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***Assessment Policy in Hong Kong: Implementation  
issues for New Forms of Assessment<sup>§</sup>***

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# **Assessment Policy in Hong Kong: Implementation Issues for New Forms of Assessment**

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## **Abstract**

Large-scale curriculum reform initiated 2001 in Hong Kong has set the stage for change in the school curriculum as well as assessment. In the past, Hong Kong education was characterized by its elitist system with highly selective examinations at different levels of learning. The selective examination oriented policy had its influential impact on the schooling of Hong Kong where teaching and learning were inclined towards examinations. Since 1990, there have been changes in the assessment policy in the school curriculum with more emphasis on formative assessment, e.g. Target Oriented Curriculum. The new forms of assessment have therefore posed a different teaching and learning environment for the schools, teachers and students.

By looking at the previous experiences regarding implementation in the local context, this paper will analyze various aspects of implementation of assessment policies adopted by the schools in Hong Kong. Implications will also be drawn to address the possibilities of implementation for the current policy.

## **Introduction**

Traditionally schools in Hong Kong have adopted tests and examinations as the major forms of assessment in the education system. These forms of assessment carry summative and high-stake characteristics that not only generate pressure to the students but jeopardize teaching and learning. The adverse effect of examinations on Hong Kong schooling was noted more than twenty years ago as a “serious obstacle to curriculum development since many schools disregarded the suggested teaching syllabuses and simply followed the examination syllabuses” (Hong Kong Government Secretariat, 1981, p.117). The comments and suggestions on various aspects of Hong Kong education system by the Visiting Panel (Llewellyn Committee, 1982) were addressed in a series of educational policy documents, i.e. the Education Commission Reports (ECR1 to ECR7) from 1984 to 1997. After 1997 when the sovereignty of Hong Kong was returned to the government of the People’s Republic of China from Britain, a large-scale education reform coupled with curriculum reform,

initiated and was expected to be implemented over a 10-year span. (Curriculum Development Council, 2001). One of the major issues of the reforms relating to assessment was reducing public examinations and unnecessary excessive tests and examinations existed in both secondary and primary sectors. Such a shift aligned with the intended learning outcomes of the “Learning to learn” reform that emphasized students’ acquisition of generic skills other than subject knowledge learning. Various forms of assessment, such as projects, portfolios, observations, tests, examinations (Curriculum Development Council, 2001, p.81) were recommended. These forms of assessment were intended to be used in continuous stages of students’ development oriented towards the global trend of assessment for learning with a view to enhance teaching and learning in the classrooms.

Yet such a change in assessment has certainly posed a new situation in schools. Recently, there is a growing concern with implementation issues pertaining to how schools, teachers and students will transform their assessment practice in their school contexts. This paper aims to analyze various aspects of implementation of assessment policies adopted by the schools in Hong Kong and implications will also be drawn to address the possibilities of implementation for the current policy.

### **Hong Kong school context: highly selective examination-oriented assessment system**

The purpose of assessment is closely related to the development of the society. Where the society is in an industrial developmental stage, the selection function of the education system is to select an educated middle class for the governance and administrative needs of the society (Biggs, 1998). Given the economic and political status in Hong Kong before 1980’s where jobs were mainly related to skilled workers and rarely needed literate professionals, the education system of Hong Kong tended to provide limited higher education opportunities for those who were academically more

able and thus let the less able ones leave their schools at different stages of education through the selective examination system. Biggs (1998) identified three sequential steps to serve this purpose (p.316):

1. Teach the same curriculum to all, regardless of ability,
2. Test, to see who are the learners of highest ability,
3. Select the most able for further education.

With reference to the Hong Kong education system, there were selective examinations existed in different stages of schooling served to select the more able ones to continue the next higher stage of education provided by the government. The major stages of selection were at primary 5 & 6, Secondary 5 and 7 where internal examinations were conducted for the primary students and external examinations were conducted for the secondary students. “Backwash effect”, a vicious cycle referring to the influence of testing on teaching and learning, was resulted from the high-stake examinations starting from the primary education of Hong Kong (Biggs, 1998). In fact, the backwash effect was evident in a number of studies on classroom teaching and learning (e.g. Cheng, 1998; Morris, 1985). Moreover, Cheng’s study (1998) identified the washback influence on teaching in a newly revised English curriculum even though the examination syllabus had been changed to requiring students to take an active role in language interaction. Significantly, Cheng (1998) found that teaching content was the most intensive washback effect in Hong Kong secondary schools:

*Through interviews with teachers and textbook publishers, it was found that textbook are by far the most direct teaching support teachers can obtain and rely on for their teaching. Textbook publishers in Hong Kong not only provide teaching materials but also detailed teaching and learning activities with suggested methods. They even suggest how much time should be devoted to carrying out those teaching and learning activities. (p.343)*

The backwash effect is not favourable for students' learning, as transmission delivery and drilling constituted major classroom activities. Since Hong Kong has gradually transformed into a more developed society in the last two decades, the expectation of the public for a universal education serving not only quantity but quality has become higher.

### **The agenda for assessment change in the millennium**

The call for curriculum change has implied for an agenda for change in assessment in the Hong Kong education system since the "Learning to learn" reform started in 2001. The educational goals have set to orient towards the acquisition of generic skills<sup>1</sup> rather than subject content knowledge (Curriculum Development Council, 2001). In relation to this, assessment has to be shifted in alignment with the new orientation of the curriculum reform, as generic skills can hardly be measured by paper and pencil tests. According to the reform, assessment was defined as "the practice of collecting evidence of student learning in terms of knowledge, skills, values and attitudes through observation of at student behaviour when carrying out tasks, tests, examinations, etc." (Curriculum Development Council, 2002, p.2) In schools, teachers, students and schools are encouraged to attend to the following aims of assessment:

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

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<sup>1</sup> Collaboration, communication, creativity, critical thinking, information technology, numeracy, problem-solving, self-management and study skills are considered as fundamental skills to learners.

- For teachers and schools to
  - ✧ Diagnose the strengths and weaknesses in the learning of their students
  - ✧ provide quality feedback and specific advice to students so that they know how to improve their learning
  - ✧ review and improve their learning objectives / expectations of students, curriculum design and content, strategies and activities so that they are better suited to the needs and abilities of their students to enhance learning and teaching effectiveness. (Curriculum Development Council, 2002, p.2)

Thus, assessment is expected to play a key role in the process of teaching and learning in the classroom. It is highlighted as “both the processes (e.g. inquiring, independent learning, use of generic skills, reflections) and the products of learning (e.g. knowledge/concepts, problem-solving capabilities) are important by the assessment methods most suited to them (e.g. oral tests for oral communication, discussion for collaboration, presentation/performance for creativity, tests and examinations for knowledge)”. In comparison with the assessment practice before 2001, the shift of the new assessment reform is dramatic in terms of goals, content, method and the type of feedbacks for students. The major shift is illustrated in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: A comparison of assessment policy before and after 2001 in HK**

Before 2001

- Assessment of learning
- To assess how well students have mastered their subject content knowledge and skills
- To grade the students against the standards they have attained
- No / limited teachers' feedback given
- Test and examination oriented
- Emphasize summative assessment
- Transmission of knowledge and drilling are common classroom activities
- Emphasize the learning product

After 2001

- Assessment for learning
- To assess students' generic skills, especially those higher-ordered generic/thinking skills identified as the learning goals of the reform
- Teacher gives constructive feedbacks to enhance students' learning
- Students are aware of their learning objectives and pick up teachers' feedbacks for continuous learning
- Formative assessment and summative assessment are used
- Process and product are stressed

The newly adopted assessment reform will require a different teaching, learning and assessment situation, and most significantly, a shift of people's minds in the implementation.

### **The Implementation issues**

From 1990 onwards, there had been innovations on assessment in Hong Kong schools such as Target Oriented Curriculum (TOC) and the use of school-based assessment in the public examinations. Yet the eventual implementations of these were not considered as successful. TOC was a large-scale curriculum change primarily aimed to adopt a more learner-centred, activity-oriented pedagogy based on constructivist orientation targeted for key learning stages of students from primary to secondary schooling. Yet the Target Oriented Assessment (TOA), formed as part of the

curriculum constituted the major barrier to change (Morris et. al., 2000). The constructivist concepts of assessment held by TOA and the prevailing system of assessment held by the schools constituted the discrepancies regarding implementation within schools and classrooms (Morris et. al., 2000, Carless, 2005). There were macro and micro perspectives taken for consideration regarding the unsuccessful outcomes of TOC. For macro perspective, Morris et. al. (2000) referred to system wide factors such as “political-legal (curricular, graduation and testing requirements) and the organizational (administrative factors, class size, grouping arrangements)” based on their study on TOC case-study schools (p.220). For micro perspectives, Morris et. al. referred to the prevailing attitudes and beliefs including “personal (backgrounds, abilities, interests) and the cultural (values and beliefs of the school and community)”(p.220). Similar outcomes were found by Carless (2005) regarding the prospects for the implementation of assessment of learning. In his study, teacher’s understanding of the practice as well as factors at macro-level such as societal teaching, learning and assessment culture, reform climate, role of high-stake tests, views of parents, internal school support, etc. all contributed to the implementation of TOC (Carless, 2005). Yip & Cheung’s (2005) study on teachers’ concerns on Teacher Assessment Scheme (TAS), a form of school-based assessment involving the practical work of Advanced Level Biology Examination in Hong Kong, revealed that there was a lack of support for teachers’ implementation in a new assessment reform. The study found that teachers were deeply concerned about the support, in terms of resources and information that teachers needed in conducting the assessment. Yet only half-day in-service courses or workshops for new TAS teachers have been organized and there has been little official support to help teachers in conducting TAS (Yip & Cheung, 2005). Indeed, teachers’ conceptions had an influential impact on their classroom practice in various dimension of teaching, learning and assessment. Dahlin, Watkins & Ekholm’s (2001)



study found that the conceptions of teachers regarding the role of assessment were classified into 6 categories in different degrees ranging from externally to internally driven concepts of curriculum and assessment. Teachers who held externally driven concepts of curriculum and assessment stressed the results of technical measurement of students' learning while those who held internally driven concepts focused on students' learning strategies. In a similar vein, Gao & Watkins (2001) proposed a model of teachers' conceptions of teaching organized on a continuum from teacher-centred to student-centred consisting five conceptions of teaching, such as knowledge delivery, exam preparation, ability development, attitude promotion and conduct guidance. In addition, Brown (2004) contended that teachers' conceptions of assessment were related to four purposes, i.e. improvement of teaching and learning, school accountability, student accountability and treating assessment as irrelevant. All these studies have their implications on government's policy making as well as teacher professional development, particularly the need for change in the system and individual level in order to guarantee a successful implementation.

### **Suggestions**

There is no quick fix to the problems encountered in the implementation of the assessment reform. For the government policy to be implemented in the school contexts, it is suggested that adequate provision of practical and relevant knowledge of assessment to the teachers is necessary. Furthermore, if teachers are given opportunities to participate in the discussions of how to implement the newly adopted reform and if adaptations are allowed to be made accordingly in both system and school levels, there would be a greater chance of success of the reform. On the other hand, the assessment reform in Hong Kong highlighted the equal status of the two types of assessment, i.e. formative assessment and summative assessment in schooling, the tensions inherent in the system level regarding high-stake tests and

examinations remain unresolved. Yet literature has also informed us that assessment of learning and assessment for learning could be in synergy. Such view holds that the distinction between assessment of learning and assessment for learning is unnecessary (Harlen, 2005). It was purposed that the synergy of formative and summative assessment could be done by making use of the same evidence for the two purposes. For example, the results of summative assessments can be served as a pool of information for teachers' understanding of students' progress so that the teachers can give further feedbacks regarding students' ongoing learning. Synergy of the two types of assessment can be done like this (Harlen, 2005, p.218-219):

*A positive answer to this question was given by Harlen & James (1997) who proposed that both purposes can be served providing that a distinction is made between the evidence and the interpretation of the evidence. For formative assessment the evidence is interpreted in relation to the progress of a student towards the goals of a particular piece of work, next steps being decided according to where a student has reached. The interpretation is in terms of what to do to help further leaning, not what level or grade a student has reached. For this purpose it is important for teachers to have a view of progression in relation to the understanding and skills they are aiming for their students to achieve. The course of progression can be usefully expressed in terms of indicators, which both serve the purpose of focusing attention on relevant aspects of students' behaviour and enabling teachers to see where students are in development.*

On the whole, the synergy of the two types of assessment will be much depended on how teachers and the schools interpret and use the evidence. Based on this assumption, teachers should develop clear conceptions of different types of assessment so as to help them to determine how the evidence will be interpreted

relevantly and professionally.

### **Conclusions**

In response to the needs of the society and the new educational goals, the assessment system in Hong Kong is going to face a critical change. Similar to other educational innovations, the implementation of the change will be depended on various factors in both macro and micro perspectives. Based on the past experiences of implementation in the literature, it was important to have changes in the system and individual's conception as well. Finally, the synergy of assessment of learning and assessment for learning is also a possible solution to the problem.

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