

Forum

Re-thinking the Education Reform: People, Process, Priority and Professionalism

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Introduction

Education reform has taken a prominent position on the SAR Government's agenda since 1997. Within this relatively short period there has been a proliferation of policy initiatives covering almost every aspect of school education. In this paper I aim to provide a personal perspective on recent education policy in Hong Kong. My perspective draws on my experience as a secondary school principal, the chairperson of the Hong Kong Subsidized Secondary Schools Council and member of a number of education-related advisory committees. My involvement across these roles has given me access to contacts, discussion and debates with school heads, school councils, government officials and others intimately concerned with education. When taken together, my experience and involvement in schools and policy debate have provided me the opportunity to observe and analyze and form a view which offers some insight into the whole reform process. These views form the basis of this paper.

Background

Most of the current important policies in school education can be traced back to a number of influential policy documents. Between them, the following documents have done much to direct the development of school education since 1997.

- “Quality School Education – Quality Indicators, Quality Assurance, Quality Management, Quality Incentives, Quality Teachers”
Education Commission Report No. 7, September 1997
- “Transforming Schools into Dynamic and Accountable Professional Learning Communities – School-based Management Consultation Document”
Advisory Committee on School-based Management, February 2000.
- “Learning for Life, Learning through Life – Reform Proposals for the Education System in Hong Kong, Education Blueprint for the 21st Century”
Education Commission, September 2000
- “Education Reform Measures – Primary One Admission System, Secondary One Admission System, “Through-train” Model, Basic Competency Assessments”
Education Department, January 2001.

The education sector and the community as a whole have embraced the overall aims of education as a way of, “enabling every person to attain all-round development in the domains of

ethics, intellect, physique, social skills and aesthetics according to his/her own attributes....” and that it is important to “raise the overall quality of students and to build a lifelong learning society”. And, not unsurprisingly, there has been little disagreement over the principles of “student-focused; no-loser; quality; life-wide learning, society-wide mobilization.” (Education Commission, September 2000)

Development since 1997

Initiatives from the Education Commission Report 7

Quality Teachers

- Certification required in 2004/05 for all principal-designates. New requirement of continuous professional development (CPD) for principals starting 2002/03, and CPD for teachers starting 2003/04.
- All serving English and Putonghua teachers must acquire the Language Proficiency Requirement by 31 August, 2006. New teachers must be professionally qualified before entering the teaching profession in September, 2003.

Quality Indicators and Assurance

- A School Development and Accountability Framework was established. All schools must undergo school self-evaluation and external school review beginning in 2003, following a 4-year cycle.

Quality Management

- The Education (Amendment) Bills on School-Based Management are being drafted in the Legislative Council. When passed as planned, they will decentralize and delegate some power from the School Sponsoring Body to the School Management Committee (SMC) thereby forging a clear division of power between the two, and giving representation and voting power to parents and teachers in the SMC.

Quality Incentives

- Establishment of the Quality Education Fund

Initiatives from the Reform Proposal of the Education Commission, September 2000

- Reform in curriculum and assessment
- Change in the Primary One Admission System and Secondary One Admission System
- Creation of a “Through-train” model
- Implementation of Basic Competency Assessments (BCA)
- Change of the academic system from a system of 7 years of secondary education and 3 years of tertiary education (5+2+3) to 6 years of secondary and 4 years of tertiary (3+3+4)
- Increase in number of post-secondary places so that 60% of senior secondary school leavers can attain post-secondary education

Apart from these, a series of initiatives were introduced in 1999 and new measures added in 2001 to further improve the terms of the Direct Subsidy Scheme (DSS) to “support the growth of the DSS sector...and to provide better quality education and to facilitate existing aided schools to join DSS”(Circular Memorandum No. 210/2001). Working alongside these educational changes has been the re-structuring of the Education Department (with the establishment of Regional Education Offices), and the merging of the Education and Manpower

Bureau (EMB) with Education Department, and subsequently the abolishment of the Board of Education.

Concerns and Challenges

In the span of less than 10 years, from the early inception of ideas in 1997 to the present, multiple policy initiatives have converged to cover almost every aspect of school education, from curriculum and assessment, to management, student admission and the CPD of teachers and principals. Not surprisingly, public expectation of the outcomes of these reforms has been and continues to be high. As the education community continues to battle with understanding and implementing the reforms, a host of concerns and challenges have become apparent. This section teases out a number of the more important of these.

1. Implementing reforms – confusion between the ends and the means

During the process of implementation, intended educational aims and philosophy can easily be forgotten. In other words, the ends can be confused with the means as a result of bureaucratic or political consideration if we lack a thorough understanding of the educational rationale of the policy, or the frontline practitioners do not have the chance to participate in the conceptualization and formulation stages. The debate on the academic structure of secondary education and the implementation of the school development and accountability framework provide good examples of this.

a. Academic structure of secondary education

After two years' study, the Working Group on the Review of the Academic Structure of Senior Secondary Education suggested that the 3-year senior secondary academic structure was the most appropriate structure for Hong Kong to achieve "an overall enhancement in knowledge, ability and quality of our students to meet the needs of the community in the 21st Century..." "Therefore, concomitant with the adoption of a "3+3" academic structure in secondary education, local universities' first degree programme will have to be extended for one year i.e. from the current 3-year structure to a 4-year one." According to this recommendation, a 4-year university programme will become an extended and integral part of a 16-year academic structure for primary, secondary and tertiary education. However, since the Report was published, there has been vibrant discussion initiated by the universities and the EMB on using the expanded Early Admission Scheme and "5+1" to expedite the transition of 3 years of University study to 4 years. For a short time this developed into an area of disagreement between the university sector and the school sector. University concerns focused on how to quicken the pace of transition to a 4-year study, while secondary schools were more concerned with the implications of "5+1" on curriculum, assessment, quality of student learning and ecology of school life.

Such a debate or argument would not have taken place if the vision, the aims and the philosophy at the heart of this structure change were clear. The true aim was the provision of a structure of 3+3+4 from secondary to tertiary education, which when taken as an integrated whole, would provide the best learning environment for the all round quality development of a student. The 4-year tertiary education does not stand alone as an aim, nor does the 6 year secondary education in the form of 5+1.

b. School self evaluation (SSE)

The education community generally agrees with the principles of accountability and development as a way to better school management, but we need to establish, through discussion and deliberation a clearer understanding on issues such as:

- what data should be collected;
- why such data is needed;
- how they should be used for the benefit of school development to promote all round development of students (but not to be used as partial and biased data on school appraisal);
- who should have access to what data;
- how frequent the reporting of data should be and how should the data be reported to avoid any abuse or misinterpretation.

However, the massive data collection exercise involving all schools has begun even before the education community has had the chance to discuss, to give suggestions and views, and to have dialogue with the policy makers to ensure that the policy is both conceptually and pragmatically sound.

The requirement that all schools conduct perception surveys of stakeholders' (teachers, students and parents) every year using the same set of questions is an illustration of how the policy was not thoroughly discussed with schools before it was launched. Schools are finding such data collection at odds with the prevailing educational rationale and the practice of allowing schools the time and space to engage in a developmental cycle of reflection, planning, action and evaluation. Such a process will take at least 2 to 3 years to complete if any impact or change is to take place.

Another example of confusion in the SSE is the mandatory reporting of the average number of CPD hours of teachers in a school year. Such a gross averaging of 50-60 teachers in each school can hardly be meaningful or useful for revealing the professional activities of teachers in the school. Nor does it give information on individual profiles of the teachers. Furthermore, this data collection and reporting requirement stands in stark contrast to the spirit advocated in the teacher education policy from a separate branch of the EMB and supported by the Advisory Committee on Teacher Education and Qualification (ACTEQ). In a separate EMB circular schools are told to keep track of individual teacher's CPD hours across the different modes of CPD activities.

These two examples have illustrated that without the involvement and input of the education community in the policy-making process, the policy may not be accepted by the community and its implementation may fall short of achieving the goal of meaningfully employing the data for school reflection and development planning. There remains the risk that the data collection may simply become an act of compliance and an end in itself, just to meet bureaucratic requirements.

2. Teacher supply and morale

a. Possible shortage in supply

About 348 of principals (about a quarter of the total number) in the primary, secondary and special schools sectors have retired or left the profession during the period from 2000/01 to 2003/04. This gives rise to concerns about the capacity of the education sector to provide

sufficient quantity of professionals, of the right calibre, to fill the school leadership vacancies at a time when it is particularly important to have good leaders to lead the education reforms.

Language teaching is another area of possible shortage. The language policy requires all new teachers to meet Language Proficiency Requirement before taking up teaching in English and Putonghua in 2004. This has been accompanied by, concerns that the demand for qualified and quality English and Putonghua teachers may not be met by market supply.

A similar shortage lurks in the supply of teachers capable of teaching subjects in English. This is an indirect consequence of the Medium of Instruction (MOI) policy which has resulted in a significant decrease in secondary schools students studying their subjects in English (three-quarters of secondary schools are schools using Chinese as medium of instruction, CMI schools) and a decrease in number of students taking academic studies in English in the Hong Kong Institute of Education. This is a market driven response in that there is a small market for teachers teaching subjects in English with only 112 schools using English as medium of instruction, as compared to 335 CMI schools. These two factors together have resulted in an acute shortage of teachers who have sufficient exposure in English or training in the teaching in English.

b. Negative feelings and low morale

Teachers are receiving demands from all sides, these include:

- changes in curriculum content, learning and assessment approaches;
- the need to cater for a wider diversity in student learning abilities;
- the need to provide life-wide learning outside the classroom;
- the need for greater attention on moral, civic and national education;
- the need for data collection, survey, analysis and documentation required for school self evaluation and external review
- the need (for language teachers) for meeting the language proficiency requirement

Each policy division of the EMB naturally pushes its own particular reform and imposes additional requirements. While one cannot argue against the benefit of each policy or reform initiative, the pressure is on teachers as the frontline practitioners to operationalize the laudable goals of the reform. A recent survey by the Professional Teachers Union revealed that 60% of teachers felt pressure at work which stemmed mainly from education reform, heavy teaching, non-teaching related workload and high societal expectations.

Decline in student population has given rise to downsizing, merging or even closure of schools and teacher redundancy. Schools and teachers feel a strong sense of instability and this makes it quite difficult for them to have long term planning or even to focus on their teaching. Their immediate task has become how to attract sufficient students to keep the schools in operating. In addition, the recent suggestions of some individuals on de-linking teacher salaries from the Civil Service Pay Scale, or changing the present pay system to teacher block salary grant, further intensifies the sense of uncertainty and insecurity among teachers.

At the same time, teachers have a low sense of achievement or success and hardly feel that their work is recognized or applauded. Our (Hong Kong's) good performance in the Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA) has been barely mentioned and much less praised.

But more often than not, teachers face public criticism from a society which tends to hold a negative perception of the performance of schools and education as a whole.

This is an issue of utmost importance that needs to be addressed if we are to develop a professional force that has a positive and healthy outlook on the future. The dominant question for principals and policy makers to consider is whether the profession can continue to attract young people of high calibre to realize the vision of education reform.

3. The press and the public

a. Disclosure of incomplete and inaccurate information

The mass media, especially, the newspapers, have played a very important and visible role in information dissemination in recent years. It provides a visible and direct platform for delivery of information and expression of opinions on educational issues. Because of the great interest of the public in education, reporters have been very pro-active in looking for and publishing information that is of a highly sensitive nature. It was not unusual for the reported news to contain highly sensitive information that should be confidential because the ideas and proposals are still on the drawing board. In cases where the reported news does not give the full picture, it is often inaccurate and misleading. The public and even the education community tend to take the press as the “authority of information” and accept news reports uncritically. Some notable examples were reports on the review on Secondary School Places Allocation e.g. the use of BCA as a scaling mechanism; review on MOI e.g. requirement that a majority of teachers in an EMI school must attain a certain standard in English proficiency; and suggestions on how money could be saved in the education budget cut meeting between EMB and the schools councils.

Disclosure of incomplete and inaccurate information can mislead and confuse public thinking and consequently hamper the effectiveness of consultation and discussion of the policy. Since such information is often of great concern to the education community and the public at large, the release of ideas too soon when not thoroughly discussed or comprehensively formulated can result in confusion and unwarranted anxiety.

At the core of this issue, we need to ask ourselves, schools and the EMB included, the following questions

- Have we made positive use of the media / press? Does it serve the best interests of education and society by properly, accurately and ethically reporting the information?
- Why do we look to the press as the “authority of information”? Is there no other more formal and appropriate channel of information dissemination, or channel for communication between the decision makers and the education community?
- Why do we accept the information from the press without critically assessing the truthfulness and viability of ideas? Do we lack critical thinking or have we simply accepted the irrationality of policies?

b. Negative public perception

There are very negative perceptions throughout the community about the success of the education reforms. There is also a perception that any change made is a change for the worse. Indeed, a comment made about education reform in 1998 by Professor Cheng Kai-ming is as relevant today as when he made it. He stated: “In short, there was no shortage of policies and

recommendations,...but there was little perceivable improvement of the situation. There was therefore a general lack of confidence in all parties.” (KM Cheng in “Reinventing the Wheel: Educational Reform”). Mr. Leung Yiu-chung, a secondary school principal and a Legislative Councillor, was quoted by Singtao News (6 February 2004) as saying that the education reform was less than satisfactory because it was being implemented too quickly, lacked appropriate support structure, and was not adequately explained or supported by parents and schools.

The general public has questioned the effectiveness of investing an increasing amount of money on education (an increase of recurrent spending of 60% from 1996/97 to 2003/04), often by referring to the perceived decline in teacher language proficiency and general student quality. The highly publicized news of parents sending their children for overseas studies, quality assurance reports on less than satisfactory performance of schools, and cases of bullying and violence in schools have reinforced the general negative perception of the ability of the education sector to produce quality education. .

Re-thinking the Education Reform: People, Process, Priority and Professionalism

Education reform of this scale and intensity requires clear vision and design, thorough and detailed planning, coordinated implementation strategies, involvement, alignment and commitment of the education community from the early phase of conceptualization to implementation. It also requires a support system with appropriate resources and expertise that can empower and build synergy with the schools and teachers to deliver the goals of providing quality education. In the remainder of the paper I will explain what I believe are the keys to the realization of the goals of the education reform.

1. People – teacher and education leaders

Teacher as target of change and change agent

Education is inspiring, motivating, shaping and modelling. It involves numerous multi-faceted interactions between the recipient (student) and deliverer (teacher) in the process of educating students. The process aims to improve students’ physical, intellectual, emotional and moral development. It is a “people” business with teachers being the target of change as well as a change agent.

The teaching profession has attracted people who love teaching, young people who are conscientious, hardworking and committed to work in the best interests of the students. The real progress made since 1997 has been that many teachers have responded to the call for continuous professional development - the attitudinal shift needed for life-long and life-wide learning - through upgrading their professional qualifications and engaging in vibrant professional activities. Collaborative work and sharing of good practices within schools and among schools have become more and more common. Teachers are changing in their thinking about curriculum, learning, teaching and assessment. In my opinion, this is the most significant change that the education reform has made – teachers are maturing professionally, and as such they are evolving from a target of change to becoming a change agent of the education reform.

However, the positive atmosphere and favourable environment conducive to the teacher’s role as change agent is still lacking. Teachers need the time and space for change, they need a clear and consistent direction, and commitment from the leadership, and the support and



encouragement to show them what they are doing is the way to go, what they have been doing is valued and appreciated as contributing to quality education.

Education leaders to provide visionary and empathetic leadership

We look to our education leaders for leadership in educational values, and with vision and clarity in direction. We need education leaders who can make and defend policy decisions on sound educational principles and best practices with long term planning for sustainable development. Education, as all professions, needs visionary and professional leadership.

Implementation of major and widespread education reform requires leaders who are open and receptive to differences of opinion and who engage in genuine dialogue. Successful reform needs leaders who unite, not divide, by bringing differences into alignment - that is to help everyone work toward the same goals while still appreciating diversity and creativity. It also calls for leaders who build resonance and synergy within their education community. The education community wants leaders who show empathy with them, who are willing to shoulder the criticism and mistakes with them, while still allowing time and room for improvement, and who would celebrate and share with them the joy of success.

2. Priority

Every educational initiative is underpinned with good intentions, and when implemented properly, will hopefully bring about quality education. However, given the many initiatives which are in place at the same time, prioritizing is needed to sort through its urgency and effectiveness and to avoid the overloading of teachers and schools so that each can be implemented in its true spirit.

I would argue that prioritizing the many education initiatives can be done by asking how close is it to what schools need and want, how pivotal and direct, and how far the point of action to the point of effect in bringing about the overall aims - student quality learning.

Teachers are the target of change and the change agent of education reform and, as such, building teacher capacity and enhancing teacher professional development is the most direct and pivotal way to bring about effective student learning. The establishment of the NET scheme in primary and secondary schools, and the curriculum coordinator post in primary schools have a direct impact on teaching and curriculum in the classroom. The Capacity Enhancement Grant that gives incentive and support to address the need for curriculum development, enhancing language ability and catering for diversity in student learning is both specific in purposes and close to what individual schools need, according to their school-based decisions.

On the other hand, a change in the way in which the school management committee is formed, allowing democratic representation does not necessarily lead to more effective teaching, learning or school management. The same can be said of the increase in transparency by uploading public examination results and number of active school days to the web – these may not have a direct or even positive impact on quality learning.

An acid test when prioritizing is to ask the question of whose need or whose wants an initiative aims to satisfy. The farther away the answer is from the teacher and school, the weaker the justification for its importance or existence, then hence, the lesser its priority. A simple question to determine priority might be – how much direct learning and development is involved for both

the students and teachers? And how much administrative work and documentation, and work not directly related to learning, are involved?

3. Process

A policy-making process should include conceptualization of values, rationale and principles, formulation, planning and implementation strategies with built-in monitoring and evaluation, and a system that enables self reflection and self renewal. The early participation and involvement of schools and teachers at the outset in the form of dialogue, debate, discussion and consultation is essential to build a shared knowledge and understanding of the essence and spirit of the policy, to develop ownership, commitment and synergy for all parties to work towards the same aims. Moreover, it enables participants to gain an historical perspective on why and how the initiatives were developed, and thus the knowledge needed to distinguish the means from the ends of the reform during the implementation stage.

Regular forums with education community and stakeholders should be organized to brief them on progress and the issues which need to be addressed. This is a necessary part of the feedback loop to EMB. It can enable periodic evaluation and feedback and consultation for forward planning and development. Moreover, it provides a direct channel of communication to foster an understanding and a pro-active way to address any misconceptions of the public which may have resulted in wrong and negative perceptions of the education reform.

4. Professionalism

To realize and reap benefits from the education reform, professionalism at all levels, from policy makers, school managers and principals, and teachers are required. I suggest that a professionally maturing education community will exhibit behaviours underpinned by educationally sound principles by moving along a number of continuums,

- from making immature politically-driven promises to well-studied and long-term planning based on educational rationale
- from bureaucratic and administrative expedience, procedural concerns to real interest in student learning, teacher and school development
- from control and monitoring to creation of conditions and environment conducive to school development with trust and respect for professional judgment
- from compliance to a set of prescribed standards, rules and regulations to concern and focus on students and school development
- from a quick-fix or short-term problem solving approach to long-term planning for sustainability in development
- from restriction to liberation, from uniformity to individuality, from one specified route to the goal to many routes to the same goal

Concluding Remarks

Since 1997, we have had worked hard to change our education system for the better. There is no doubt that our Government is committed to this, our education leaders are committed to it, as is our broader education community. Schools and teachers are trying to make good on the vision of the education reforms. Progress has been made in the professional development of teachers and principals, school management and accountability, quality of school curriculum, learning and teaching approaches. But, at the same time, certain issues and concerns still need to be



resolved if we are to build an environment conducive to sustaining education development and quality.

We need visionary and professional leaders who:

- have clear vision and direction;
- can establish mutual trust and respect, and instil confidence and pride in the profession;
- engage in constant dialogue and collaborative partnership with their education communities;
- have carefully thought-out long term plans and implementation strategies which are consciously prioritized in terms of both importance and effectiveness;
- provide support measures to build the capacity of schools and teachers.

In short, we need a professional force, from policy makers to frontline practitioners who are working for the best interests of our students with policies underpinned by sound educational principles and best practices. With these in place, we will make a difference through and with the education reform.