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Hong Kong's Education System: Challenge for the Future

Linda Christine Murad¹

Introduction

Hong Kong began to evaluate and reform its existing education system after China regained control of Hong Kong from the British in 1997. Under British rule, not all students were given access to education, standardized tests were the only measure for academic advancement to higher levels of education, the government developed standard curricula for all schools to follow, and students were not given the freedom to question the concepts that they were taught in class. Recognizing the need to expand the access to education, increase the measures of academic advancement, and improve the method of teaching within the classroom, the Hong Kong government initiated a program to improve the framework and refine the goals of education.

The purpose of this article is to explore how the government and selected advisory bodies (in particular, the Education and Manpower Bureau (EMB), the Education Department (ED), and the Education Commission (EC)) of Hong Kong are positioned to achieve reform. In order to accomplish this, I have posed the following questions: What has the government done to date and what does the government plan to do in the future to improve the education system of Hong Kong? What areas within the education system has the Education Commission targeted to induce successful reform? What role will the government take in responding to the overwhelming number of teachers with insufficient institutional space, resources, and knowledge in teaching basic

¹ The author would like to thank Professor Raymond Bell for all his help and advice.

subject areas? The answers to these questions will not be found solely by looking at the education system as it currently stands, but in also reviewing how it developed.

I begin the article with a brief history of Hong Kong's current education system. The major thrust of my article will be a discussion of the need for reform at each stage and the changes, post-1997, introduced by Hong Kong's government through programs developed specifically for reform. This will be followed by an explanation of changes regarding teacher qualifications. Finally, I will offer a series of recommendations for further actions to be taken by the government and its advisory bodies.

Structure of Education

From 1841 to 1997, the British focused most of their attention on making Hong Kong into a city for international trade and neglected its education system. In 1997, Hong Kong was left with an outdated education system based on the 1941 British curriculum. While under British rule, three types of schools emerged, all of which still exist today: 1) government schools (funded and operated by the government), 2) aided schools (funded by the government and operated by voluntary groups), and 3) private schools. ("Hong Kong: The Facts...")

Students may choose, but are not required, to begin their education at age three, staying in kindergarten for two years. Kindergarten is followed by six years of primary school, five years of secondary school, and two years of senior-secondary school. After senior-secondary school, students may qualify to enroll in the tertiary system. Hong Kong requires a minimum of nine years of education: primary 1 (at age six) through secondary 3 (at age fifteen). All nine years are fully funded by the government.

Kindergarten, senior-secondary and tertiary schools are subsidized, leaving students and their families responsible for 20 percent of the total costs during these years. (Kwan)

Hong Kong is a highly competitive society, and this is reflected in the education system. Students are able to advance only after passing a series of public examinations. In order to attend secondary schools (equivalent to high schools in America), students are required to take three Internal Assessment Exams, standard tests given by all primary schools (equivalent to elementary schools in America). Students were formerly also required to take the Academic Aptitude Test, a test created and scored by individual primary schools, in order to advance. However, in 2000 this test was abolished to allow schools to put more emphasis on the teaching of English in primary 5 (at age 10) and 6 (at age eleven).

The Hong Kong Examination Authority administers the Hong Kong Certificate Education Examination (HKCEE) after secondary 5 (at age seventeen) and the Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination (HKALE) after secondary 7 (at age nineteen). The HKCEE determines which students will attend an additional two years of school in preparation for college. These additional two years of school before college are called “sixth form.” The HKALE determines a student’s eligibility to attend tertiary schools. Depending on a student’s score, the student may qualify for acceptance into college. (“HKCEE”; “HKALE”)

Hong Kong has ten tertiary institutions. The University Grants Committee, an education-related advisory committee, funds eight of the ten institutions. The other two are the publicly-funded Hong Kong Academy of Performing Arts (HKAPA) and the self-

financing Open University of Hong Kong (OUHK). HKAPA and OUHK both offer degree and non-degree programs.

Still other types of education are provided by the Education Department. They include adult education at primary and secondary levels and English courses for persons aged fifteen and above, education for newly arrived children (NAC) from Mainland China and/or non-Chinese speaking children, and vocational education, advised by the Vocational Training Council (VTC). (“Hong Kong: The Facts...”)

Education Boards

It is also important to understand the governing bodies that control the Hong Kong education system. The Education and Manpower Bureau, the Education Department, and the Education Commission are three agencies that have had the most influence in planning and implementing unique approaches to educational reform. Although the structure of these reforms may look different, the three agencies are all working toward the same goals.

The Education and Manpower Bureau (EMB) is responsible for the formulation, development, and review of policies, programs, and legislation from kindergarten to tertiary level. The EMB oversees and assesses the effectiveness of various departments, including the Education Department, the University Grants Committee, and the Hong Kong Examinations Authority. (“About EMB”) After the handover of Hong Kong to China, the EMB became responsible for developing and implementing an education reform program. This program focused on ten key areas, each of which targeted the objectives set out by the Education Commission. Some of the key areas within this program are upgrading the quality of teachers, increasing the number of Hong Kong

citizens with higher education, promoting bi-lingual and tri-lingual education, nurturing talented students, and promoting continuing education. (“EMB Policy”)

The Education Department (ED) reports to the Education and Manpower Bureau, and its mission is to provide “quality school education for [Hong Kong] students” and to develop and prepare the students for future challenges in life. (“Vision and Mission”) In regard to reform, the Education Department has put forth a three-part reform program. The first part focuses on a client-based culture, such as improving communication between the education agencies and the individual schools. The second part allows for more authority and accountability to be placed on individual schools—for example, allowing principals to hold more responsibility over the framework and management of individual schools. The third part focuses on the responsibilities and roles of the Education Department. For example, the ED evaluates its structure and staff, aiming to enhance the training and the knowledge base of its department. (“The Education Department Reform”)

The Education Commission (EC), formed in 1984, is the most important advisory body to the government. It advises the government with regard to the educational needs of the community, particularly in the areas of curricula, administration and assessment mechanisms, as well as the academic structure of the system. The EC also works with other advisory boards, for example, the Board of Education, University Grants Committee, and Vocational Training Council, to accomplish its tasks. (“Terms of Reference”)

Background for Reform

Education under the British system was satisfactory for its time. However, when Hong Kong became a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of the People's Republic of China in 1997, new challenges arose.

Since this time, Hong Kong has focused on becoming more competitive with its neighboring countries in a multitude of areas. For example, Hong Kong wants to gain international respect for its workforce, educational programs, and financial systems. As Fanny Law, Secretary of Education and Manpower Bureau, has stated, "There is an urgency to reform our education system." (Law) In order to compete in the global economy, Hong Kong's education must provide citizens with "the ability to think critically and laterally...and the ability to work with people of different backgrounds and abilities." (Law) As a result, there is now a perceived need to "reorient" the education system to reflect the current objectives of Hong Kong and improve the skills of its students. Ultimately, the SAR's goal for its education system is to accomplish the following:

To enable every person to attain all-round development... according to his/her own attributes... filled with self-confidence and team spirit... and to contribute to the future well being of the nation and the world at large. ("Reform Proposals...", p. 4)

Along the same lines, Tung Chee Hwa, Chief Executive of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region People's Republic of China, has said that "[Hong Kong's] most important long-term social investment is in [its] education" and has embarked upon a "holistic" review and improvement of the current system. (Chung) Chee Hwa has further said that he is committed to removing "unnecessary drillings and the pressure of high-stake public assessments" as well as providing more funding for schools. Moreover, as a

goal Chee Hwa plans to expand access to tertiary education from the current 18 percent of the population to 60 percent by 2008. (“Hong Kong Committed to Education Reform”) Consequently, reform has been planned for all stages of the education system: kindergarten, primary, secondary, and tertiary schools.

Reform of Kindergartens and Child Care Centers

There are two types of pre-primary education in Hong Kong: kindergartens and child-care centers (CCC). Kindergartens, established in the private sector in the 1950s, are regulated by the Education Department, and child-care centers are regulated by the Social Welfare Department.

In 1980, while 85 percent of children were enrolled in kindergarten, only 16 percent of the teaching staff was adequately trained for teaching their respective courses within the school. This was one of the many concerns that were addressed in a “White Paper” on pre-school education. The White Paper constituted the government’s first official policy on pre-school education. It highlighted the need to train teachers as well as the need to improve and develop a respectable curriculum. One year later a panel of international educators reviewed the Hong Kong education system. The panel concluded that early childhood education was essential and that “kindergartens should become part of the aided sector.” (Bray and Koo, p. 23) The Education Commission disagreed with the panel’s proposal, however. It wasn’t until 1995 when an education-related advisory board decided that the government should be involved in the pre-school sector of education, establishing a committee to help train teachers. (Bray and Koo, p. 24)

By 1998 the government pledged a commitment to preschool education and worked to resolve two key issues: kindergarten tuition and teacher qualifications. To

help parents afford kindergarten education, the government introduced a “Kindergarten Fee Remission Scheme” to assist qualifying parents in paying kindergarten fees. A “Kindergarten Subsidy Scheme” was also established to improve the quality of education and lessen the financial effects (fee increases) caused by governmental regulatory requirements on the number of qualified teachers to be employed by each kindergarten. (Bray and Koo, p. 25)

In terms of teacher qualifications, the post-1997 government has raised the kindergarten teacher entry requirement. Teachers previously were deemed adequate to teach after passing just two parts of the Hong Kong Certification of Education Examination, a standardized test. Now teachers must pass five parts of the standardized test to be certified capable to teach, including tests in both English and Mandarin. A “Guide to Pre-Primary Curriculum” has also been published to advise kindergarten principals on how to develop an effective curriculum. Finally, a pamphlet has been published to help parents choose a kindergarten best suited for their child. (Bray and Koo, p. 29 ; “Education Program Highlights”)

Primary and Secondary School Reform

By looking at the primary and secondary school levels it is evident that Hong Kong schools are a synthesis of the British and the Chinese education systems. The British influence is evident in the school uniforms and straight rows facing the blackboard in classrooms, while the Chinese influence is seen through memorization and emphasis on hard work and diligence in schoolwork.

Following the establishment of the SAR in 1997, the government began working on five main areas of reform. First, it focused on extending the previously half-day

primary schooling sessions to full-day sessions. As of February 2002, the SAR has been able to extend full-day schooling to 49 percent of the schools and plans to reach the 100 percent target rate by 2007. The student-teacher ratio has also improved, from 24:1 in 1997 to 22:1 in 2001 for primary schools, and from 21:1 to 19:1 in secondary schools. Between 1997 and 2002 a total of 148 new schools were constructed and converted into whole day operations. Between 2003 and 2007, 47 more new schools are proposed. (“Education Program Highlights”)

Second, a significant amount of resources has been allotted for the increased use of information technology (IT) in teaching and learning. In 1998, the EMB completed a review of the education system, which led to the publication of “Information Technology for Learning in a New Era: Five-Year Strategy 1998/99 to 2002/03.” This document outlined the EMB’s strategy to promote IT in the classroom and resulted in the allocation of HK\$3,214 million in capital investment and HK\$556 million annually thereafter. The aim is to provide at least forty computers for each primary school and eighty-two computers for each secondary school. Also, the goal is to provide about 85,000 IT training facilities for teachers at all levels of education and to allow students to use the IT machinery after normal school hours. (“EMB Policy”)

Third, the use of native-language teaching has been increased, especially in primary schools. The Hong Kong government wants its students to be trilingual in Cantonese, English and Putonghua (more commonly known as Mandarin). In 1998, both a Language Resource Center and a new Mandarin curriculum were established, and 223 of more than 400 secondary schools have now adopted Mandarin as the medium of instruction. These schools have been given more government support in terms of

acquiring both additional grants and multi-media learning centers; the government believes fluency in Mandarin will “facilitate effective communication and business exchanges. (“EMB Policy”)

Fourth, through the School Improvement Program the government has been upgrading facilities and will continue to do so in phases through 2005. All new schools that were built during 2000 and after will be equipped with computer-assisted learning rooms, language rooms, conference rooms, bigger classrooms, faculty rooms, and covered playgrounds. (“EMB Policy”)

Finally, the government is encouraging the idea of the “through-train school.” According to this “through-train” model, primary and secondary schools that have a consistent teaching methodology and curricula will be linked, allowing students to be directly promoted from primary to secondary without having to take any standardized tests. Under the rules of the through-train model, the linked secondary school must admit all the primary 6 graduates from their linked primary school. Since each school may decide to implement this model on a voluntary basis, each linked secondary school must also have room available for students wanting to enroll from an unlinked primary school. (“Reform Proposals...,” p. 7)

Higher Education Reform

Education reform encompasses all levels of education; hence, Hong Kong has also developed a reform plan for the higher education level. Hong Kong’s tertiary institutions offer degree and non-degree programs to post-secondary students, most using English as the medium of instruction. In 1998 there were 21 higher education institutions. The UGC-funded institutions, combined, have the capability of handling

over 45,000 students in degree programs and over 14,400 students in sub-degree programs. A sub-degree program requires about half the number of college credits that are needed to attain a full degree. For example, an Associate of Business Administration sub-degree requires between 35-64 credits, while a Bachelor of Business Administration full degree requires 120 credits. (“Credit System”) As of 2000, only 18 percent of the 17-20 year age group were provided with 14,500 first-year first-degree places and only 8 percent of the same group were offered full-time first-year sub-degree places.

(“Overview”)

Higher education has also begun to shift from an “elite oriented” to a “public oriented” philosophy over the last decade. Based on the goals set by the EMB and ED, higher education faces many challenges in the 21st century. First, Hong Kong needs to adapt to science and technological advancements in the world by expanding its IT curriculum in college. Second, it needs to form a system that is best for Hong Kong, taking what is best from the British and the Chinese cultures. Third, Hong Kong graduates need to be innovate, creative, and independent problem-solvers. (“EMB Policy”)

To date, programs have been put in place to help qualifying students with tuition fees and expenses. In 2001, the programs benefited 9,044 tertiary students, both full-time and part-time, pursuing continuing and professional education. (“Overview”)

According to the EMB, there are many other targets that need to be met in tertiary education. First, education must be made available to all adults looking for higher and continuing education. In order to increase access, universities have planned to base

admission partly on examination and partly on principal and teacher recommendations. (“Overview”)

Second, all students should be guaranteed that the quality of education in Hong Kong will be of the same caliber as in other international universities. Tertiary institutions need to focus more attention on becoming more competitive with schools within the region, such as those in Japan and Singapore. Presently, Hong Kong is ranked well below its Asian neighbors in terms of the number of students educated, the quality of the teaching staff, and the overall curriculum offered and taught within the universities. The government is evaluating several proposals including the expansion of the number of students accepted for degrees and sub-degrees and the development of a framework that encourages life-long learning. (“Education Program Highlights”)

The Problem of Teacher Qualifications

The issue of teacher education has become a major concern to the Hong Kong government. Students need to be assured that they will have a “dedicated and professional” (“Strategic Plan...”) teaching staff, but qualified teachers have been difficult to recruit. In 1994 five existing colleges of teacher education merged to form the Hong Kong Institute of Education (HKIEd). Committed to upgrade the quality of teacher education, the HKIEd has established programs for both practicing and pre-service teachers. (“Strategic Plan 1994-2004”)

There are two pre-service programs and two in-service programs currently offered. Under the pre-service programs, students can enroll in teacher education either after two years of senior-secondary schooling (Form 7 at age 19), which would last for two years full-time, or after five years of secondary education (Form 5 at age 17), which

would last three years full-time. In either of these programs, each student is trained to teach four primary subjects. With in-service education, teachers with reasonable scores on the Hong Kong Certification Education Exam (HKCEE) enroll in a three-year part-time program. Teachers with higher academic qualifications enroll in a two-year part-time program. Still, there is a need to further improve qualifications of teachers. (Bray and Koo, p.67)

The government also plans on setting professional standards for entry into teacher education programs. Those wishing to become teachers will have to be registered with the Director of Education, and teachers will need to have “subject-specific core competencies,” which means that they must be proficient in specific subject areas before being able to teach those particular subjects. Another goal of the government is to have all teachers meet a language proficiency requirement in both English and Mandarin. Yet another longer-term goal is to require all teachers to have an undergraduate degree. Finally, the government wants to encourage primary school teachers to improve themselves by pursuing both a degree and teacher certification. As of now, the in-service and pre-service training simply provide a sub-degree certificate.

Public Reactions

Even since 1997 Chief Executive Tung Chee Hwa has repeatedly announced a commitment toward education reform. In his policy address of 2000, Chee Hwa said, “I plan to focus on three major issues of public concern—education, poverty, and governance.” (“Hong Kong Committed to Education Reform”) At the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST) 10th Anniversary ceremony, Chee Hwa said, “Human capital counts for more than physical and financial capital; and education

background certainly counts for more than family background.” (“Hong Kong Committed to Education Reform”) Yet, according to Anthony Cheung Bing-leung, the head of the Department of Public and Social Administration at the City University of Hong Kong and a former Democratic Party legislator, “There is still no strong social consensus about how to take reforms forward.” (Bing-leung) Despite the heightened publicity and the numerous publications by the EC, ED, and EMB, Bing-leung is among many who are not pleased with the work of Chief Executive Tung Chee Hwa. As he notes further, teachers have been forced to teach in a specific format rather than given the appropriate amount of “freedom, trust and room for positive interactions with students.” (Bing-leung) Although he agrees that the chief executive has commendable goals, Bing-leung suggests that the government should be spending more time implementing changes rather than continuously pushing their “reform blueprints” onto the public. For example, a recent article in the *South China Morning Post* notes that the Curriculum Development Council in 2001 said that “senior secondary students should undertake a new, project-based subject—general knowledge.” (Bunce) While conceding that this is a plausible recommendation, Professor Pauline Bunce of the Hong Kong International School has criticized it as too general. She suggests that general knowledge is needed but that it is something that cannot be directly taught as a subject. She instead believes that “general knowledge happens when you are busy looking for something else.” (Bunce) Hence, Bunce claims that it is only with the addition of a more flexible curriculum that general knowledge will be attained. For example, teachers should be given a wider selection of texts to choose for their classes. They should also encourage students to be inquisitive

and allow them to be independent when selecting topics to research and understand.

(Bunce)

A second area of public concern is the implementation of Mandarin as the vehicle of instruction in the SAR. As a recent editorial in the *People Daily* states, “The introduction of the mother-tongue instruction...comes at a time when the need for English proficiency has never been greater.” (“HK Continues to Implement...”) The editorial explains that the use of native language in schools may make it easier to learn, but argues that it will also lead to the loss of valuable English skills needed for professional life. (“HK Continues to Implement...”) Fanny Law, Secretary of the Education and Manpower Bureau, refutes this contention by pointing to research showing that students learn best when instructed in their mother tongue. Furthermore, she states that no definitive conclusion can be made until the first batch of students subject to mother-tongue teaching graduates in 2003. (Law)

Another complaint from the Hong Kong population concerns the pace of education reform; many believe that it is happening much too rapidly. Some hold to the view that education reform, while aiming for equality, is jeopardizing quality by launching too many changes at the same time. However, Fanny Law has argued that reform is not occurring too rapidly, but instead that the government places importance on both “nurturing talents” and attaining respectable standards. Law says that it is necessary to change all levels of education at once because “many issues are interlinked.” (Law)

Despite these concerns, not all public reactions to the post-1997 changes have been negative. For example, the public has been very pleased with the new school curriculum at the Po Leung Kuk Luk Hing Too primary school. This school has

introduced a curriculum where students also work on art projects and engage in sports. This new curriculum enables students to develop creativity, problem solving skills, and organizational skills and encourages teachers to assess students on these skills. (Yow)

The public has also reacted favorably to the reduction of the number of standardized tests needed to progress to higher levels of education. Although some believe that the change has lowered the quality of education in traditional elite schools, Ping, a researcher hired by the government to evaluate the performance of students since the abolishment of the Academic Aptitude Test, disagrees. Specifically, Ping has observed that since the abolishment of the AAT students have shown a greater amount of knowledge retention. Hence, he and most Hong Kongers seem to agree that the reduction in the number of tests has been a positive change. (Ping)

Outlook for the Future

Since 1997 Hong Kong has been faced with the task of improving its education system in order to remain competitive with its Asian neighbors and to gain for its education system respect from countries around the world. To these ends, Hong Kong has focused its reform efforts on each level of education as well as on its teachers and administrators.

The reform programs, established by the government and the education-advisory boards, have resulted in a number of changes so far. For example, teacher-training programs have been improved, and teachers now must be proficient in both English and Mandarin. School administrators are also learning how to develop effective school curriculums that are individualized for their institution.

Despite the many changes and improvements that have occurred since 1997, much more still has to be accomplished. For example, there needs to be an increase in the use of information technology, still more highly trained teachers, and increased access to education. Overall, Hong Kong has worked hard to improve its education system; yet, it is only with the government's continued dedication toward reform that its education system will reach its full potential.

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