>● examine abilities (e.g. organizing, communicating, cooperating skills) that are not easily assessed through written tests</li> <li>● Establish a new public examination to replace the existing HKCEE and HKALE if the three-year senior secondary education system were to be adopted</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Teachers can do assessment collaboratively with students, or allow students to have peer assessment or self-assessment.</li> <li>● Teachers can use assessments to find out what and how students think, probe students' higher order thinking skills, creativity and understanding of concepts</li> <li>● Schools can use the "Student Assessment Programme" of the BCA (Eng, Maths, Chinese) as one basis for improving learning and teaching.</li> <li>● Schools can help students to develop a portfolio of learning and assessment throughout school years.</li> <li>● Schools should include key attitudes, self-management, and moral and civic qualities in report cards as part of student achievement and basis for improvement</li> <li>● Schools can set their own base-line of student achievement and use as a basis for planning.</li> </ul>	<p>performance to be reported with reference to a set of five levels consisting a set of descriptors and exemplars</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Use individual learning profile to record student's experiences and achievements throughout senior secondary years learning.</li> <li>● Make changes of university admission procedures and allow admission with a broader set of criteria.</li> </ul>
<b>Measure</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Develop evidence-based quality criteria in line with the curriculum framework to help teachers judge student performance and progress.</li> <li>● Work with HKEA to develop combined curriculum and assessment guides for various examination subjects.</li> <li>● liaise with the university sector and relevant agencies about broadening university admission criteria and providing information on student achievement (e.g. portfolios)</li> </ul>	

Before going into details about these proposed assessment practices, some principles are stressed in this assessment reform. Examples are easy to quote: EC (2000) recommends the use of various modes of assessment including flexible formative assessment, and proposed to eliminate excessive dictation exercise, mechanical drillings, tests and examinations; CDC (2001) suggests schools and teachers use feedback (e.g. informal, formal, verbal, written), and to inform students of their strengths and weaknesses, and proposes schools should include key attitudes, self-management, and moral and civic qualities in report cards as part of student achievement and also as a basis for further improvement. While these principles are helpful to promote assessment for learning, they are by no means concrete measures to facilitate implementation by schools and teachers. EMB (2005d, p.10) decided to introduce a wider range of approaches to assessment and reporting, including the use of moderated SBA, SRA and a student learning profile. Indeed, all principles proposed in these three documents are in line with

the main theme of assessment reform – assessment for learning.

EC (2000) shows that the government wished to change assessment at both policy and school levels. Though retaining a public examination for assessment of learning, the document lays down the principles of assessment for learning. Three major aspects of assessment reform are worth mentioning: 1. to increase the modes of assessment, including formative assessment, in school assessment and public examinations; 2. to put in place BCA (including Chinese, English and Mathematics); 3. to use HKDSE to replace HKCEE and HKALE. It is clear that EC constructed the framework for the change of assessment.

CDC (2001), following the footsteps of EC, made assessment for learning the prime target in all its proposed practices and measures. However, most of the proposed practices are principles with the word “can” or “should”, but not clearly stating specific practices. Yet, it stated three concrete measures: 1. to develop evidence-based quality criteria in line with the curriculum framework; 2. to develop combined curriculum and assessment guides for each subject to make assessment and objective consistent; 3. liaise with the universities about broadening university admission criteria. The 10 practices and 3 measures being proposed are fragmented and non-concrete items. Nevertheless, they are stressed assessment for learning and are consistent with EC’s advice. EMB (2005d), then, proposed action plans for the assessment reform. All measures, such as replacing current HKCEE and HKALE by the HKDSE, SBA, SRA, student learning profile and changing of university admission procedures, are concrete ones and it is assumed they will be put into practice.

To conclude, these three documents outline the assessment reforms. The EC (2000) outlines the reform framework, the CDC (2001) advocates practices and measures, and the EMB (2005d) requires up action plans. It is reasonable to argue that proposals of these three documents are incremental in nature. All of them are consistent with the target of bringing assessment for learning to this examination-oriented society that traditionally focusing on assessment of learning. Whether this target can be achieved, however, remains problematic. It is important to note that this target challenges the cultural context of Hong Kong and this can be shown by the practices and public responses to this change.

## **Practices and public responses**

To facilitate the implementation of assessment for learning, a few practices were proposed by CDC (2001, pp.81-81) and EMB (2005d). These measures are at the systemic level and are designed to ensure that public assessment is consistent with the curriculum objectives. These include BCA, school-based assessment, standards-referenced assessment, student learning profile and the introduction of Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education.

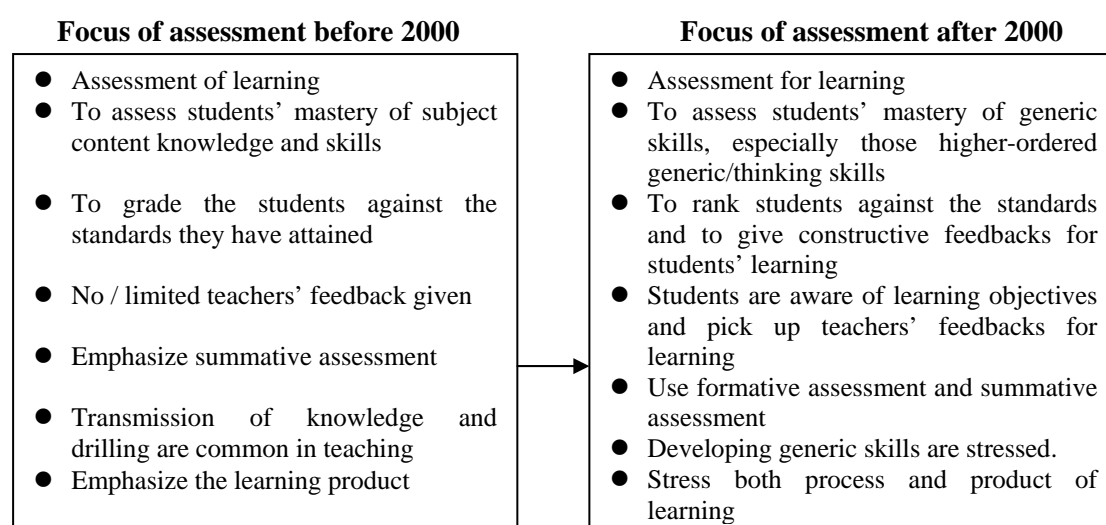
## A. Approach of ‘assessment for learning’

The concept of “assessment for learning”, aiming to provide information for both students and teachers to improve teaching and learning:

*Both the **processes** (e.g. inquiring, independent learning, use of generic skills, reflections) and the **products** of learning (e.g. knowledge / concepts, problem-solving capabilities) are important by the assessment methods most suited to them (e.g. oral tests for oral communication, discussion for collaboration, presentation / performance for creativity, tests and examinations for knowledge). (CDC, 2001, p.80)*

Since 2000, HKSAR and its related organizations continuously stressed the importance of the change of assessment and proposed new assessment practices as a policy innovation for the city (Yu et al., 2006). This change has been regarded as radical (e.g. Carless, 2005) and has to face stern challenges since it is not in line with the traditional culture of the society (Fok et al., 2006).

**Fig 1: Comparison of assessment policy before and after 2000 in HK (after Chan et al., 2006)**



With this new assessment approach, various assessment practices are proposed since 2000 and have been put into practice since then. However, it should be noted that these assessment practices have been challenged by the public. As mentioned by Chan et al. (2006), this newly adopted assessment reform will require a shift of people's minds for its successful implementation. Thus, it is important to have an in-depth understanding of this new change. Here, the various practices to implement the idea of “assessment for learning” are described.



## B. Basic Competency Assessment (BCA)

BCA has two components namely Student Assessment<sup>3</sup> and Territory-wide System Assessment (TSA). They cover the three subjects of Chinese Language, English Language and Mathematics (EMB, 2004). Student assessment is to be carried out by the teachers during classroom teaching and is a low-stake assessment while TSA is a low-stake assessment designed by the government (EMB, 2004; HKEAA, 2006) but high-stake assessment perceived by the schools and teachers (Chan, 2007).

The TSA is administered at the territory level by the Government. It is mainly conducted in paper-and-pen mode and there is also an oral assessment component for the two languages. Students at the three levels of Primary Three, Primary Six and Secondary participate in this assessment. This System Assessment was first conducted in mid 2004 and expanded to cover Primary Six and Secondary Three in 2005 and 2006 respectively (EMB, 2004). In TSA, the dimensions / skills for the subjects of Chinese Language and English Language are i) reading, ii) listening, iii) writing, and iv) speaking. The dimensions of Mathematics are i) number & algebra, ii) measures, shapes & space, and iii) data handling (HKEAA, 2006).

Initially, it is claimed that TSA is a standards-referenced assessment. The purpose of the assessment is to see how students have attained the Basic Competency (BC) levels set for Chinese Language, English Language and Mathematics. Through the TSA we can better understand the performances of the students in the different dimensions/skills of the three subjects (HKEAA, 2006).

In order to restrict the TSA as a low-stake assessment, the officials carefully treat the reporting of the results. They provide report to schools about their standards in the three subjects of Chinese Language, English Language and Mathematics, so that schools could draw up plans to increase effectiveness in learning and teaching (HKEAA, 2006; EMB, 2004):

*From the report, a school will understand the performance of its students as a whole in each dimension/skill of the three subjects. For each subject, the report will show the number and percentage of students who have attained the BC level. Alongside, the corresponding percentages of the entire cohort of students in Hong Kong will also be provided for reference. From the report, a school may better understand the*

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<sup>3</sup> The Student Assessment is a resource bank provided through the Internet. It is not compulsory. It is provided to assist teachers in developing and selecting the appropriate assessment tasks for their students (EMB, 2004). In fact, the online Student Assessment has been made available to primary and secondary schools in 2003 and 2005 respectively. More than 60% of primary schools and 80% of secondary schools have used this Student Assessment to assist teaching and learning (EC, 2006, p.20). Student Assessment will not be discussed in this article.

*strengths and weaknesses of its students as a whole, which in turn facilitates the development of a school plan to enhance learning and teaching (HKEAA, 2006).*

As TSA aims to provide information for schools to enhance the effectiveness of learning and teaching, the results of individual schools will not be ranked or made known to the public and are prohibited for promotional purposes. Schools are requested to follow the protocol strictly to avoid any misuse of information in order to avoid unnecessary competition among schools (HKEAA, 2006). It is expected that the assessment data will be used only for school improvement purposes (EMB, 2005b). However, there is no feedback on individual student performance. On the other hand, the government makes systemic use of the results for further enhancement of teaching and learning effectiveness (EMB, 2005b). The results will be studied carefully, so as to adjust where needed the training and other learning and teaching support for schools (EMB, 2005b).

It is well-known that the perception of the public about TSA is different from its stated purpose. Though the aim of TSA is to provide schools, school management and the Government information on standards in key learning areas for school improvement purpose, schools and teachers perceive TSA as a high-stake assessment that is believed to have significant impacts on school. Though the government has repeated its pleas for primary schools not to drill students, stressing the TSA does not affect students' academic careers and the assessment is low-stake in nature, primary schools and teachers have devised various ways to help students to prepare for this assessment. In reality, all schools were concerned about their performance in the TSA, perceived that results would indirectly or directly affect school's reputation, gave plenty of drilling exercises to students (Clem, 2006-07-08; Lee & Yiu, 2006). Some schools cancelled physical education and music classes and cut extra-curricular activities to spare time for preparing the tests and attending the tutorial class. Schools, with the aid of publishers to publish a lot of exercises, request students to buy BCA exercises and model tests and monitor to do these exercises regularly (Clem, 2006-07-08). More seriously, a few incidents show that schools and teachers use unethical ways to respond to the assessment. There were claims that teachers asked weaker students to stay away from TSA. In 2005, there were 90 primary schools having "unusually high" absentee rates in student assessments (Clem, Nov 5, 2005). Over 2 times the average number of students were absent from the schools when school held TSA tests. And, "..... a few examination scripts in three schools showed clear evidence of malpractice. Three cases have been fully investigated and the results have been referred to the Education and Manpower Bureau for further action." (HKEAA, 2006, p.3).

These incidents show that schools and teachers treat the TSA as high-stakes assessment instead of a low-stake assessment being proposed by the government (Clem, 2006-07-08). The TSA may have inadvertently reinforced our schools' attachment to examinations, and all its negative implications (SCMP Editorial, Oct 28 2006). The actual actions of schools and teachers show that the perceptions

are quite different from that of the original purpose. Needless to say, these practices lead to negative impacts in schools.

Education Convergence & Hong Kong Primary Education Research Association (2006), sending questionnaires to investigate the views of primary and secondary schools, got 1173 replies from 300 schools. The results showed that the TSA exerted pressure on students and teachers, and affected the teaching in schools (See table 2). In fact, student in Primary six need to attend internal examinations, BCA and pre-S1 examination. Schools respond by imposing a lot of exercises, model tests and coaching, which are affecting the teaching and learning in schools (Education Convergence, et al., 2006).

**Table 2: Views of primary and secondary schools for TSA (TSA)**

Views on TSA	Strongly disagree and disagree	No comment	Strongly agree and agree
1. TSA increases the examination pressure of students	4.9	6	89.1
2. TSA interferes daily teaching	5.4	9.8	84.8
3. TSA is a tool of EMB to monitor schools	3.7	20.6	75.7
4. TSA does not help to improve teaching	26.1	27.4	46.5
5. The content of TSA is not the same as the subject content in our school	31.8	19.2	49
6. The items of TSA are too difficult	22.2	33.2	44.6
7. School arrange pre-test exercise for student to enhance the results of TSA	3	4	93
8. Our school will adjust subject curriculum with reference to TSA performance of students	6.6	18.9	74.6
9. HKEAA should make public the standard of all subjects	10.2	15.6	74.2
10. TSA can assess the basic competency of Chinese, English and Mathematics	17.1	29.1	53.8
11. TSA exerts pressures to teachers' work	2.6	3.3	94.1
12. TSA not suitable to take place annually	5.2	19.7	75.1

It is interesting to investigate the context that led to the differences between the proposed nature and the perceived nature of TSA. The context for this perception is complex like the closure of primary and secondary schools due to drastic drop of the birth rate, the examination-dominated culture and the reputation of the school with good or bad results. Yet, it is worthwhile to note that government helps to arouse the interest of the public. When the results of TSA are released, the government emphasizes: "There was an improvement in the percentage of students achieving basic competency at the primary 3 and primary 6 levels" (HKEAA, 2006). This announcement is a kind of promotion instead of sending the message of neutrality to the public. Besides, parents want to know as much information as possible. They want to have the TSA results, achievements in moral education and extracurricular activities of their children and overall performance of Hong Kong schools. Moreover, media thinks that it is right to

increase competition between schools. It argued that EMB should work with educators on how to release essential data on their performance so that parents can choose on the basis of this information the most suitable schools for their children (Ming Pao, 2006-4-11).

### **C. School-based Assessment**

Introducing SBA in public examinations is believed to be one of the significant tools for enhancing assessment for learning. In recent years, an important change in the public examination structure of Hong Kong secondary schools is the shift from a sole focus on external examinations to using both external and school-based assessment (Yip & Cheung, 2005, p.156). SBA means formative tasks count towards final marks rather than grades being based entirely on student performance in public examination (Clem, 2005). Kennedy, Chan, Yu & Fok (2006) regard this as “to move away from examinations to a greater reliance on school based assessment fuelled by teacher judgments is one further ways of ensuring less negative ‘backwash’ from external summative assessment.”

SBA is continuously mentioned in various government education documents, which indicate that this is not a new idea. It has been implemented in a number of subjects like chemistry (Advanced Level Examination), Design and Technology, and Electronics and Electricity (HKCEE) since 1978 (HKEAA, 2005). EC (2000, p.44) proposes to review the modes, content, and assessment methods of the examinations, which allow students to display their independent thinking and creativity. The newly introduced examinations are expected to involve teachers at an appropriate degree of SBA. CDC (2001, p.80), following the line of thought of EC, pinpoints the aim of assessment is to help to provide information for both students and teachers to improve learning and teaching (assessment for learning) and reiterates the need for assessment to select students for higher education (assessment of learning). EMB (2005, p.84) confirms that SBA is implemented in 13 HKALE subjects and 13 HKCEE subjects by 2006. The SBA has been adopted with an aim to improve quality of learning, teaching and assessment.

There are, at least, three major conceptual arguments supporting the introduction of SBA for enhancing student learning. Firstly, one of the main objectives for introducing SBA is that it can be constructed as assessment for learning and related to teaching (IBM, 2003, p.32). The guiding principle for the teachers is to use relevant evidence gathered as part of teaching for formative purposes but to review it, for summative purposes, in relation to the criteria which will be used for all students (Harlen & James, 1997; Yung, 2001, p.1001). In other words, teachers can use SBA results to teach and to improve student learning in S. 4 to S. 5 and S. 6 to S. 7.

Secondly, SBA, supplementing external examinations, provides a more holistic and valid measurement of student abilities (Yip & Cheung, 2005, p.156). There is a range of generic skills such as

communication skills, higher-order thinking skills, problem-solving skills, creativity and the ability to work independently or as a member of a team, which are highly valued in the modern world (EMB, 2004). It is assumed that these skills can be better assessed through SBA than through one-off paper-and-pencil examination (Chang, 2004). Another example is that SBA can reflect the language ability of students in a more holistic view (Chan & Cheung, 2006).

Thirdly, SBA meets the intentions of the education reforms that emphasize the more real-life environment learning and assessment. It is easy to understand that terminal, written, one-off high stakes examinations are not the way people work in the community or in employment. In real employment situation, people interact with others and arrive at conclusions by team-work, iteration and trial-and-error (EMB, 2004; IBM, 2003).

Most teachers, parents and students accepted the principles of SBA. According to HKEAA's survey in the first round consultation on the curriculum and assessment guides for the 24 subjects of the new senior secondary curriculum that involved on some 12,000 teachers, panel chairs and principals, the SBA is supported by schools and teachers (HKEAA, 2007b). The analysis of responses from 508 schools (including 96.5% of all government and aided schools), indicated that schools and teachers are generally supportive of the curriculum and how it will be examined. Moreover, most of them support the design and proposed weighting of School-based Assessment (SBA) in most subjects (HKEAA, 2007b). From the summary of view on NSS and Higher education, there are similar ideas to support this SBA measure. Some of the examples are:

- 62.4% of schools agreed School-based Assessment could help motivate learning and reduce the pressure of one-off examination. (Oct 04 EMB Survey);
- support SBA to reduce the risk of one public examination.

Yet, the practice of including school-based assessment results in addition to public examinations has been challenged by practitioners such as teachers in secondary schools as well as by the public (Fok et al., 2006). In an investigation of views on NSS and higher education, mentioning in the above paragraph, various suggestions or concerns were forwarded to EMB (EMB, 2005, pp.25-26). The main concerns can be categorized into two types:

#### 1. The reliability and validity of SBA

- Doubt the reliability of SBA
- Concern how to ensure fairness of SBA
- Concern about the moderation of standards across schools
- Concern about the authentication of students' work in SBA
- Should not count the result of SBA in the public examination
- ICAC will draft a set of anti-corruption guidelines for schools to enhance the fairness of SBA

- Concern that the assessment of individual's achievement in group projects.
- Support implementation of SBA but should have flexibility in the weighting.

## 2. The workload imposed on teachers

- Teachers' and students' workload will increase if SBA is adopted.
- Difficult for teachers to grasp criteria-referenced mode of assessment
- The implementation of SBA in school will create difficulties and wash back effect on teaching as it changes teacher's role from a partner to an assessor

Education Convergence (2006b), conducting a survey to collect view about SBA, suggested that teachers and principals were not convinced that SBA would be successful. According to this survey, about 60% of 2543 teachers and principals felt concerned or very concerned the fairness of the system and 70.5% English teachers, 67.4% mathematics teachers and 63.9% Chinese teachers were not confident in the system. Moreover, about 54% of respondents felt they would have difficulties in implementing the SBA. The association, revealing the opinion of teachers, launched a campaign to push for a delay and further abolish the SBA in HKCEE or in new senior secondary curriculum. Tso Kai-lok, principal of Elegancia College in Sheung Shui and vice-chairman of Education Convergence, stressed that the SBA should not be implemented until the government reduced class sizes to 30 students, increased the number of university places and allotted extra resources to schools. Otherwise, teachers do not have adequate resources to implement accordingly. He insisted that the discussion of implementing SBA should start from the beginning and schools should be given the choice whether or not to do the assessment (Clem, 2006, Sept 23). Indeed, it is normal that SBA adds pressure to schools and teachers (Fok et al., 2006).

Under the pressure of the schools, principals, and interest groups, the implementation of SBA was deferred again and again. In 2006, HKEAA announced the assessments would be simplified and phased in over three years (Clem, 2006). For the 2007 examination, SBA for schools have three options for the subjects Chinese Language and English Language: 1. submitting or not submitting assessment results; 2. submitting the results but not having them count towards students' final grades; 3. submitting marks and have them count towards students' final grade. In 2008, all schools must submit but may choose whether or not counting the marks. In 2009, SBA marks will count for all students in both subjects. The delay of SBA implementation in 2006 happened in 2007. On 19 March 2007, the Curriculum Development Council (CDC) and the Public Examinations Board (PEB) of the HKEAA approved a deferred implementation timetable for SBA in all 24 subjects of the new senior secondary curriculum (HKEAA, 2007b).

On the one hand, this deferment was well received by schools and teachers as this helped to release the immediate pressure from them and allowed more flexibility for them. On the other hand, however, the

changes invited criticisms from those schools who had prepared for SBA. Which HKEAA should act as a reliable organization to the public, the credibility of HKEAA was being suspected. Carless (2006) rightly pointed out:

*“Experiences of reform over the last two decades have led to a high degree of cynicism. Why would teachers commit to any future reform which may be watered down, postponed, abandoned or replaced? .....*

*As for the future, the decision on the pace of current implementation of SBA is school-based. Ironic or principled? A deft compromise or a lack of will? Flexibility or a failure to tackle predictable problems? ...Any volunteers to be the next reformer?”*

Within the politics, the compromise and natural concerns about workload, the dimension of pedagogy seems almost overlooked (Carless, 2006). In some sense, HKEAA was responding to the actions and opinions of the public. However, the HKEAA, or even EMB, lost its credibility over implementing the SBA consistently. Thus, the announcement of delay in March 2007 on all 24 subjects of the new senior secondary curriculum gave another blow to the HKEAA's legitimacy.

#### **D. Standard-referenced Assessment**

In 2005, the government proposed to introduce a wider range of approaches to assessment and reporting, including the use of moderated Standards-referenced Assessment (SRA) (EMB, 2005d). By this SRA, a clear indication of what a student has to know and useful information on student achievement is provided to various stakeholders (EMB, 2005d).

This change of assessment criteria did not arouse much attention. There is no specific comment from the public in media or from survey. And, there were very little comment in the summary of views on reform for NSS and higher education (EMB, 2005c) and most of them agreed, in principle, to this change. Only three supporting views were quoted:

- 70.5% of schools agreed “Standards-referenced” reporting can provide information about what students know and can do, and hence could improve student learning. (Oct 04 EMB Survey)
- Support standard-referenced approach to report results
- Over 60% of 253 secondary schools agreed with the introduction of a “standards-referenced” system. (HK Subsidized Secondary Schools Council Survey) (EMB, 2005c).

The main is concern to ensure the descriptors of Standards-referenced Assessment are fair expectations of students (EMB, 2005c). According to HKEAA, the descriptions are important for “assessment for learning” though not important for “assessment of learning”. There are very few responses received

from the public as it perceives this change is only the form of reporting and little about the content and nature of the assessment but not important for changing the ranking of students.

## **E. Student learning profile**

CDC (2001) proposed schools to include key attitudes, self-management, and moral and civic qualities in report cards as part of student achievement and basis for improvement. Schools can be done this by setting their own base-line of student achievement and use as a basis for planning for their own progress. This proposal would be substantiated by the student learning profile (EMB, 2005c). The student learning profile should provide a comprehensive picture of the full range of achievements and ability of students. This profile has two main functions: to recognize the students' abilities and achievements other than academic performance in public examinations and to facilitate students in presenting their achievements for tertiary institutions and employers (EMB, 2005d, pp.88-90).

Introducing student learning profile for senior secondary schooling did not gain much attention from the public. The summary of views on reform for NSS and higher education showed that the student learning profile was generally accepted by the public (EMB, 2005c). There were three supporting views in this summary:

- 86.0% of schools agreed that the achievements, qualifications and other learning experiences of a student throughout the years of senior secondary schooling should be recognized by means of a student learning profile.
- Agree to have Senior Secondary Learning Profiles.
- Agree to broaden the admission criteria to take into account the information in the student learning profiles (EMB, 2005c).

In general, this summary showed that schools and teachers supported this student learning profile. If there was any concern about this student learning profile, it rested on those about the reliability of the profile and workload for teachers:

### **1. Reliability of the profile**

- Incorporating other learning experiences in student learning profile may disadvantage students suffered from financial hardship
- Should include remarks from schools on students' performance in the Profile.
- Concern about the reporting of unbalanced profile, e.g. some students may be strong in some areas but weak in others.
- Recognition will be given under the Senior Secondary Student Learning Profile for students who have given blood in the school year (HK Red Cross) (EMB, 2005c, p.28).



## 2. Workload for teachers

- Suggest enhancing the function of Web SAMS to include student learning profile (EMB, 2005c, p.28).
- There is also concern about how data pertaining to the student learning profile should be stored, processed and authenticated (EMB, 2005d, p.88).

## **F. Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education**

EMB advocated replacing the current two high-stake examinations – the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE) and the Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination (HKALE) – by one examination Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE) to be taken at the end of the senior secondary stage (EMB, 2005d, pp.9-10). The aim of converting to a single examination is to cut out examinations and preparation time in order to give extra time for learning and for effective remedial and enhancement programmes (EMB, 2005d, p.11).

While there was general support for one examination by teachers, students, parents and tertiary sector (EMB, 2005c, p.23), there were also great concerns about this change. The summary of views on reform for NSS and higher education showed that the concerns about this change of public examination showed there were greater attention from the public (EMB, 2005c, p.27). These concerns are mainly about the recognition of this new examination, which is always the biggest concern of the public in Hong Kong:

- Great concern on the international recognition of the new HKDSE
- Concern how the new qualification (3-yr programme) can be benchmarked against International Baccalaureate which is a 2- yr programme
- The new system should be articulated with international qualifications e.g. TOEFL, SAT
- The date of releasing public examination result should tie in with the admission date of overseas countries

This proposed reform aims to create space for learning and for effective remedial and enhancement programmes. However, the main concern of the public, again, is on the creditability of the examination which is being stressed in this society.

## **G. Concluding comments**

As mentioned before, Hong Kong has been dominated by examinations and focused on “assessment of learning”. Trying to create a new culture is not without resistance. The public seems to dwell on the old culture and her concern is not prepared to change. However, these practices do show that the HKSAR

government tries to work on the structure to support the “assessment for learning”.

## **Discussion**

The HKSAR government has tried to change the approach of assessment from “of learning” to “for learning”. This is a bold trial to create a new assessment culture in this examination-oriented society. The introduction of BCA aims to provide information for schools to enhance the effectiveness of learning and teaching; SBA helps to enhance student learning in their learning process; standards-referenced assessment provides various stakeholders a clear indication of what a student has to know and useful information on student achievement; the student learning profile, including key attitudes, self-management, and moral and civic qualities in report cards, informs student achievement and basis for improvement; and the HKDSE cut out examinations and preparation time in order to give extra time for learning and for effective remedial and enhancement programmes. Though these practices, to certain extent, are directing to assessment for learning and are stressing the formative nature of assessment. However, it is a difficult task as this is trying to create new assessment cultures in Hong Kong.

### **A. On assessment of learning and assessment for learning**

According to quality inspection review, most of the schools had formulated clear assessment policies in regard to curriculum reform and curriculum development objectives and had adopted both formative and summative assessments. About half of the schools adopted different assessment modes to assess students’ learning progress. Project learning was most commonly used to play this formative role. Some schools could strike a balance between “assessment of learning” and “assessment for learning” (EMB, 2005a, p.18). However, some schools had not formulated policy to implement “assessment for learning” and a small number of schools still focused on summative assessment. Even worse, most schools did not have in-depth exploration of students’ strengths and weaknesses and did not use assessment information to improve learning and teaching (EMB, 2005a, p.19). EMB (2005a, p.36) was aware that the progress in implementing assessment for learning was slow and expected much effort was needed to achieve a balance between ‘assessment for learning’ and ‘assessment of learning’.

### **B. Cultural context**

It is clear that the idea of implementing assessment for learning in Hong Kong is no easy task. Indeed, the culture of this city does not accept this new concept without resistance. It can be elaborated in three aspects:

1. the domination of competitive examination;
2. the lack of trust in teacher professionalism;
3. school tradition.

Hong Kong is well-known for its domination of examinations (Carless, 2005; Chan et al., 2006; Choi, 1999; Fok, 2006; Pong & Chow, 2002). Before the introduction of curriculum and assessment reform in 2001, the assessment of Hong Kong was associated with selection (Biggs, 1996b) and exerted a profound negative backwash effect on teaching and learning (Choi, 1999). An examination dominated education system has led to detrimental effects on creative teaching and learning (EC, 1997). Biggs (1996a; 1996b; 1996c) explained the dilemmas of the ideal and real situations of assessment in Hong Kong. This could be attributed to the underlying assumptions of assessment functions to educate or to select, the quantitative and qualitative traditions, and the beliefs of teachers and parents about assessment. This approach makes the society focus on assessment of learning.

A high proportion of teachers and students emphasized on doing well in examinations and many are proud of their success (Cheng, 2004). This approach is not new. In 1982, a report that had an impact on Hong Kong educational development stated:

And they are [examinations] used to establish a ranking order among students as a basis for allocating a small number of places among a large number of applicants possessing the minimum qualification required. (Llewellyn Committee, 1982)

This situation has not changed and only the very best students who obtain high grades in public examinations could go to university for further education that prepared them for entering professions (Lau, 2005). Though the competition for tertiary places has been lessened in recent years, the emphasis on examination for selection purpose is still much stronger than in some other places (Biggs, 1996). This indicates that the main practical purpose of public examinations in Hong Kong is to select high-ability students for university admission (Chang, 2004). Thus, the wash-back effect on schools is great. They continue to make tremendous efforts to drill their students to prepare for the examinations, often at the expense of teaching and learning (Lau, 2005, p.195). Education in the classroom is largely affected by public examination (Fullilove, 1992). Chang (2004) suggests that a fair and reliable norm-referenced public examination is still a “must” in Hong Kong society. It is extremely difficult to change these well-established values, habits and modes of operation in our society. In fact, the Hong Kong community uses public examination results as a measure for revealing education standards (Choi, 1999). Thus, every school emphasizes its public examination results in their Quality Assurance Inspection report, and all primary schools pay much attention to the Basic Competency Assessment results even though it is not related to student place allocation. Besides, the outstanding results of Hong Kong students in various international assessment projects (e.g. PISA, TIMSS) (Gonzales et al., 2004; OECD, 2004) have aroused extensive interest in the community (e.g. Law, 2002). The culture of emphasizing assessment of learning is likely to be retained in the near future.

Second, there is no trust on the teaching professionals among teachers and public. Teachers play an important role in all forms of assessment. However, both teachers and public have reservations on the reliability of teachers' role in public examinations. Take the example of SBA. In an open-ended survey, a sample of 53 teachers expressed a wide range of worries (e.g. my ability to design high-quality assessment tasks, whether SBA will affect teacher-student relationship, assessment method to be used) (Cheung, 2001). A more serious issue involving teachers in SBA is that the public does not trust teachers (IBM, 2003, p.34):

*One reason put forward in the past for limiting school-based assessment is the public's ostensible lack of trust of teachers. This has been too readily accepted as received wisdom. It dates from a period before teaching was a trained profession, and it no longer fits the modern education system.*

Numerous questions about the roles and judgments of teachers are raised, which are related to validity and reliability found in SBA (Chang, 2004; Hau, 2004). In fact, teachers and the public of Hong Kong have paid special attention to the reliability, fairness, role, and professional skills of teachers in school-based assessment scheme of public examination (Yung 2001; Choi, 1999). According to research and government document, problems of these questions are difficult to be tackled (Chang, 2004). Broadfoot & Black (2004, p.16) rightly perceived that teachers' role in summative assessment is not easy to be recognized.

Thirdly, it is also important to note that teachers and schools lack the capacity to implement the assessment for learning (Carless, 2005). Assessment for learning exists only when information is used by teachers and pupils to modify or adapt the teaching and learning activities (Cowie, 2005, p.137). And, this is achieved by ensuring that pupils should receive "detailed, positive and timely feedback with lots of advice on how to improve." (Brown et al., 1995, p.81). Thus, feedbacks needs to be seen as a key function for all forms of assessment (Kennedy et al., 2006). However, teachers view the SBA as additional work imposed on them. Taking the chemistry as an example, Yip & Cheung (2005) reported that the school-based practical assessment was time-consuming:

*Many teachers view teacher assessment as additional work imposed on them by the authorities and, together with the lack of implementation skills and supporting resources, the scheme adds extra workload and pressure to their routinely busy timetable.*

Indeed, it is difficult for Hong Kong teachers to give detailed and timely feedback when the tradition of teaching is transmission, the class size is big, the packing content of the curriculum and the pressure of public examinations.

### C. The way forward

Though facing challenges to put assessment for learning into practice, it is clear that HKSAR government has committed to change the structure (e.g. BCA, SBA, SRA, student learning profile, HKDSE). Whether or not these are successful is yet to conclude, they have aroused tremendous responses from the public.

In fact, schools and teachers in Hong Kong are quick to respond to this assessment approach. Many schools stress 'assessment for learning' in their school plans or annual reports.

Secondary schools, facing the pressure of public examinations, try to include this approach into their teaching. A secondary school worked out various measures to implement this assessment approach:

- Conduct assessment to monitor the effectiveness of the English Bridge Programme for S.1.
- Methods such as written examination, written reports, projects and oral presentations were adopted to assess students' performance comprehensively.
- Tests of all subjects were administered at regular intervals to monitor teaching progress and evaluate students' performance.
- Quality feedback was given to students to enhance learning effectiveness.
- Encourage teachers to let students perform self-evaluation.
- Student peer assessment was done in some subjects (KTGSS, 2006, pp.8-12).

HPCCSS (2005), another secondary school that has very good public examination results, set high priority to assessment for learning and teaching. She lends support from tertiary institute to hold activities for their teachers and provides professional development for looking at assessment for learning in student's work. Tak Sun Secondary School (TSSS, 2005, p.8) introduces the concept of 'assessment for learning' and promotes good assessment practices such as:

- Promote and strengthen the use of formative assessment to enhance learning and teaching;
- Promote the effective use of Best Work Portfolio and monitor its implementation;
- Review and refine the reporting system;
- Use the assessment data for improving student learning, curriculum evaluation and school planning.

Besides the secondary schools, primary schools also tried hard to cope with the assessment approach proposed by EMB and CDI. One excellent example is the HKUGA Primary School (HKUGA, 2006) who set high priority for 'assessment for learning' and regards it as one of the major concern for the school (see Table 3). Yet, the above schools reports do not provide a full picture for the responses from the public (cf. Carless, 2005).

**Table 3: Assessment for Learning as major Concern in 2006-2007: (HKUGA, 2006, p.47-49)**

Implementation Plan	Date	Teachers involved	Resources	Evaluation Methods	Success Criteria
Summative assessment  Use assessment data for further planning, re-grouping within class, reflecting and shaping pedagogy.	Nov - June	All English teachers	Assessment data.	Year group self-evaluation -considering external factors such as children on the SEN lists.	- 75-80% of students can obtain an agreed passing grade.
Formative assessments in various modes:  Use different modes of assessment methods for assessing various skills.	all year round	All English teachers	In different forms. E.g. observation, students' work, self and peer assessments, spelling, quests, reading, students' attitude and motivation both in independent and group learning, etc.	- A variety of modes such as observation of participation & learning attitude, assignments and assessment papers, spelling tests, oral and reading assessments, portfolios, PowerPoint presentation.	- 75-80% of students can obtain an agreed passing grade.  - All teachers agree that it reflects what it is supposed to measure (valid, reliable and accurate).
Adopt Backward Design as the major approach for curriculum development.	Whole academic Year	Panel, Vice Panel & Year Level Coordinators	1. Workshop 2. Reference Books	1. Evaluation of Unit Plan 2. Assessing teachers' feedback (Questionnaire)	1. Adopt Backward Design for unit planning 2. 80% of teachers agree Backward Design enhance learning and teaching
Conduct classroom assessment in daily learning and teaching process.	Whole academic Year	Year Level Coordinators	1. Assessment for Learning Resource Book	1. Assessing teachers' feedback (Questionnaire)	1. 80% of teachers find classroom ass. is a useful tool for evaluating the quality of learning and teaching.
Use different modes of assessment.	Whole academic Year	Year Level Coordinators	1. Assessment for Learning Resource Book	1. Evaluation of Unit Plan	1. Include at least 2 different modes of assessment apart from written assessment in each unit
Formative use of summative assessment data (After each summative assessment).	Whole academic year	Year Level Coordinators	1. Summative assessment data	1. Assessing teachers' feedback (Questionnaire)	1. 80% of teachers agree this practice can help planning, regrouping, reflecting and shaping pedagogy

## Conclusion

The idea of having a synergy of assessment of learning and assessment for learning is helpful to student learning. However, "there is no quick fix to the problems encountered in the implementation of the assessment reform". (Chan et al., 2006). Before 2000, attempts at reforming assessment in HK had faced resistance to reform and could be regarded as having little influence on student learning (Morris et al., 2000). The present assessment initiatives has proposed a clear direction (EC, 2000; CDC, 2001; EMB, 2005d) and the government has made structural changes (EC, 2000; CDC, 2001; EMB, 2005d; Carless, 2005) to support the "assessment of learning". It is reasonably to have higher expectation to this reform.

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# ***Teachers' responses to student assessment reform in a Chinese context\****

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## **Introduction**

Traditional modes of assessment focusing mainly on summative purposes have dominated Hong Kong's schools for years until the beginning of this century when a large scale educational reform was undertaken. Recommendations for change were put forward to encourage more diverse forms of assessment, especially at the level of classroom practice. There have been intense discussions on these recommendations as teachers attempt to implement the reform recommendations in the schools. The traditional examination-oriented culture within the Chinese context has made the implementation of assessment reform in Hong Kong difficult. Facing a long history of traditional assessment culture in the background and a reform culture demanding formative assessment in the new century, teachers' understanding and responses to assessment reform are crucial for its success.

A case study of four project schools<sup>4</sup> was used to show how Hong Kong teachers experiment with assessment reform in practice. The focuses of this paper are on how teachers understand student assessment and how they implement the changes in their classroom practice. It also report on what challenges teachers face in the reform process.

## **The assessment reform landscape**

Understanding the dual functions of schools: "to discriminate between students for selection purposes" and "to change students by educating them" (Biggs, 1998a, p. 315) is essential for the discussion of assessment practice in this paper. The changes in the educational landscape in Hong Kong have led to a new demand for assessment reform in recent decades.

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\* The research reported here was funded by the Quality Education Fund of Hong Kong. The views expressed here are those of the author and not the funding body.

<sup>4</sup> It is a selected sample from a project funded by the Quality Education Fund (QEF) of Hong Kong. It is a 3-year project involving a study of 17 schools, covering both the secondary and primary sectors. This study mainly draws data from a sample of four primary schools.

The expansion of basic education in Hong Kong in the past few decades has shifted the purpose of the educational system from the production of an elite population to a compulsory education for all. Free and compulsory primary education had been achieved in 1971 and it was extended to junior secondary in 1979 (EC, 1990). Since then the main function of schools has shifted from “selection purpose” to “educative purpose” in the basic schooling system. Assessment modes had to be changed accordingly. The change was initiated by *Education Commission Report Number 4*, which criticized the then selective assessment approach (Education Commission, EC, 1990). Later, the *Report on Review of 9-year Compulsory Education* raised the concern in improving teaching and learning (Board of Education, 1997, Section 6.26). This has further stimulated the debate on the goals of the educational system in Hong Kong—striking a balance between ‘selection’ and ‘education’.

With accumulated suggestions for change in the reform landscape made since 1990, the reform gained impetus when the *Reform Proposals for the Education System in Hong Kong* was published (EC, 2000). This proposal has formulated an education blueprint for the 21<sup>st</sup> century and promoted “learning for life – learning through life”. The change in the reform landscape has become more vigorous when the Government published the document *Learning to Learn - The Way Forward in Curriculum Development* (Curriculum Development Council, CDC, 2001). This document has provided the guiding principles for the large scale curriculum reform in Hong Kong in the 10 years following 2001.

One of the key reform proposals was the abolition of high-stake assessment practices with solely selective functions like the Academic Aptitude Test (AAT) at the end of primary schooling level. The removal of the AAT in 2001 “reduced the drilling and examination preparation that tended to distort upper primary school education” (Carless, 2005) and “backwash effect” brought about by examinations (Biggs, 1998a; Cheng, 1998; Alderson & Wall, 1993). In line with the educational reform, Basic Competency Assessments (BCA), comprising of the Student Assessment<sup>5</sup> and the System Assessment<sup>6</sup> were introduced. As specified in the government document (CDC, 2001), the BCA is considered a low-stake assessment designed to improve the curriculum, teaching and learning in schools. These assessments will cover the key learning areas of Chinese, English, and Mathematics at the beginning stage, but will be gradually extended to other areas in the future.

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<sup>5</sup> The Student Assessment is designed to help teachers better understand the learning needs and problems of students, so as to provide timely assistance to enhance students’ learning effectiveness. It could be done at the discretion of schools.

<sup>6</sup> The System Assessment is designed to provide the Government and school management with information on students’ standards at the levels of Primary 3, Primary 6 and Secondary 3 on a territory-wide and school basis. The “Territory-wide System Assessment” is commonly known as “TSA” among teachers.

The intention of the reform was to encourage schools to direct the energy of the students on meaningful learning. Memorization and mechanical drillings should be reduced. More formative assessment activities like “learning to read” and “project learning” have been promoted as key learning tasks<sup>7</sup> (CDC, 2001).

## The present study

This study was designed to investigate how teachers understand the nature of student assessment and how they transfer their ideas of assessment into practice. It was a study of four mainstream primary schools in Hong Kong. Data collection methods included interviews, lesson observations, and document analysis of school annual reports and sample assessment scripts. Subject panel heads<sup>8</sup> representing four main subjects<sup>9</sup> in the primary schools were interviewed. Among these teachers, four of them took up the role of Curriculum Leader in the schools at the same time. Their teaching experience varied from 7 years to over twenty years. This paper mainly drew data from the school annual reports and a total of 16 interviews.

## Background of project schools

The discussion of assessment practice needs to be understood in the context of school where teachers and students perform teaching and learning. The table below shows a summary of some basic information of the four project schools:

**Table 1: The establishment of project schools**

Project schools	Year of establishment	Total number of teachers	Total number of students
Island Primary School (IPS) <sup>10</sup>	1984	45	982
Peace Primary School (PPS)	1961	45	937
Century Primary School (CPS)	1969	28	384
Success Boys School (SBS)	2002	59	830

<sup>7</sup> The four key tasks include: “Moral and Civic Education”, “Learning to Read”, “Project Learning”, and “Information Technology for Interactive Learning”.

<sup>8</sup> Subject panel heads are the subject leaders in the school. Most of them are members of the core curriculum and assessment development team in the project schools.

<sup>9</sup> In Hong Kong, the four main subjects in the primary level include: Chinese Language, English Language, Mathematics, and General Studies.

<sup>10</sup> Pseudonyms created for project schools.

## Major findings

The major findings from the teachers' interviews are summarized by their responses to two questions: (1) how did teachers understand student assessment? and (2) how did teachers transfer their ideas of formative assessment into practice?

### ***How teachers understand student assessment***

Interviews of teachers showed that student assessment as perceived by primary school teachers embraced new conceptions of assessment. They are different from the traditional assessment functions before the assessment reform was launched as reported by the literature (e.g. Morris, 1985). It was a wider and deeper understanding of student assessment.

### ***Student assessment happens naturally and informally***

Many teachers said that assessment could happen naturally and constantly in everyday classroom practice and some even agreed that assessment could be built-in within their teaching life. One English teacher reflected on student assessment she did:

*To perform student assessment, I do not need to tell my students, "I am assessing you." However, I take note of their learning when I am grading their work. I make judgment about their progress. I know whether they put effort in their work. I note whether they have improvement. I consider this an everyday form of assessment though it is not a formal process. Instead, it has been done informally in my regular teaching. (English teacher, in SBS)*

### ***Student assessment may carry no marks***

Several teachers shared experiences they had about assessing students and gave no marks. One English teacher shared her case:

*I do not only assess a student's academic performance. As a class teacher, I assess my students taking into consideration of their family background and other things. I remembered once I put this down in a student's record: "Peter has a very anxious mother, and a laissez-faire father. Being scolded by a teacher, Peter would turn a blank face which may be considered impolite. But he might not realize this himself. He does not express his emotions very well." (English teacher, in SBS)*

This piece of information that the English teacher noted could be seen as an alternative assessment of Peter. This did not only assess the academic performance of the student but also take note of his family and personal backgrounds. This could help the other teachers to gain a more holistic understanding of a particular student.

### *Student assessment informs teaching and learning*

It was not difficult to discover that more teachers are concerned about the results of examinations. Several teachers from different schools expressed that they did not see the results of tests and examinations as the end of assessment. They made use of the assessment scores to understand what the students had achieved in their learning. For unsatisfactory outcomes, they would design follow-up activities (Curriculum Leaders, in IPS & SBS; English teacher, in SBS; Chinese teachers, in IPS & CPS; Mathematics teacher, in CPS). The following could be one good example:

*I am not satisfied with only the marks we get from student assessment. It should not end there. The evaluation of students' grades is more important. By evaluation, further reflections should be made on improving learning or the school. (Mathematics teacher, in CPS)*

The reflection above was echoed by another teacher in a different school:

*We set extended worksheets to follow up the difficulties students showed in examinations. There are two versions: one is more difficult than the other. The teacher will estimate the number of students taking one or the other, and let students try the worksheets after re-teaching the parts that students had difficulties in understanding. (Curriculum Leader, in IPS)*

### **How teachers transfer their ideas of formative assessment into practice**

Formative assessment concepts expressed by teachers incorporated ideas like continuous assessment, multiple forms of assessment including the use of self assessment and feedback.

#### *Continuous assessment practiced*

All the project schools in this study have practised continuous assessment in one or more subjects. Continuous assessment was especially popular in General Studies. Following the reform recommendations on project learning, more school based approach to project learning was evidenced. In IPS, for example, the General Studies subject head has designed an inquiry based project learning taking the advantage of the school's proximity to a fishermen's village. The subject head consulted an experienced fisherman about production of salted fish and brought the new learning to students. This project design has fitted very well into the topic of food preservation in General Studies. Continuous

assessment was conducted in the process when students inquired into the study of food preservation through making salted fish in school.

However, the way these different assessment results appeared in students' reports was a different story. Most of the traditional assessment would contribute to the grades in students' reports but not many new assessment forms did. Even these assessments were counted, they usually accounted for a small percentage of the assessment grades.

Besides new assessment mode however, some schools considered tests as one kind of continuous assessment. Formative use of traditional assessment modes was evident. Some project schools reduced the number of examinations but increased the number of tests. The former was done to eliminate pressure experienced by students, while the latter helped in breaking down the contents for revision purpose.

#### *Multiple assessment forms used.*

The main forms of assessment used were summarized in the table below:

**Table 2:. Forms of assessment used in the main subjects in project schools**

Forms of assessment	IPS				PPS				CPS				SBS			
	C <sup>11</sup>	E	M	G	C	E	M	G	C	E	M	G	C	E	M	G
Examination	☆	☆	☆	☆	☆	☆	☆	☆	☆	☆	☆	☆	☆	☆	☆	
Test	☆	☆	☆	☆	☆	☆	☆	☆	☆	☆	☆	☆	☆	☆	☆	☆
Dictation	☆	☆			☆	☆			☆	☆			☆	☆		
Project		☆		☆	☆							☆	☆	☆	☆	☆
Portfolio											☆	☆				
Oral task													☆	☆		
Reading task	☆				☆				☆	☆			☆	☆		

It is obvious that schools in general still maintained traditional assessment modes like examinations, tests, and dictations. Only SBS has made an attempt to eliminate examination for General Studies. They have designed school based curriculum assessment in General Studies. No books were used. Tests of General Studies in SBS focused on current affairs and news reports. Among various formative assessments, project learning was the most popular assessment mode. Very few schools would made attempts at portfolio assessment. Only one school (CPS) practised small-scale

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<sup>11</sup> The four main subjects under exploration in this study are: C (Chinese Language), E (English Language), M (Mathematics), and G (General Studies).



portfolio ideas. In the Mathematics and General Studies, students made personal progress reports on self learning.

### *Self assessment used.*

In SBS, students were encouraged to self-assess their performance in English tests. It was an extended section attached to the test. Students were asked to colour one of the three faces representing three levels of satisfaction about their own performance in the test. The idea was to provide extra information about the competence level of students in using a particular language area they were tested.

Other examples included self learning by computer-assisted programmes practiced in CPS while extremely large gaps between students were found.

### *Feedback valued*

Feedback which “can help students gain insight into what they can do well ... and the degree of skill they have in various areas” (Gronlund, 2003, p. 19) was used more often in different subjects. In showing the significance of feedback to a student, a teacher shared her observation in a co-curricular activity:

*Students treasured their “Student Ambassador”<sup>12</sup> passport very much. I knew one student who locked the “passport” in his mother’s safety box in a bank.*

The teacher accounted for her student’s interesting behaviour by how she saw as the value of feedback:

*The “passport” was not a grade book. The comments would not add marks to a student’s report. However, the comments made by different guests had pointed out those abilities that a student possessed but were seldom acknowledged by the marks reported in their academic reports. Many students have gained confidence from participating in these activities. In the comments made by guests, the students learnt that they were not just evaluated by their academic performance; they were valued by their personal qualities like courtesy, communication, and commitment, for example. (Curriculum Leader, in SBS)*

## **Challenges teachers face in the assessment reform process**

The challenges teachers faced in the assessment reform ranged from teaching within the classroom to meeting public assessment needs external to schools.

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<sup>12</sup> The “Student Ambassador” scheme in SBS trained student to escort guests visiting their school. Each student was given an ambassador passport in which guests would sign and wrote comments.

### 1. *Learning diversity in classrooms*

In line with developments of inclusive education practice and free education for all in the field, learning diversity has been ever growing within the classroom context. Though recommendations in using diversified assessment modes could cater for such differences, teachers expressed their difficulty in handling students of diversified learning abilities:

*The most effective mode of teaching, of course, is one-to-one mode. In the classroom, I may not be able to cater for all the needs of individual students. Instead, I will ask those particularly weak students to come to see me after class and tailor some extended activities for them.* (Curriculum Leader, in BPS)

### 2. *Insufficient teacher knowledge in assessment*

Although most of the teachers interviewed had shown a high level of understanding in assessment, there are still others who did not have the same competence. This comment made by a teacher revealed the reality:

*Honestly, not all the teachers possessed the same level of understanding about 'Project learning'. Some teachers admitted that they do not know how to guide students in doing their projects.* (Chinese teacher, in PPS)

### 3. *Deep rooted examination culture*

Biggs (1998a) made a vivid description of the Hong Kong situation:

*The situation is exacerbated by traditional beliefs in the reasons for success and failure. Hong Kong people, along with those in other Confucian heritage cultures, attribute success to effort, and failure to lack of effort* (p. 320).

This culture was deep rooted among teachers and some still believed that examinations outstood other forms of assessment. This is a remark made by a Chinese teacher:

*If there were no examinations, learning among students could not be enhanced. Without examinations, students might not know their own weaknesses and they might think, "I know*

*everything.” But in fact, they still have a lot of things that they have not mastered.* (Chinese teacher, in PPS)

#### 4. *External assessment requirement*

The intention of abolishing excessive public assessment in the reform had brought about more public assessments. They are the Territory Wide System Assessment (TSA) at primary 3 and 6, and Pre-secondary-one (Pre-S1) at primary 6. Many teachers shared their opinions about these public assessments and their impact on school assessment practices:

*We arranged make-up classes to train students for TSA. In the speaking assessment, students needed to practise talking with strangers. This is one form of assessment in TSA.* (Curriculum Leader, in SBS)

This was not a stand alone example. The English teacher in PPS also shared the same experience in providing extra lessons on drilling students for specific questions in TSA. This challenge from external assessment was echoed by the Curriculum Leader in SBS:

*We would not arrange extra drillings in holidays like other primary schools reported in the news. However, I have to admit that TSA affects the assessment mode in our school. We incorporated the type of questions used in the TSA in our school assessment. Students need to get accustomed to the particular type of question form.*

The impact of TSA on internal school assessment was great. There had been a greater proportion of multiple choice questions in the school’s examination papers just because it was one common question type in the TSA. More tests on reading were made due to the same reason.

Apart from TSA, the Pre-S1 assessment also has great impact on schools. Nearly all the Curriculum Leaders in the project schools told stories of pressure experienced by preparing students to take the assessment which took place in the summer. The result of this assessment will affect the allocation of secondary places of students from the same primary school in the following years. Pre-S1 as reflected by teachers being interviewed had been a more unpredictable assessment. Despite of the difficulties, teachers still need to drill their students because of its impact on place allocation for the school’s future.

## Conclusion

The knowledge and practice of assessing learning are going through a paradigm shift, from testing memorization to evaluating learning grounded in teaching and learning theories (Biggs, 1998b). Student assessment has become more complicated. In the project school classrooms, more formative assessments were being practised and this indicated clearly that changes were taking place. It seemed apparent from these case study schools that learning was being assessed with more diverse forms of assessment. Teachers, however, were working under greater pressure than ever because on top of the newly introduced formative assessment, traditional summative assessment such as examinations and tests still dominate the school context.

Teachers' understanding and responses to assessment reform are crucial for its success. In Hong Kong, teachers are faced with a long history of traditional assessment culture. These characteristics have challenged the reform culture which demands more formative assessment. In reality, we need both formative and summative assessment in measuring learning and informing teaching. These assessments are fulfilling parallel purposes. We need both, not one or the other (Clark, 2005). Making clear the challenges teachers face is of prime importance in helping them face assessment problems and more hopefully, translate ideas about "assessment for learning" into practice more successfully.

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# ***“We have various forms of assessments but only summative assessments count”: Case studies of the implementation of an innovative assessment policy in Hong Kong\****

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## **Introduction**

The school policy on assessment has changed since 2001 in Hong Kong. Such a change was brought about by the government to address the issues of excessive assessments in schools with a view to create a better teaching and learning environment for students and in alignment with the theme of “Learning to Learn” as emphasized by the large scale curriculum reform in 2001 (Curriculum Development Council, 2001). Since 2002, a framework of school assessment practice that incorporated an integral use of formative assessments and summative assessments has been recommended by the government through the Basic Education Curriculum Guide (Curriculum Development Council, 2002). In essence, a balance across different modes of assessment is needed for the proposed change. In order to echo the proposed change, schools started to formulate and restructure their school policies on assessment for implementation. Based on the case studies of six primary schools, this paper aims to describe the characteristics of the new assessment policy, school practitioners’ understanding of this new policy and how schools have responded to the policy through their practice.

## **The new assessment policy**

Traditionally, schooling in Hong Kong has been driven by public examinations and examinations taking place in schools at various learning stages. The famous vicious cycle, namely the “backwash effect”, referring to the influence of testing on teaching and learning resulted from the high-stake examinations starting from primary education in Hong Kong was evident in a number of studies on classroom teaching and learning (Biggs, 1998; Cheng, 1998; Morris, 1985). In view of the impediments exerted by the traditional mode of assessment and also in alignment of the recently launched curriculum change that emphasized the importance of nurturing students’ generic skills rather

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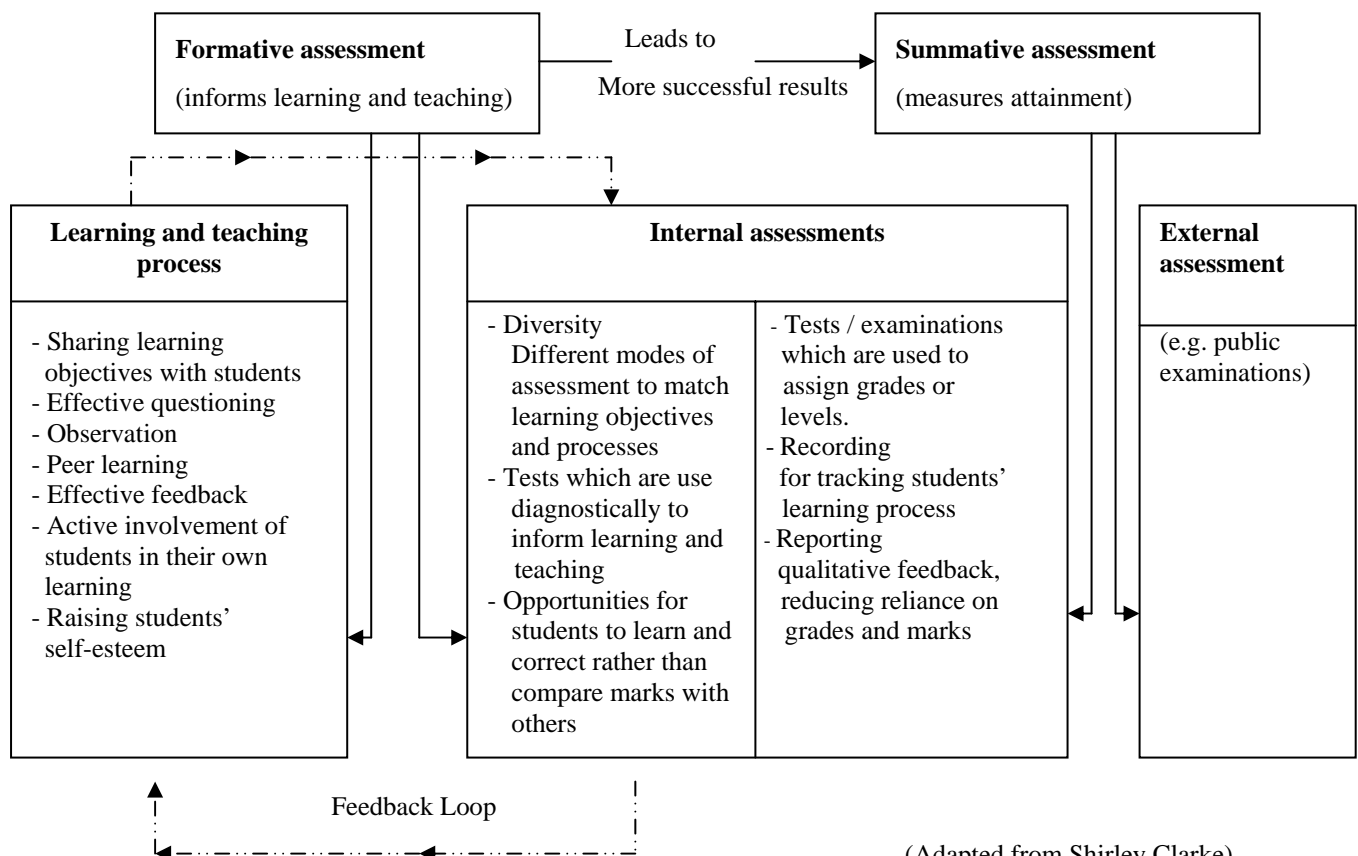
\* The research reported here was funded by the Quality Education Fund of Hong Kong. The views expressed here are those of the author and not the funding body.

than imposing knowledge, a new definition of assessment was drawn up for the schools to reconsider in their own policies on assessment.

*Assessment is the practice of collecting evidence of student learning in terms of knowledge, skills, values and attitudes through observation of at student behaviour when carrying out tasks, tests, examinations, etc.* (Curriculum Development Council, 2002, Booklet 5, p.2)

Formative assessment and summative assessment were given equal status here where it is being proposed that assessment is incorporated into a continuous cycle of teaching and learning. It was also stressed that feedback was important during the process of administrating formative assessment. Furthermore, assessment was an important element in the cycle of teaching and learning through which assessment provided evidence so as teaching and learning could be improved. As a result, a framework was proposed for school change. The essential features of the proposed framework were the link of formative assessment and summative assessment, the feedback loop between learning and teaching process and internal assessment, and the use of summative assessment to inform internal assessment as well as to contribute to external assessment (as shown in figure 1).

**Figure 1: A framework of school assessment practice (Curriculum Development Council, 2002, Booklet 5, p.5)**



The new assessment policy provides challenges for many schools. In the past, schools have focussed on summative assessment by administering tests and examinations during the school years and preparing their students for taking examinations. With the new assessment policy, schools do not really know what and how to deal with formative assessment, how to link up the different kinds of assessment and how to integrate the different assessments into the process of teaching and learning. The assessment process is no longer a matter of examining students' learning at the end of the term but rather a complex process that involves different interfaces among teaching and learning and a variety of assessment processes and modes through which evidence of students' learning can be collected to inform teaching and learning. The difference between the usual practice of schools and the newly proposed assessment framework of the government inevitably forms a gap for school practitioners' understanding of the policy and thus may pose difficulties for their translation of the change into practice.

## **Methodology**

Six primary school cases were selected while an individual case was looked at as a particular context for investigation of the school' policies for formulating and implementing the central assessment policy. Qualitative methodology was used to collect data using various methods like interviews, observations and document analysis. While data collection is still underway, the source of data for this paper mainly based on the interviews of teachers. Four teachers from each school were interviewed, making up a total of 24 interviews. Among the interviewees, half of them held functional positions in their schools, like panel subject heads, vice principals or principals, while half of them were teachers. Each of the interviews lasted about 1 hour, then it was transcribed, sent back to individual teachers for confirmation. The transcribed scripts were studied carefully to trace for patterns and themes.

## **The adoption of central assessment policy by the participant schools**

The case studied schools have their own school histories and developments throughout the years of providing primary education for the school children in different districts in Hong Kong. Some of them had adopted traditional tests and examinations for years while some of them began to adopt various forms of assessments some years ago. Simultaneously, all cases were reported to have formulated their school policies to adopt various forms of assessments and reduce excessive examinations. The adoption of various forms of assessments and the emphasis of formative assessments by the schools were explicitly stressed in their school websites and also narrated by the interviewees. Compared to the assessments used by the schools in the past, the current assessment policies of the schools have significantly shifted towards the central assessment policies (see table 1).



**Table 1: A comparison of change of school assessment policies adopted by the six primary schools**

School	Assessments adopted previously	Assessments adopted at present	Forms of assessment adopted at present
<b>A</b>	Quite a number of traditional mid-term tests and final examinations.	Replace the mid-term tests by formative tests. Final examinations remain.	Formative tests, projects, examinations.
<b>B</b>	Mid-term tests and examinations.	No mid-term test but final examinations remain.	Various forms of assessment: formative tests, projects and examinations.
<b>C</b>	Mid-term tests and examinations.	Cancel mid-term tests, 4 examinations remain.	A variety of assessments used: formative tests, projects and summative examinations.
<b>D</b>	Included traditional tests and examinations. Some tryouts on formative assessments.	Reduce the number of examinations and replace them by formative tests.	Various forms of assessment: projects, online assessments, portfolios, observations, tests, examinations, etc.
<b>E</b>	Started to develop formative assessments and reduce formal examinations apart from using mid-term tests and examinations..	No mid-term test, formative tests by learning units, only 2 final examinations remain.	Various forms of assessment: reading reports, class exercises, formative tests at the end of learning units, examinations.
<b>F</b>	Included traditional tests examinations. Developed formative tests some years ago.	Reduced the frequency of formal examinations and developed various types of assessment.	Various forms of assessment: portfolios, projects, observations, peer assessment, self assessment, examinations.

Generally speaking, the school assessment policies of the six primary schools had experienced a significant shift by reducing the frequency of traditional tests and examinations and adopting various forms of assessment with the intention to work towards the assessment framework as proposed by the central assessment policy.

### **The status of various forms of assessment**

Although there was a variety of forms of assessments adopted by the schools, the different forms of assessment did not appear to have equal status. Among the many forms of assessment, test, quiz, class exercise, homework, oral presentation, group work, project, etc. that were commonly used by the case studied schools were assumed to serve the purpose of assessment for learning. On the other hand, the mid-term and final examinations served the purpose of assessment of learning. Although these different forms of assessment were experienced by the teachers in their daily teaching, they did not know the reason for implementing them except to follow the policies set by the authority, as one of the teacher in School F said,

*I take Chinese teaching as an example, the assessments that we set actually follow closely the requirements of EMB [Education and Manpower Bureau], i.e. a diversity of assessment modes like peer assessment, parents' assessment and self reflection....and I don't know what is meant by assessment for learning. I seldom heard of it. (Teacher, School F, interview)*

For most of the formative tests, projects, presentations, etc., grades or comments were given but usually they carried a very low weighting in the students' assessment profile. The teachers usually required their students to perform well in all forms of assessment but they would not explicitly tell the students and parents the weighting of individual form of assessment, as the teacher of School C said,

*Parents know about the school policy and students too – but they may not exactly know what is counted and what is not, e.g. the performance on Visual Arts is not counted. Apart from that, we require the students to do well in every item although we would not tell them that dictation only carries 10% of the total. (Teacher, School C, interview)*

In reality, some formative assessments that were highly rated by the teachers but were not counted as significant items in the assessment profile. Among the many forms of formative assessment, project learning was commonly used by the teachers of General Studies and was taken as a relevant form of assessment for students' generic skills and attitudes. Despite the fact that students had spent quite a number of hours on their projects, their performances were not usually reflected fairly in their assessment profile, as commented by teachers in School C and School A:

*For project learning that is used in General Studies this year, it carries 10% of the total weighting and is counted only in the 2<sup>nd</sup> term... (Teacher, School C, interview)*

*We have project, homework, test and quiz, etc.... I can say that we have taken all these items into consideration, e.g. the projects or mini-projects will be counted as students' continuous assessment carrying 5 to 10 marks in total. (Teacher, School A, interview)*

The low status of formative assessment in the assessment profile was also reflected in the school policy of School E that had developed formative assessments replacing excessive examinations for some years.

*In fact, we do not count the results of the formative tests, i.e. the results of formative tests do not have an impact on students' performances in their reports.... The reason that we use formative tests in replacement of examinations is to release students' pressures... (Panel head, School E, interview)*

The most significant aspect of the school assessment policy was always the summative examinations, as commented by the teacher in School D,

*We have various forms of assessments, like formative assessment and summative assessment. For example, we have developed observational records for each student to observe students' behaviours during their participation in classroom activities six or seven years ago. These records would be sent to the students and parents for their information... However, the most important aspect of assessment in my school is summative assessment. (Teacher, School D, interview)*

The unequal weighting of the different forms of assessment in the students' overall profile was perceived as reasonable, as commented by the teacher of School B,

*We have to stream students into different classes in Primary 4, 5 and 6. ...Tests and examinations will serve as an important reference index for this purpose. We could not rely solely on students' daily classroom performances by observation. Without tests and examinations, how can students be identified as more able or less able and then streamed into different classes? I think streaming is necessary for handling the problem of individual differences so that teachers can adapt the curriculum for the needs of students... (Teacher, School B, interview)*

Although schools had started to adopt a variety of assessments to conform to the central assessment policy of diverse modes of assessment, formative and summative used by the schools were unequal in status. Furthermore, formative and summative assessments did not seem to be closely linked and thus not easy for the school to generate an accumulated learning effect as expected by the central assessment policy.

### **The internal and external influence on schools' assessment policies**

Internally, the schools have faced pressures from parents and teachers from within when they formulated their assessment policies. For administrative and reporting purpose, schools saw that it was necessary to find a more objective and fair assessment instrument to make decisions that would influence students' future development, e.g. class streaming, allocation of secondary school places, etc. Since examinations and tests have been used for years and served as the commonly used criteria for selection purpose, it was not easy for the schools to take into an account of other forms of assessment in the final decision of students' future development as that would certainly arouse conflicts between parents and the schools.

*Frankly speaking, assessment is not an easy task. If we look for a systematic assessment [for students and parents], only tests and examinations can fulfill this requirement....The most reliable [form] for conducting assessment must be the traditional type of paper and pencil. It*

*is because the school has to give concrete feedbacks to parents, like what level their children have attained and what position their children are in the class... (Panel head, School D, interview)*

Apart from the test and examination culture that had been deeply-rooted in the schools and classrooms, external conditions were also unfavourable and inhibited radical shifts in their assessment policies, particularly the “Territory Wide System Assessment” (TSA)<sup>13</sup>. As the purpose of “Territory Wide System Assessment” (TSA) to evaluate schools’ effectiveness, as stated in the progress report of the reform (Education Commission, 2004, p.33), the impact of TSA on schools’ policies on assessment was significant.

*While the Government can understand the teaching effectiveness of schools by reference to the information, schools can adjust their teaching strategy accordingly to enhance the effectiveness of learning and teaching. (Education Commission, 2004, p.33)*

The results of TSA with detailed analysis of the performance results of each school are sent to the Education and Manpower Bureau by the Hong Kong Examination and Assessment Authority after the assessment each year. Moreover, the overall results and profiles of students’ performances in each subject will be released to the public. Although individual schools’ TSA results will not be released publicly, they would be sent to individual schools and the school management councils concerned that are assumed to have further accountable actions. In this way, TSA was perceived by the schools as high-staked examinations. Furthermore, schools generally perceived that sanctions would be implied if their students’ results were unsatisfactory. For this reason, the schools would place a high premium on summative assessment, particularly in alignment with that of the requirements of TSA.

*I would agree that the central policy has an impact on schools. Whenever there is a new policy from the central, e.g. TSA, schools will have to prepare their students to take the examination by means of extra practice... (Vice principal, School B, interview)*

Although the school policies had shifted apparently towards the framework of the central assessment model with an intention to integrate the elements of assessment for learning and assessment of learning in real practice, the internal and external conditions of the school contexts did not support such a policy

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<sup>13</sup> TSA is part of the Basic Competency Assessment (BCA) that was initiated when the curriculum reform was launched in 2001 to obtain assessment data for school improvement. BCA comprised of two parts, i.e. student assessment and territory system assessment. Student assessment is to be carried out by the teachers during classroom teaching and is a low-stake assessment while TSA is a high-stake assessment for the schools’ effectiveness will be evaluated by the central government through the TSA results.

and thus its practice. In the end, teaching and learning were focused on high-staked examinations except that there would be numerous forms of formative assessment added to the classrooms.

## Conclusions

The assessment reform was a salient change for the education of Hong Kong in alignment with the quest of the large-scale curriculum reform that aimed to help students to develop “Learning to learn” skills and enable their lifelong learning. Although school policies had shifted towards the change by reducing excessive tests and examinations and replacing them with different forms of assessment, teachers and school policy makers did not consider these changes equally important as they saw the need to prepare their students for high-staked examinations. Implementation difficulties found in the literature regarding new assessment schemes were often related to teachers’ concerns and mindsets that posed a gap between the expected reform and the reality (e.g. Davison, 2004; Yip and Cheung, 2005). However, the examination culture and policies from external as well as from within are significant factors that have a profound influence on the schools’ orientations to the new assessment reform.

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