

## **Transformational Issues in Curriculum Reform: Perspectives from Hong Kong**

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Following the return of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty in 1997, the new government set out an ambitious programme of educational reform. Following extensive community consultation, reforms to both basic education and senior secondary education were set out and programmed over a ten year period starting in 2001. The school curriculum was the centre piece of this reform agenda with proposals for a more integrated curriculum, more engaging teaching strategies and assessment processes that focused on learning rather than testing. A new approach to senior secondary education extended six years of schooling to all students. The reform agenda was post-colonial in nature but also sought to develop a curriculum that would support Hong Kong's role in the emerging knowledge economy. The reaction of schools to this agenda has not always been supportive. Yet there is some evidence that change is being made and teaching and learning in Hong Kong schools has been affected by the reform agenda.

Keywords: reform, learning, curriculum change

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## 有關課程改革蛻變的問題： 從香港的角度出發

甘國臻

隨著 1997 年香港回歸中國主權後，新政府積極展開了一連串的教育改革計劃。廣泛向社群進行諮詢後，橫跨十年的基本及高中教育改革於 2001 年開始進行闡釋和定立方案。在這次改革中，學校課程被視為重要的一環，當中建議較為統整的課程、能投入學習的教學策略及評量方法，更重視學習歷程，不再只著重評核結果。在新方案中，所有學生都需接受增至六年的高中教育。雖然改革方案是一種後殖民的轉變，但是當中亦尋求發展一套在知識經濟體系中支持香港角色的課程。縱使不是所有學校都對此改革抱著支持的態度，但是有關證據顯示轉變正在發生，改革方案下已對教與學兩方面產生影響。

關鍵詞：改革、學習、課程轉變

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Curriculum reform has been a constant feature of the Hong Kong educational landscape for almost a decade (Kennedy, 2005; Kennedy, Chan, & Fok, 2011). Hong Kong's post-colonial government moved quickly after 1997 to launch a major reform initiative that has influenced every aspect of Hong Kong's education system. Some have argued that Hong Kong's teachers now suffer from "reform fatigue" described by Kim (2005, p. 76) as "the condition in which government workers become cynical and tired of reform." For many teachers there has been too much reform, it has come too quickly and it often appears uncoordinated. There have been political fall outs from the reform process which has seen one Permanent Secretary of Education come under severe pressure and teacher unions line up against the government's reform agenda. In other words, curriculum reform in Hong Kong has reflected many of the characteristics of contested reform efforts elsewhere in the region.

There are thus regional commonalities that have driven reform in Hong Kong. Yet there is also a distinctiveness that has created some important local characteristics. In this article I would like to focus on both the commonalities as well as the distinctiveness to portray an holistic picture of the reform process and make an assessment of how these have influenced classroom practices. To do this I shall draw on a significant range of research that has been conducted over the past decade in Hong Kong and other parts of the region.

In specific terms I shall address the following issues,

- Rationale for reform in the Asia Pacific region—the new "progressivism"
- Hong Kong's rationale—post colonial release
- Features of Hong Kong's reform process—policy intentions
- Changing classroom and school practices—policy implementation
- Changing approaches to curriculum leadership
- Changes for new times—what has been achieved?

## 1. Rationale for reform in the Asia Pacific region —New Theory for Education

Kennedy and Lee (2010) highlighted the pervasiveness of educational reform across Asia as the new century dawned. The scope of regional reform is shown in Table 1 (Kennedy & Lee, 2010, p. 24):

**Table 1.** The Scope of Education Reform in the Asia Pacific Region, 1997–2002

Country	Policy	Year	Emphasis
China	Curriculum Reform of Basic Education	2001	Focus on students' learning interests and experience; include knowledge and skills which are necessary for lifelong learning.
Hong Kong SAR	Learning for life – learning through life	2000	To build a lifelong learning society.
	Learning to learn: The Way Forward in Curriculum Development	2000	Help students to build up their capabilities to learn independently.
Indonesia	Competency Based Curriculum	2002	To develop a process-oriented way of teaching multicultural attitudes and behavior such as tolerance, mutual-respect, mutual understanding, and recognition of religious, ethnic, and cultural diversities and differences.
Japan	The Education Reform Plan for the 21st Century	2001	Establish an educational philosophy suitable for the new century and improve the provision for education.
Korea	Adapting Education to the e Information Age	2001	It is a reform of the educational system for the new society through ICT.
Malaysia	Smart School Curriculum	1999	To foster the knowledge, skills, and attitudes appropriate for success in the Information Age.
Philippines	Restructured Basic Education Curriculum	2002	Raising the quality of the Filipino learners and graduates and empowering them for lifelong learning.

**Table 1.** The Scope of Education Reform in the Asia Pacific Region, 1997–2002 (continued)

Country	Policy	Year	Emphasis
Singapore	Thinking Schools, Learning Nation	1997	A “learning nation” envisions a national culture and social environment that promotes lifelong learning in our people.
Taiwan	Moving Towards a Learning Society and Action Plan for Educational Reform	1998	Curriculum designed for the new century: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• developing humanitarian attitudes,</li> <li>• enhancing integration ability,</li> <li>• cultivating democratic literacy,</li> <li>• fostering both indigenous awareness and a global perspective,</li> <li>• building up the capacity for lifelong learning.</li> </ul>
Thailand	National Education Act, 1999	1999	1) Lifelong education for all, 2) participation by all segments of society, and 3) continuous development of the bodies of knowledge and the learning process.

There are many similarities here—lifelong learning, the dominance of information technology, the focus on learning. All of this was driven by a common theoretical rationale that accounts for the pervasiveness of reform. At the same time in Hong Kong there were quite distinctive reasons driving the reform effort and these interacted with the more general rationale. In what follows, both the common rationale and local reasons for reform will be discussed.

### *Regional Education Reform—the “new economics” as a common motivator*

I have discussed in a number of places the economic motives for educational reform in the Asia Pacific region (Kennedy, 2005; Kennedy, 2007; Kennedy & Lee, 2010). I shall draw on this work in what follows.

Ritchie (2003) explained the economic imperative this way:

a key driver of innovation and technological progress is the supply of and demand

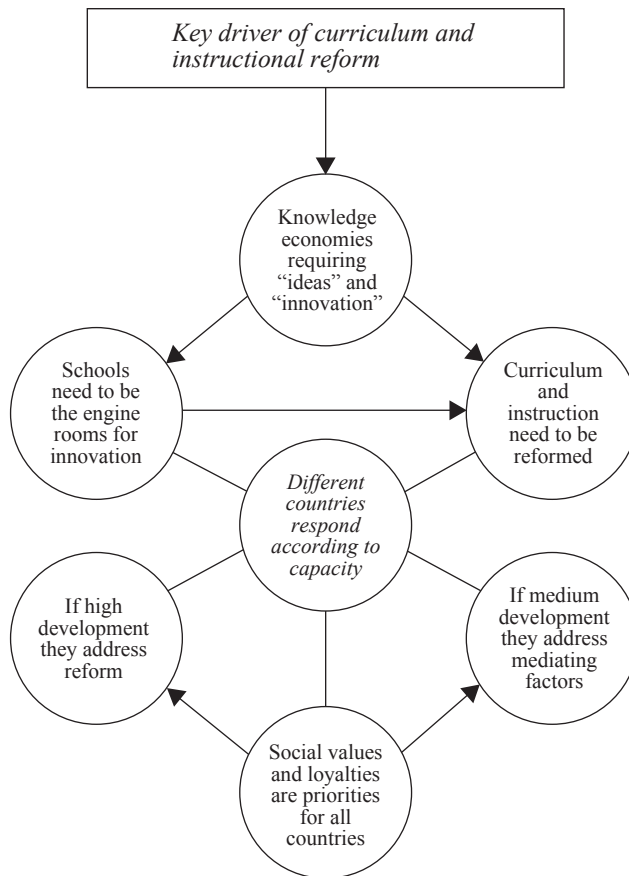
for a large and competent pool of intellectual capital—the knowledge and skills found in the local labor pool. This is not to say that physical capital, investment, and macroeconomic stability are no longer necessary for economic growth. Rather, they are no longer sufficient. Whether they positively impact long-term technological upgrading (as opposed to only aggregate growth) depends largely on the creation of new knowledge and skills in the local economy. (p. 3)

The results of such a perspective for education are significant and I summarized them (Kennedy, 2007, p. 813):

In terms of labor, therefore, the essential ingredients are ideas, creativity, innovation, problem solving and critical thinking skills. These are not skills and attributes associated with the traditional academic approaches to schooling that characterized the Asian region towards the end of the twentieth century. Education monitored by bureaucratic systems that rationed education for elite served the old but would not serve the new economy. Herein lies a rationale and impetus for reform: the “knowledge economy” required workers who are flexible and responsive, able to respond to new contexts and capable of innovation to provide new solutions to old problems. Schools needed to become the engine rooms where such skill sets could be developed, a fact acknowledged directly by a number of Asian education policy makers (Goh, 1997; Law, 2002) as well as curriculum reform documents.

This view can be shown diagrammatically as in Figure 1 that is taken from Kennedy (2007, p. 814). At the heart of this economic view of schooling and the contribution of education is “learning,” a construct with which all educators are familiar. In Figure 1 learning is driven by the needs of the knowledge economy for “ideas and innovation.” This learning, though, is viewed through a theoretical lens that I have described as a “pastiche” of progressivisms—what I have called the “new progressivism” (Kennedy, 2005, pp. 12-13). It draws from the broadest conceptions of progressivist teaching and learning principles. Its emphasis is not so much “child-centred” progressivism but rather social efficiency that focuses on the role of schooling in the provision of a skilled workforce. Sargent (2006, p. 10), writing of the curriculum reform agenda in China made a similar point, “education policy officials in China use this language of progressivist ideology and weave it seamlessly into functionalist rhetoric about the need for a labor force that is capable of innovation and of acquiring and

applying information in practice in the global knowledge economy of the 21st century.” In other words, as I have argued, “the state has co-opted progressivist principles to support an economic instrumentalism as the basis of the school curriculum.” (Kennedy, 2007, p. 817) That is to say integrated curriculum, assessment for learning, and engaging teaching strategies do not just represent a particular educational ideology: they are seen by governments to advance the development of the knowledge economy through stimulating problem solving, creativity and critical thinking.



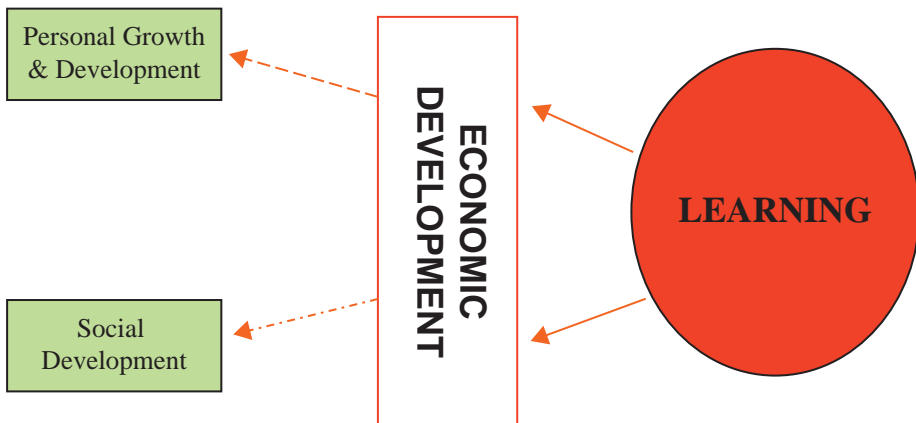
**Figure 1.** The Key Drivers of Curriculum and Instructional Reform

*Source:* Kennedy (2007: 814).

In Hong Kong, and I would argue in the rest of the region as well, reform agendas have been driven by this neo-progressivist view of learning that is summed up in Figure 2. It recognizes the value of learning primarily in terms of the potential of learning's return to the economy. The personal and social benefits derived from learning are residual rather than central. This “new learning”—learning harnessed to the needs of the economy—underpins the curriculum reforms and in an important sense the reforms only make sense within the framework I have outlined. The issue to be explored further is whether this broad theoretical conception of learning has had any impact in classrooms? I shall return to this issue in subsequent sections.

## 2. Hong Kong's rationale—Post Colonial Release

The rationale for reform outlined above certainly applies to Hong Kong and is described in some detail elsewhere (Kennedy, 2005). Yet there was also another impetus for educational reform. Hong Kong's colonial history resulted in a well developed education system by the time of Hong Kong's return to China. Yet it



**Figure 2.** A Neo-Progressivist View of the Value of Learning in the School Curriculum



was a colonial system rather than a local or indigenous system. I have described the colonial curriculum in this way (Kennedy, 2005, p. 101):

There is general agreement that the pre-1997 curriculum in Hong Kong was derived from what might best be called “the English grammar school model” (Adamson & Morris 2000; McClelland, 1991; Morris, 1988). Morris and Chan (1998, p. 249) have identified the underlying rationale and ideology as “academic rationalist” (Eisner, 1992) based on a “collection code” curriculum (Bernstein, 1975, 1990). This usually means that the curriculum is based on traditional academic disciplines, usually focused on the preparation of students headed for higher education often in the context of limited places, little control can be exerted by teachers, parents of students so the emphasis is on central control and examinations are the key selection mechanisms. Thus the pre-1997 curriculum could be defined as traditional, elitist, competitive, exam-dominated and bureaucratic.

This is in stark contrast to what was proposed by Hong Kong’s post-colonial Education Commission (2000, p. 5) where the vision for the future was outlined:

- to build a life-long learning society;
- to raise the overall quality of students;
- to construct a diverse education system;
- to create an inspiring learning environment;
- to acknowledge the importance of moral education; and
- to develop an education system that is rich in tradition but is cosmopolitan and culturally diverse.

The last two dot points here are particularly important to note since they introduced a very local element into what otherwise can be seen as a neo-progressivist reform agenda. The focus on “moral education” and the reference to an education system that did not neglect “tradition” was a clear signal that in post-colonial times Hong Kong would return to its roots as a Confucian-oriented Chinese society. The development of national identity became an important issue for the new curriculum (Education Commission, 2000 p. 46) Students should:

Have a deeper understanding of the history, culture, natural and human environments of China, strengthen their national identity, and will develop a social and

humanistic perspective for making sound judgments about issues concerning the local community, the nation and the world. (Education Commission, 2000, p. 46)

This reflected the curriculum reaction to colonialism and it continues in Hong Kong to the present time. The balance between “moral education” and “tradition” referred to above is in fact a very specific approach to civic education that highlights two dimensions: the personal (“being a good person”) and the collective (“becoming a good citizen”). The latter, of course is defined in distinctly Chinese terms and is more likely to mean loyal and patriotic rather than reflect any liberal democratic conception of the “good citizen.” This dual conception of civic education characterizes what is otherwise a neo-progressivist curriculum reform agenda as highlighted by the Education Commission (2000, pp. 38, 40):

In a knowledge-based society, the knowledge cycle is short and information spreads fast. The workplace requires more than ever before good communicative skills, adaptability, abilities for cooperation, self-learning, exploration as well as creativity.... In a knowledge based society, students would no longer receive knowledge passively. Through the process of learning, they also continuously create and construct knowledge.

Thus post colonial Hong Kong’s reform agenda was impelled by two motifs—creating a “Chinese” education system that could nevertheless cope with the new directions in the global economy, the new demands for innovation and creativity and the needs for mass rather than elite education. Adamson and Morris (2000, p. 10) have pointed out that the colonial government was not unaware of the need for a reenergized education system, but it was left to successive post colonial governments to pursue this goal.

### **3. Features of Hong Kong’s Reform Process —Policy Intentions**

Hong Kong’s curriculum reform agenda was set out in the Curriculum Development Council’s (2001, p. 2) statement, *Learning to Learn—The Way Forward in Curriculum Development*. The reform principle was clear:

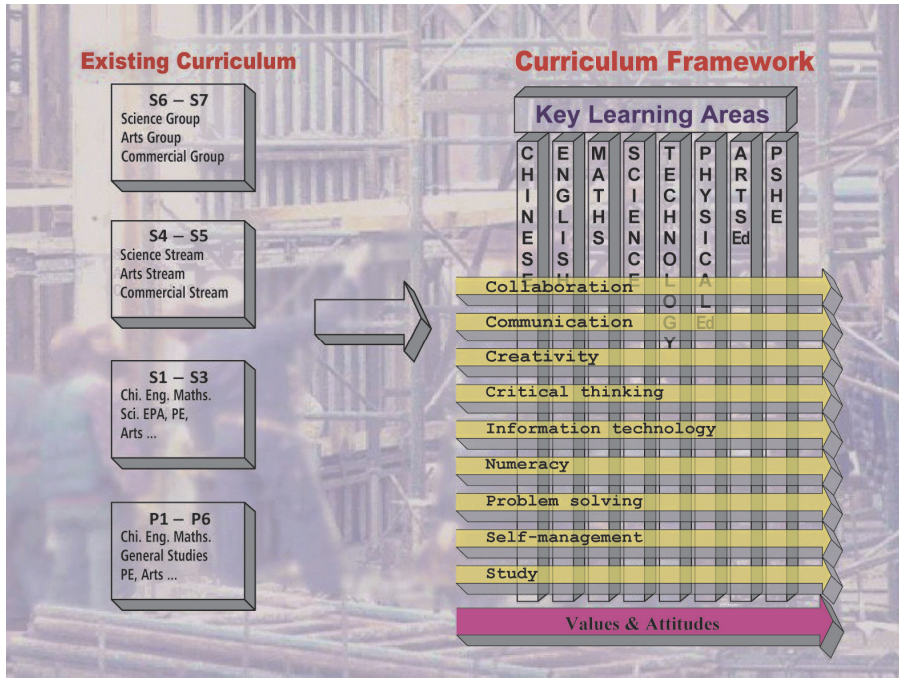
Our overarching principle is to help students Learn to Learn, which involves developing their independent learning capabilities leading to whole person development and life-long learning.

I have described the main elements of the reforms (Kennedy, 2005, p. 111):

To achieve this objective school subjects are grouped into Key Learning Areas thus encouraging more integrated approaches to curriculum development and a focus on generic skills, assessment for learning is promoted rather than summative assessment in the form of tests and examinations, four cross curriculum perspectives are identified to support student growth and development as citizens and as learners (moral and civic education, reading, project learning and using information technology and the focus is to be on learners and their needs. There is also recognition that responsibility for the school curriculum is shared between the Curriculum Development Institute, a central government agency, and schools. While the latter are encouraged to experiment and respond to their local communities, there is also an injunction to provide students with access to a curriculum that reflects the principles of the reform. This is a key issue for the reforms and represents one of the most significant challenges since schools in Hong Kong have considerable freedom to implement the kind of curriculum that they determine is appropriate.

Figure 3, drawn from Curriculum Development Council (2001, p. 22), shows the shift of Hong Kong's school curriculum from its traditional base in the grammar school model (shown on the right hand side of the diagram as a subject based curriculum with different streams for different abilities) to that proposed under the reforms (shown on the left hand side of the diagram which shows a more integrated curriculum for all students with a focus on generic skills).

It should be noted that in this figure the curriculum reform process is not confined to basic education (P-Secondary 3) but goes all the way to Secondary 7, the final year of secondary schooling. In this sense it was a comprehensive reform proposal. Details of the senior secondary reform were announced later. Under the new structure for senior secondary: all students would go to Form 6 rather than a few; the length of senior secondary would be reduced from 7 to 6 years; there would be 4 core subjects (English, Chinese, Mathematics and Liberal Studies); fewer examinations, "A" levels were to be replaced by a new local



**Figure 3.** Transforming Hong Kong's School Curriculum

*Source:* Curriculum Development Council (2001: 22).

examination; undergraduate university degrees were to be lengthened by one year. These are comprehensive reforms that are still in the processes of transforming secondary education in Hong Kong and in broad outline they were envisaged from the beginning of the reform process. They are very much part of Hong Kong's "colonial release" referred to in the previous section. Yet it was not only the school curriculum, in terms of subjects, that was part of this transformational process. Assessment reform was also highlighted. My colleagues and I summarized its main characteristics (Kennedy, Chan, Yu, & Fok, 2008, p. 3):

With a focus on "assessment for learning," teachers have been encouraged to view assessment not only as examinations and tests, but also as part of a learning process that can provide feedback to students to help them improve their learning (Curriculum Development Council, 2002). The Education Commission (2000) proposed to eliminate excessive dictation exercises, mechanical drills, tests and

examinations and recommended the use of various modes of assessment including flexible formative assessment. The Curriculum Development Council (2001) suggested that (a) teachers provide feedback to students of their strengths and weaknesses and (b) schools include key attitudes, self-management, and moral and civic qualities in report cards as part of student achievement and as a basis for further improvement. The Council made assessment for learning the prime target in all its proposed measures, which included: (1) evidence-based quality criteria in line with the curriculum framework; (2) combined curriculum and assessment guides for each subject to make assessment and objectives consistent; and (3) liaison with the universities about broadening university admission criteria.

The radical nature of these proposed changes cannot be over estimated. The changes are summarised in Table 2 (Chan, Kennedy, Yu, & Fok, 2006, p. 6).

The assessment reform agenda was designed to challenge a deeply embedded examination culture in order to free up classrooms from regimes of testing and to enhance a learning culture. It was an ambitious agenda and its implementation challenges will be discussed later in this article.

Curriculum and assessment reform was accompanied by an equally strong emphasis on the reform of teaching itself. The Curriculum Development Council (2001, p. 79) outlined an ambitious agenda:

- Different forms of classroom organisation (such as variations in grouping, whole-class setting and seating arrangements) facilitate the delivery of diverse learning and teaching strategies such as and whole-class teaching, group learning and individual works.
- We can help students to move from being recipients of knowledge to seeing the relationships between ideas, applying ideas, and ultimately thinking critically and creatively and constructing knowledge.
- Teachers can give students opportunities to express themselves openly and share their work in class and publicly to enhance their confidence. Teachers can capitalise on opportunities (e.g., current affairs, school/classroom contexts) to facilitate spontaneity and change in responding to different demands and situations. This widens the exposure of students and helps them to learn in a changing environment.
- Teachers can use different learning and teaching strategies to achieve the different purposes of learning and to suit the learning styles, abilities, interests

**Table 2.** A comparison of assessment policy before and after 2001 in HK

Before 2001	After 2001
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assessment of learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assessment for learning</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To assess how well students have mastered their subject content knowledge and skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To assess students' generic skills, especially those higher-ordered generic/thinking skills identified as the learning goals of the reform</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To grade the students against the standards they have attained</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teacher gives constructive feedbacks to enhance students' learning</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No/limited teachers' feedback given</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students are aware of their learning objectives and pick up teachers' feedbacks for continuous learning</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Test and examination oriented</li> <li>• Emphasize summative assessment</li> <li>• Transmission of knowledge and drilling are common classroom activities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Formative assessment and summative assessment are used</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emphasize the learning product</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Process and product are stressed</li> </ul>

*Source:* Chan, Kennedy, Yu, & Fok (2006: 6).

and needs of students. There is no fixed rule regarding which strategy is the best. Teachers master learning and teaching strategies differently. They can develop the repertoire which is most effective for them to enhance the independent learning capabilities of students for whole-person development.

Thus curriculum reforms went beyond subjects to include assessment and teaching as well. It was thus a broadly based attempt to reorganize classrooms so that they were aligned with the learning need of students. Textbooks did not escape this transformational emphasis of Hong Kong's education reforms (Curriculum Development Council, 2001, p. 91):

Well-written textbooks developed in accordance with the new curriculum framework will serve the purpose of effective learning and teaching. Textbooks should be written for students. They should provide the core elements of learning in KLAs or subjects recommended by the CDC, develop critical and creative thinking and other generic skills in the learning resources and activities provided, and also open up space for learning through suggestions that go beyond their confines. Quality textbooks help students to achieve learning targets and objectives, consolidate what they have learned, and extend their personal knowledge.

The reforms thus sought to review and revise all aspects of schooling so that they would align with the demands of the “new learning.” The extent to which this agenda has been successful will be explored in the following sections.

## 4. Changing Classroom and School Practices —Policy Implementation

Moving from policy design to implementation is by no means a simple task for any education system. In Hong Kong there has been a ten year concerted effort to transform schools, learning and students. How successful has it been? Given the limitations of space, only selected aspects of the reforms will be discussed.

Fok, Kennedy, and Chan (2010) have described the approach to implementation as “gradualist” and they used Table 3 below (adapted from Curriculum Development Council, 2001) to show the pace of reform.

**Table 3.** The development strategies adopted by the government at different stages of implementation

<p>Short-term (2001-02 to 2005-06)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Renders support to schools by providing curriculum guides, teacher and principal development programmes, on-site school-based support, etc.</li> <li>• Works in partnerships with schools and tertiary institutions to conduct “seed” projects to generate and disseminate successful experiences for the references of other schools.</li> <li>• Conducts a review by the end of the short-term phase to take stock of the overall progress and to consolidate successful experiences.</li> </ul>
<p>Medium-term (2006-07 to 2010-11)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consolidates and disseminates systematically the experiences accumulated during the short-term phase to help schools develop school-based curricula and improve learning and teaching strategies.</li> <li>• Continues with the tasks undertaken in the short-term and improves plans and actions based on the review in 2005-06.</li> </ul>
<p>Long-term (beyond 2011)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continues to update and improve the curriculum framework according to the needs of society and students.</li> <li>• Continues to work in partnership with schools and various concerned parties to generate and accumulate successful experiences with a view to helping schools further improve the quality of education.</li> </ul>

These measures were also accompanied by External School Reviews and the introduction of Basic Competency Testing—what Fok, Kennedy, and Chan (2010) refer to as “hard measures.” These were not directly linked to reform implementation but were part of a broader raft of accountability measures that have nevertheless had an impact on the take up of the reforms in schools.

Fok, Kennedy, and Chan (2010) have explored this implementation context with the “soft” measures as shown in Table 1 and the “hard” measures referred to above to assess their impact on project learning, a key reform initiative. Education and Manpower Bureau (2004) reported that in excess of 90% of Hong Kong had adopted project learning. This seems like an extraordinary success rate considering that at the time the reform had only been operating for two years. Fok, Kennedy, and Chan (2010) concluded that:

Officials initiated project learning as well as other curriculum policies and perceived that they were using soft instruments to implement these policies. However, schools and teachers associated all curriculum policies with hard policies and perceived all measures as hard policy instruments in the process. All recommendations and suggestions in curriculum guides (CDC, 2001) were becoming rules and were necessary to apply to schools and classrooms.

The broader policy context of the reforms was one of declining school enrolments, new standard setting for language teachers, publication of the results of external school reviews (this practice ceased in 2005) and the introduction of basic competency testing. These were very threatening processes to schools so that resistance to reform implementation was not really an option as highlighted by Fok, Kennedy, and Chan (2010):

Though government officials assumed that project learning was an appropriate approach for student learning, school teachers treated it as an instrument and evidence for QAI,<sup>1</sup> SSE<sup>2</sup> and ESR.<sup>3</sup> Thus, they had to launch it as if it was a compulsory requirement as it was one of the foci of QAI, SSE and ESR.

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<sup>1</sup> Quality Assurance Inspection

<sup>2</sup> School Self Evaluation

<sup>3</sup> External School Review



Thus implementation in this context may not be a good measure of success since it was constrained by so many external factors. Nevertheless, there are some excellent examples of project learning in Hong Kong schools and they have even made it into YouTube!<sup>4</sup>

We can also take a closer look inside classrooms to get some idea of how the reform agenda has been implemented. Yu, Kennedy, Fok, and Chan (2006, p. 8) reviewed the progress that three schools in Hong Kong had made and summarized the results shown in Table 4.

Yu, Kennedy, Fok, and Chan (2006, p. 8) concluded that:

All of these schools still maintained the use of testing and examinations for grading students by the end of the school years though they have reduced the number of assessment strategies demanding memorization, e.g., dictations. They have gradually introduced formative assessment methods in different subjects. Project learning, self and peer evaluation were the most popular strategies used. The extent in applying new assessment strategies promoted in curriculum reform varied from school to school.

These results were not inconsistent with the survey of reform progress conducted in 2003 (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2004) (see Table 5).

**Table 4.** Summary of attempts at “assessment for learning” strategies

School A	School B	School C
Project Learning	Project Learning	Observation Report
Information Tech Folder	Self and Peer Evaluation	Self and Peer Evaluation
Book Report		Web-based Assessment
Critical Reflection		
Learning Portfolio		

<sup>4</sup> for example see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VhhQxo3fEqw>

**Table 5.** Implementing Assessment Strategies

Strategies on Assessment	Implemented	
	Primary School(%)	Secondary School(%)
Formulate a whole-school assessment policy	71.9	69.8
Use appropriate assessment modes to obtain feedback on learning and teaching	75.0	68.6
Reduce the time spent on tests and examinations when planning the school calendar, so as to allow students to have adequate learning time	99.2	90.7

Source: Education and Manpower Bureau (2004: 13).

Yu (2007, p. 8) found after an interview study with teachers in selected schools, however, that the use of new modes of assessment did not necessarily mean that they were as valued as more traditional modes:

... 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.

Chan (2007, p. 7) reported a similar result with a different sample of schools:

Although there were 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)*

Berry (2004, p. 12) also interviewed Hong Kong teachers about their assessment practices and while she saw positive signs of change she also had some reservations:

On the whole the teachers treasured formative assessment and they understood that both teachers and students should be involved in the assessment as it helped teaching and learning. However, there were big gaps between what teachers thought they should do and what they actually did. Teachers did not seem ready for this kind of assessment.

Thus implementation contexts need to be examined very carefully when trying to make a judgment of what is happening in schools and classrooms.

Exactly the same constraints apply to the use of textbooks in Hong Kong schools. The Education Bureau maintains a “Recommended Textbook List” form which schools can choose but they can also choose textbooks that are not on the list if they meet the learning needs of their students. The criteria for textbooks to get on the “Recommended List” are aligned with the principles of the education reform Education Bureau (2007):

- The aims, targets and objectives are compatible with those laid down in the relevant curriculum or subject guide.
- The core elements of the subject curriculum are included. Not too much information is covered, in order to leave room for students to learn how to learn. If the materials included are non-core or serve to provide enrichment opportunities only, they should be properly indicated.
- The content is current. Information and data are relevant and accurate. Concepts are correct and precise. Ideas are coherent. There are adequate examples and illustrations. Such examples and illustrations are relevant to learners’ experience.
- Generic skills are developed. Nine types of generic skills are identified as essential: collaboration skills, communication skills, creativity, critical thinking skills, information technology skills, numeracy skills, problem-solving skills, self-management skills and study skills.
- Appropriate values and attitudes are nurtured.

- Cross-curricular elements are encouraged. For example, environmental, civic, moral, and sex education as well as occupational safety elements can be incorporated into different subjects.

Parents are also provided with guidelines to help them choose textbooks for their children (Textbook Committee, 2008) and again the emphasis is on ensuring that textbooks are constructed to promote learning are selected. Yet it seems that the education reforms have by no means diminished the use of textbooks in Hong Kong classrooms.

Based on a report from the Hong Kong Consumer Council, Li (2010) highlighted the fact that “the average spending on textbooks by Form Five students under the new curriculum structure has risen from 50.9% in 2010 to HK \$ 2,135, compared with HK \$ 1,415 last year when the reform was not in place.” There was considerable variability across sectors with costs rising more in secondary than primary schools and between schools in the same sector. Several structural reasons were advanced for this but the main issue to note is that textbooks and the reforms are by no means incompatible, at least from the point of view of schools and parents who are the main players when it comes to textbooks.

Nevertheless, textbooks have become controversial in Hong Kong with the Legislative Council taking some time to consider the issues (Legislative Council, 2009a). One issue is price as outlined above, but particularly the impact on low income families; successive editions produced very soon after the first edition thus creating more expenses for families; another is the sheer physical weight of textbooks that impact adversely on student health; and then the issue of “bundling” textbooks with learning resources which also affects the price. These issues became linked to the use of IT in schools and the feasibility of making more electronic resources available in order to relieve the burden of textbook purchase. The Government has moved forward with the following concrete actions that will establish a pilot scheme to (Legislative Council, 2009b, pp. 4-5):

- (a) develop, try out and evaluate when and how e-Learning works best to bring about effective interactive learning, self-directed learning, catering for learner

diversity in different curriculum and school contexts in Hong Kong in order to facilitate the charting of the way forward for implementing e-learning in schools; and

- (b) explore commercially viable business models for the development of e-learning resources, in order to meet the needs of schools, teachers and students.

In other words, the textbook issue will be addressed indirectly through the exploration of an alternative learning process mediated through electronic resources. In this sense, the reform process has resulted in the beginning of a change process for textbooks the results of which are still uncertain. This has meant that the government has avoided directly confronting the commercial interests associated with the textbook industry in Hong Kong but has signaled that there may be alternatives. Furthermore, in the current funding period it has invested HK \$ 140 million to explore this alternative. In addition, a number of measures have been undertaken with the purpose of reducing textbook costs and providing more choices for parents in purchasing either textbooks or the optional accompanying resources but with no compulsion to buy everything a publisher makes available. The direction of government policy on this issue is unmistakable and it is away from the traditional textbook.

## **5. Changing Approaches to Curriculum Leadership**

A significant innovation of the reform agenda was the introduction of a new position in primary schools given the formal title of Primary School Master/Mistress (Curriculum Development)(PSMCD). Its function was to provide curriculum leadership for the reforms (Kennedy & Hui, 2006). This was a move away from the top down leadership usually associated with positional authority holders in Hong Kong schools such as Principals, Deputy Principals and Panel Chairs. These newly appointed curriculum leaders (PSMCDs) retained a teaching load (50%) but for the remainder of their time worked with their colleagues on classroom issues relating to reform implementation. It was an attempt to implement a form of distributed leadership in primary schools and create change from the “bottom up.” The success of the initiative is currently being

evaluated.

In launching the curriculum leadership initiative, the HKSAR government recognized the need to prepare teachers for their new roles. One way that was found to be useful in assessing whether curriculum leaders were in fact growing into these roles was the use of a measure of teacher self efficacy (Kennedy & Hui, 2006; Tsui & Kennedy, 2009). This is a standard measure that continues to be used in Western contexts but it had not previously been used in Chinese contexts. An unexpected outcome of the research that was conducted with curriculum leaders on this measure was the discovery that the latent structure of the factors for Chinese teachers was consistently different from what had been found with Western samples. This led to suggestions that Chinese teachers may think of teaching in a different way fuelled by conception that are more Confucian in orientation than would be found in any Western sample. In particular, it seemed that Chinese teachers did not really believe that their task was to engage students in the classroom but rather that students should already be engaged and understand that their duty is to learn. This has opened up some new lines of research to explore in Chinese contexts since it seems expectations for learning amongst Chinese teachers are very high. These expectations themselves may exert considerable influence on students. The ways in which they might do so needs further study especially in light of the reform priorities around student learning.

Curriculum leadership remains a fundamental issue in relation to the reform agenda. Who can best provide that leadership remains an open question. The role of the Principal is always seen to be important but it does not seem that Hong Kong Principals see themselves as “curriculum and instructional” leaders in which case the distributed role of a curriculum leader (PSMCD) could fill the gap. Yet the demands of being a curriculum leader with distributed leadership responsibilities should not be underestimated as pointed out by Li (2004, p. 10) who commented that “knowing how to do curriculum development matters but it is not sufficient. It is how the curriculum leaders influence people and to get people involved and engaged in school reform with commitment that matters most.” The reform agenda in Hong Kong has begun this ex-

periment in distributed leadership and that is a good outcome in itself. Yet much more work is needed to understand how this process works in local contexts, what is needed to support curriculum leaders who do not have any positional authority and exactly how the reform agenda is advanced through the work of this kind of leadership. It is a challenging agenda for the future.

## **6. Changes for New Times—What has been achieved?**

It is difficult to provide a definitive answer to this question. There is evidence that changes have taken place in Hong Kong classrooms but it does not suggest that these changes are comprehensive or deeply embedded. Surveys have shown that many of the elements of the reform agenda have been adopted but they do not indicate that the competitive nature of education in Hong Kong has been in any way ameliorated. International studies of student achievement suggest that Hong Kong students continue to do well in relation to the international peers but there is a worrying suggestion that they are not as happy or content as these peers. An international report (McKinsey & Company, 2007) has suggested that Hong Kong's education system is among the top performing systems in the world. Yet there remains dissatisfaction in the local community about schools and teachers in general, graduates and their competence, especially in relation to language and the capacity of the education system, including universities, to produce workers for the knowledge economy. These are not issues that the reforms can address but they remain issues for the community.

On the more positive side, the education system that was inherited from the British colonial administration in July 1997 has been transformed. Curriculum structures have changed, there has been more experimentation with different forms of assessment, including school based assessment, more attention has been paid to the needs of ethnic minority students, special needs education has received more support and attention, the benefits of small class teaching have been recognized and language education has been recognized as a key area for development for all students. It is perhaps the transformation of the British "A" levels examination to the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education to

commence in 2012 that is the most notable change signaling an end to the colonial education system and the beginning of a locally developed and internationally recognized system of education. These are significant changes that mark Hong Kong's transition from a colonial society to one that has responsibility under the Basic Law for its own education system.<sup>5</sup> By any measure, the government has taken this responsibility, seriously and moved forward on many fronts.

Hong Kong's education reform agenda has been, and continues to be, a bold experiment and I have tried to outline its broad features here. It has signaled changed at every level of the education system and it has attracted significant resources. The ultimate success of the reform agenda is a matter for future judgment; but what is certain is that change is underway and there is no turning back from what is undoubtedly the most serious and far reaching set of reforms ever applied to Hong Kong's education system.

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<sup>5</sup> The Basic Law is Hong Kong's mini-constitution setting out the constitutional principles for the governance of Hong Kong as a Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China.



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