

## *Welcome Speech*

### **Professor Paul MORRIS**

President

Hong Kong Institute of Education

Good morning, Professor Li, Dr. Wong, Dr. Chan, Mr. Lau, Distinguished Guests, Principals, Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to welcome you all to the Hong Kong Institute of Education, especially when it coincides with the Institute's 10th anniversary year. I would especially like to welcome those attendees and speakers from abroad who have kindly come to share their wisdom and insight.

Over its first decade, the Institute has moved teacher education away from a reliance on sub-degree programmes recruiting mainly Form 5 graduates to help achieve the Government's goal of an 'all graduate and all trained' profession by providing mainly undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes. It is also a mark of the significant change within the educational sector that a conference like this has attracted such a record turnout – nearly 1,000 principals who, as we all know, are amongst the busiest people in Hong Kong. I would like to congratulate you for participating in this Conference as your involvement is a demonstration of the emergence of a much stronger professional community of school leaders in Hong Kong.

During this Conference, you are going to hear a number of presentations which address issues central to your role as school principals. Issues such as the role of assessment as a tool for promoting learning, teacher appraisal and curriculum reform are all topics which are addressed and which you have to grapple with on a day-to-day basis. However, your ability to improve your schools and implement the worthwhile changes that are advocated is greatly dependent on the teachers for whom you are responsible. Without a committed and high quality teaching force, much of the advice you will be given today will be of limited value. In this regard, I anticipate an emerging crisis in Hong Kong which is going to severely affect our teaching force and eventually the quality of education. So, what is the crisis that we are facing? I refer to the rapidly declining attraction of teaching as a career for our school leavers and graduates. This is reflected in the very significant drop in the level of applications for teacher education programmes designed to prepare primary and secondary school teachers which are offered by all the teacher education providers.

The key question is - why has this happened? One possibility is the upturn in the economy, but the trend was apparent before the upturn. There is, I believe, a more powerful process in place which is akin to what the influential Holmes Report on teacher education in 1986 in the USA referred to as 'a cycle of mutual impairment'. This involves a range of day-to-day actions by various parties which serve to maintain and undermine the status and morale of teachers and in so doing discourage talented young people from joining the profession. Each of us, be we teacher educators, school personnel or members of Government must look towards our own actions in order to locate the source of this problem.



In the case of teacher educators, in the past we have not always ensured that our courses required high levels of academic and professional rigour for graduation. Low expectations encourage low entry standards and this process can be perpetuated by the teachers we prepare. I am pleased to say that fortunately the situation is changing in our Institute and the Faculties of Education in other universities. The practice that was employed in the former Colleges of Education of expecting all students to graduate successfully so that all vacancies could be filled and to avoid any so-called wastage has now ceased. Students are now expected to achieve standards that ensure they are professionally competent to work with students, colleagues, parents and the wider community. For this, I am proud to share with you that surveys of school principals in 2002 and 2003 have showed that overall the first two cohorts of our Bachelor of Education (Primary) graduates have been viewed as performing very well. Amongst all attributes, the novice teachers are described as particularly impressive in their sense of responsibility, willingness to learn, working attitude, the ability to collaborate with others, and their knowledge of the major subjects they taught. It is a very great happiness to me and my colleagues to see our graduates becoming a new, energetic and professional teaching force in your schools!

In the case of some school principals and teachers, we hear of cases where talented students who want to become teachers are discouraged from doing so on the grounds that teaching is viewed as a low status occupation. They are instead encouraged to pursue careers in Law, Medicine, Business etc. Clearly if we, as professional educators, don't see our own profession positively and don't expect to attract talented young people into it, then we undermine our own credibility and we will have to live with the consequences in the long term.

Finally, I turn to the role of Government. Let me say I can fortunately exempt our Guest of Honour, the Secretary for Education and Manpower, Professor Arthur Li, from my comments. There is a strong tendency for Government to seek to portray teachers, principals and schools as both the cause and solution to all the problems of our educational system. This provides a strong platform for justifying change and conveniently puts the blame for problems elsewhere. The British scholar, Stephen Ball referred to the same phenomenon in the UK under the Thatcher Government as a 'discourse of derision' towards schools, teachers, principals and teacher education providers. We see the same in Hong Kong where ongoing concerns such as language standards, the benefits of small class teaching, bullying and student suicide have all been portrayed as mainly caused by and dependent for their solution on the skills and competence of individual teachers and principals. Teachers and principals are both part of and a product of an education system which has been defined by previous policies.

The problem I refer to is not unique to Hong Kong. If we look at other governments which have previously operated in a similar way, we can anticipate what will happen if we continue along this route. In Australia, UK and Singapore, the governments also used to constantly criticize educators but eventually they realized that whilst blaming the teachers was handy in the short term (especially in that it solved the problem of tomorrow's newspaper headline), in the longer term it had resulted in a much bigger problem. It had created a demoralised teaching force and a profession which was less and less attractive to new entrants. As a result, each of these countries decided consciously to reverse their policy. They began to support and encourage the teaching profession and found ways to attract people into the profession. This has had a marked improvement on morale and recruitment. That same paradigm shift needs to

occur sooner rather than later in Hong Kong if we are going to develop the teaching profession which the community expects, and we need urgently to find ways to attract highly talented students into the profession. Ironically, maybe it is not a paradigm shift which is required but rather a return to or recognition of one of the most traditional Confucian values, namely a respect for teachers. As we start the 21st Century, the respect for the teaching profession is a value that is especially significant and relevant nowadays.

Last but not least, I would especially like to thank the school principals here for the support they have rendered to our Institute, our students and graduates in the past years. We are very grateful for the opportunities and support you have offered our students in your schools and for the mentoring support which you have provided that is so important in the professional development of young student teachers. We also appreciate greatly the assistance you have given to a wide range of collaborative research activities. Your support and partnership has been essential in helping us to achieve one of the key roles given to our Institute by the University Grants Committee, which is to “maintain strong links with the community and in particular the schools and the teaching profession”. The year of 2004 is the 10th anniversary of our Institute and a time to celebrate the 65 years of history of Hong Kong’s teacher education. May I make an early invitation to all of you, principals, partners, alumni and education policy makers to a number of other exciting programmes that we plan to roll out starting from our birthday on April 25?

I would like to specifically congratulate Mr. Hui Wai-tin, Mr. Chan Kin-hung, Mr. Ng Yeung-ming and Ms. Shirley Wong of the Hong Kong Subsidized Secondary Schools Council, Mr. Fung Man-ching, Ms. Fung Yuk-yi and Mr. Choi Poon-yeung of the Subsidized Primary Schools Council, Professor Y.C. Cheng and his colleagues, Mr. Ip Kin Yuen, Dr. Ng Shun Wing, Dr. Magdalena Mok, Dr. Wong Ping Man for organising this Conference. I wish you all a very fruitful discussion today.