

Classroom Assessment in Policy Context (Hong Kong)

D Carless, University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, People's Republic of China

© 2010 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Glossary

Confucian-heritage culture – Those societies which subscribe to the tenets of Confucian thought.

School-based assessment – Assessments taken by students within the school, marked by their teachers and counting as part of the external examination score for the subject.

Washback – The phenomenon whereby due to the influence of a test, teachers, and/or students do things that they would not normally do.

The potential of classroom assessment to enhance student learning has, in recent years, attracted considerable attention in the main Anglophone countries. Learning-oriented assessment has been less established in jurisdictions that share a Confucian-heritage culture (China, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan) and are usually considered to be highly test-driven. Such examination-oriented systems may be due in part to high expectations of parents for the academic success of their offspring and the residual influence of the Chinese imperial examination system. The intense pressure and potentially negative social impacts of highly competitive examination-oriented systems in East Asia have been much discussed. Pong and Chow's (2002) portrayal of the pressures exerted on Hong Kong youngsters contains a distressing depiction of the risks of heaping examination stress on vulnerable teenagers. More positive images arise from the seminal work of Biggs (1996) who elaborates the paradox of the Chinese learner in that large class sizes, transmissive teaching, and test-dominated education can still lead to successful deep learning outcomes. A further positive performance indicator is that Hong Kong students generally perform well in international tests of achievement, such as TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) and PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment).

Within such examination-oriented systems, the prospects for classroom assessment in East Asia might seem unpromising at first sight. A more positive outlook arises from Hong Kong's historical position as a combination of Eastern and Western influences and so there might be greater potential for formative approaches to assessment than in neighboring economic success stories, such as Japan or South Korea. There are grounds for believing that there is scope for classroom assessment to embed

itself in the Hong Kong context and a number of relevant policy initiatives have manifested themselves in recent years. The aim of this article is to review the prospects for classroom assessment in Hong Kong with developments divided into those in the primary sector (students aged 6–11 years old in years 1–6) and those in the secondary sector (students aged 12–18 in years 7–13). Each section includes both policy and implementation perspectives, mindful that there are tensions and contradictions between policy intentions and actions, as teachers re-interpret, subvert, or ignore policy prescriptions. This can particularly be the case when policy borrowing from overseas fails to account adequately for local contextual factors.

Assessment Developments in Primary Schools

Primary schooling in Hong Kong has traditionally been textbook dominated and test driven with school communities attaching great importance to indicators of academic achievement, such as textbook completion, homework, test scores, and report cards. Testing from an early stage is emphasized as preparation for future competition and selection through high-stakes examinations. From the age of 6 years, primary school students experience multiple tests and examinations in each school year. Within this test-dominated setting, two significant policy initiatives related to classroom assessment in the primary sector are: the target-oriented curriculum (TOC) in the period 1993–99 and the promotion of reforms related to learning to learn; and assessment for learning, from around 2000 until the time of writing. These two initiatives are discussed below.

Assessment Reform in the TOC

TOC was a radical and wide-ranging reform that sought to transform curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment through multiple components, including targets, tasks, and criterion-based assessment. It is probably fair to say that although there were pockets of encouraging developments, an overall judgment would indicate that TOC was overambitious in scope and failed to achieve the fundamental changes its adherents sought. Here the focus is only on the assessment aspects of the TOC reform. The TOC framework document, developed by Clark *et al.* (1994), sets out what they saw as the main problems with assessment in Hong Kong:

1. too much assessment involving gap-filling and multiple-choice questions;
2. a focus on the ranking and sorting aspects of assessment;
3. lack of integration of assessment with the curriculum; and
4. Failure to assess what is important in learning rather than what is easily assessable.

The proposed solutions tended to be more at the level of exhortations rather than concrete practical strategies and included pleas for: greater use of criterion-referenced assessment; more attention to formative assessment and student improvement over time; and the development of records of student achievement.

Evaluation reports indicated that the assessment aspects of TOC were the most difficult to reform and proved most problematic for teachers. *Morris et al. (2000)* reported resistance to TOC-assessment processes in that teachers held a set of interlinked beliefs, which involved a preference for objective, reliable, formal assessments, and doubts about the feasibility of formative assessment. Teachers did not see assessment as something which would involve their professional judgement and had a reluctance to assess through any means which might be regarded as nonobjective. Formative assessment in TOC became associated with the recording of data about learners, with teachers not having the time, skills, or support necessary to feed back this data into the classroom. Teachers reported doing extra work in collecting assessment data and became frustrated as they realized this was not contributing to enhanced pupil learning. The combination of increased paperwork through record-keeping and a system which was both misunderstood and not congruent with teacher beliefs resulted in formative assessment being considered by teachers as the most problematic and unpopular aspect of the TOC reform.

TOC classroom assessment was further hindered in view of the failure to reform the complex secondary school-selection processes at the end of primary schooling, whereby internal school tests in years 5 and 6 are scaled against a standardized test. It became apparent that neither the system, nor educational stakeholders were ready for the kind of assessment system envisaged by TOC. As a central plank of government educational policy, TOC was beginning its decline by the time of the retrocession to mainland China in 1997 and began fading out as the incoming postcolonial government sought to make its mark. Challenges in the implementation of formative classroom assessment were one of the factors in the eventual abandonment of the TOC reform.

Learning to Learn, Assessment for Learning and Basic Competency Assessments

It was acknowledged that TOC had done little to modify the prevailing examination-oriented culture. A number of TOC principles or concepts were however, repackaged as a new curriculum reform was launched at the turn of the

millennium under the theme of learning to learn. Following contemporary terminology in the UK and elsewhere, the nomenclature formative assessment was changed to assessment for learning. The Education Bureau made a number of recommendations for the development of assessment for learning, including the following:

1. the development of more diversified modes of assessment and a reduction in tests and examinations;
2. opportunities to do assessment collaboratively with students or encourage students to carry out peer or self-assessment;
3. sharing with students the goals of learning, so that they can recognize the standards they are aiming for; and
4. the use of assessments which probe higher-order thinking skills, creativity, and understanding rather than rote memorization of facts.

Within this policy context, *Carless (2005)* discusses two case studies of progressive teachers implementing assessment for learning, mindful that scaling up of these experiences is likely to be difficult. He proposes a multi-level model of factors impacting on the implementation of assessment for learning in Hong Kong, comprising three components: teacher factors, including attitudes toward and understanding of assessment for learning; microlevel school factors, including internal resources, support from management, and collaboration with colleagues; and macrolevel societal factors, including the wider reform climate, educational culture, impact of relevant governmental agencies, and washback from high-stakes testing.

A further subcomponent of the learning-to-learn reforms relates to the introduction of basic competency assessments for the three main subjects of mathematics, Chinese, and English. Basic competencies are the essential knowledge and skills or basic standards required by students in relation to the learning targets and objectives set out in the curriculum for each key stage. Progress toward the basic competencies is monitored through a territory-wide system assessment (TSA) administered by the government at primary three (first conducted in mid-2004) and primary six (first conducted mid-2005), comprising paper-and-pen mode with an oral-assessment component for the two languages. Its stated purposes are to provide feedback to schools about their standards in the three key subjects so that schools can draw up plans to increase effectiveness in learning and teaching.

The government claims that the TSA is low stakes in nature and this is true for students because no individual student grades are made available. For schools and teachers however, it is generally interpreted as high stakes because it indicates how well schools are performing. In a context with a low birth rate, competition for students and associated threats of school closures, the TSA exerts pressure on teachers, which is then transmitted to students.

Table 1 Percentage of students achieving basic competency levels

Subject and year level		Percent achieving basic competency			
		2004	2005	2006	2007
Chinese language (listening, reading, and writing)	Yr 3	82.7	84.7	85.2	84.9
	Yr 6	–	75.8	76.5	76.7
	Yr 9	–	–	75.6	76.2
English language (listening, reading, and writing)	Yr 3	75.9	78.8	79.4	79.5
	Yr 6	–	70.5	71.3	71.3
	Yr 9	–	–	68.6	69.2
Mathematics	Yr 3	84.9	86.8	86.9	86.9
	Yr 6	–	83.0	83.8	83.8
	Yr 9	–	–	78.4	79.9

Adapted from government press release: <http://www.gov.hk>.

The government documents tend to reinforce this by stating that monitoring of the extent to which individual schools attain the basic standards in key learning areas is premised on the need for accountability. The TSA seeks to incorporate both summative (overall assessment data about school performance) and formative (information which can feed back to teaching) functions. The reality, however, is a focus on statistics when results are published. **Table 1**, for example, illustrates the percentage of students who have reached the basic competency standard. It indicates an initial improvement, perhaps as teachers and students become familiar with the test format, and then evidence of tapering off in 2007.

In terms of the formative function of TSA, schools are provided with data which summarize the performance of their students on different test items. Teachers find it difficult to channel this raw feedback into classroom practice. A consequence of the emphasis on statistics and the difficulty of making formative use of the data is to reinforce the prevalent notion in Hong Kong that almost all tests are perceived by stakeholders as high-stakes and formative assessment tends to be drowned by the power of summative assessment. The use of standardized assessment data to inform teaching and learning still needs further development if its formative potential is to be realized.

Assessment Developments in Secondary Schools

Secondary schools in Hong Kong tend to be even more examination oriented than primary schools, as students work their way toward the key selective public examinations at the end of years 11 and 13. Years 10 and 11 are often characterized by drilling, rote learning, examination tips, and repeated study of past papers or examination-practice

exercises. A narrowing of the curriculum results from the tendency to disregard anything that is not directly examination related. Given the importance of the major public examinations, TSA (at secondary 3, year 9) seems less influential than in primary schools.

Unlike in the primary sector, where initiatives such as TOC or assessment for learning can be adopted, tinkered with, or ignored, changes to high-stakes examinations in the secondary sector have an immediate impact on classroom practice, particularly as teacher effectiveness is principally judged by examination results. In line with the understanding that one of the principal influences on what goes on in the classroom is the nature of high-stakes tests, most examination changes in Hong Kong during the last 20 years have had the aim of promoting positive washback on classroom pedagogy. Washback can be defined as the phenomenon whereby because of a test, teachers and students do things that they would not normally do. Washback studies have been a particular feature of assessment research in Hong Kong, particularly with respect to English language, one of the key subjects in the school curriculum. **Cheng (2005)**, for example, studied the impact of changes to the 1996 English language Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE) taken at the end of year 11. These changes were premised on the aim of improving students' English communication skills and encouraging a more communicative orientation to language teaching. Cheng argues that washback works quickly and efficiently in bringing about changes in teaching materials, which is due largely to the highly adaptable and commercial nature of Hong Kong society, and slowly and with difficulties in terms of the methods teachers employ.

Two current developments should also be noted. First, the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority **HKEAA (2006)** with effect from 2007 is moving from norm-referenced to standards-referenced reporting with grades of A–F being replaced by levels 1–5, with the top-scoring students within level 5 being awarded a 5*. Under the standards-referenced approach, the standards are held constant and the percentage of students being awarded a given level varies according to the proportion of students meeting the defined standard. Key aims are to allow students to gain recognition for what they know and can do, and reduce the number of students who are currently awarded unclassified grades and hence no recognition of their learning. It is also hoped that transparent standards with associated criteria and exemplars can be useful in illustrating to students targets and areas for improvement. This aspect is congruent with the role of learning intentions and explicit criteria in classroom assessment.

Second, Hong Kong is moving from 7 to 6 years of secondary schooling with 4-year undergraduate degrees to align itself with mainland China and North America. As part of a new senior secondary (NSS) curriculum,

instead of two high-stakes external public examinations, – HKCEE at the end of year 11 and Hong Kong advanced level examination at the end of year 13 – from 2012 onward there will be one qualification, a new Hong Kong diploma of secondary education (HKDSE) at the end of year 12. It is hoped that moving from two examinations to one will reduce the amount of time preparing for and taking examinations and thereby increase the time available for student learning. The overall aim of the assessment change is to assess a wide range of outcomes relevant to the aptitudes, needs, and abilities of the entire cohort of students eligible for the HKDSE. Each student would also have a learning profile to record their main achievements during the process of senior secondary school. One school of thought is that the HKDSE may reduce pressure on students as there is only one instead of two public examinations for secondary school students. A contrary viewpoint is that having only one high-stakes examination process actually intensifies the pressure on students. A further feature of the HKDSE is that a proportion of marks is being awarded for school-based assessment in all subjects, thereby bringing classroom assessment a higher profile. This development is discussed below.

School-Based Assessment

The most significant and longstanding classroom assessment initiative in the secondary section is the promotion and development of school-based assessment (SBA). SBA in the Hong Kong context refers to in-school assessments graded by teachers and contributing around 15–25% of the marks to the HKCEE or HKDSE. The earliest manifestations of SBA date from a teacher assessment scheme (TAS) for science subjects, initiated from the late 1970s onward. Motivations for SBA include: the potential for assessing a wider range of achievements than through examinations; involving teachers and students more actively in the processes of external examinations; facilitating student improvement over time; and not determining students' academic standard by a single examination. As indicated above, this and other assessment innovations have been generally motivated by the need to temper the negative impact of examinations on classroom practice.

Benny Yung Hin-Wai's research into practical work in science for the TAS has developed particularly useful insights into the challenges of combining both summative and formative functions of assessment. In TAS/SBA, teachers need to award a grade for certification purpose and also provide feedback to students for ongoing learning purposes. This represents a tension which Yung (2001) analyses using the metaphors of policeman and companion to illustrate Hong Kong teachers' conceptions of assessment. The former saw the teacher adopting a picky and fault-finding attitude as represented in the following quotation, "I had to behave like a policeman who had to grasp every chance to give out the assigned

quota of illegal parking tickets in order not to be scolded by his superiors" (Yung, 2001: 254). The latter was represented by a teacher who upheld his beliefs that the teacher's role was to assist students' learning and that the process of awarding an examination grade should be of subsidiary importance to that goal. As Yung acknowledges, the teachers in his study did experience challenges and confusion concerning formative and summative uses of the same set of evidence; illustrative of challenges also found elsewhere in reconciling formative and summative functions of assessment.

Yung also discusses the crucial issue of fairness and describes three views of fairness exhibited by the case-study teachers in his research: fair in the sense of assessing students reliably; fair in terms of not jeopardizing students' chances of learning the subject matter; and fair in the sense of not depriving students of opportunities to receive a well-rounded education. Yung concludes by suggesting that the educational benefits derived from the TAS are at a cost to reliability. The evocative subtitle of Yung's (2006) recent book *Fairness and Fear* reinforces these issues and the pressures of assessment for both teachers and students.

SBA is currently being expanded to all subjects of the curriculum within various timeframes with statistical moderation being used to enhance the reliability of teacher grading. The subject of English has been a particularly high-profile example of SBA. Early progress indicates some positive impacts on students in terms of engaging with assessment criteria and having the explicit opportunity to improve over time, balanced by concerns about increased workload in preparation for SBA. Teachers' responses vary and concerns are mainly focused on the pressures of being responsible for part of the public-examination score; the issue of fairness and interrater reliability; and the heavy workload accruing from SBA preparation, scoring, moderation, and attendance at training programs.

The extent to which SBA can operate fruitfully in a Confucian-heritage culture setting is still open to question. There remain a number of societal barriers to its successful implementation: a preoccupation with reliability and fairness at the expense of validity; lack of understanding, and few well-publicized local models of formative assessment; and a societal perception that teachers cannot be trusted to grade their own students fairly. The following comment of Pong and Chow may still carry some validity, "the highly selective nature of examinations has forced examiners to put fairness and objectivity of marking above all other concerns" (Pong and Chow, 2002: 143).

Summary

This article has focused on assessment developments in Hong Kong primary and secondary schools. Hong Kong

represents an interesting case in which global trends (assessment for learning; learning to learn; school-based assessment) meet a traditional competitive test-driven culture dating back to the Han dynasty. In primary schools, despite some pockets of good practice, classroom assessment is still struggling to become firmly embedded. In secondary schools, SBA has been and will remain to be a crucial topic and one which is likely to generate much discussion or controversies. The new HKDSE and standards-referenced reporting are also issues which are likely to be extensively debated in Hong Kong in the years to come. The high demands for education from parents, the public, and employers, allied with perennial concerns about perceived falling standards continue to put pressure on government, schools, teachers, and students.

The prospects for classroom assessment to become a positive force in Hong Kong remain unclear. In an examination-oriented system, a contextually suitable version of classroom assessment would need to acknowledge the power and dominance of summative assessment. Developing formative learning power from in-school and external tests might be a useful way of developing productive synergies between summative and formative functions of assessment. SBA also has the potential to develop a stronger interface between examinations and productive student learning but still faces the barriers of societal values and teacher resistance. For these potentials to be realized, there remains a pressing need for the enhancement of assessment literacy through teacher development and an associated program of collaborative classroom-based research.

See also: Challenges of Developing and Implementing Formative Assessment Practices in Schools; Summative Assessment by Teachers.

Bibliography

- Biggs, J. (1996). Western misperceptions of the Confucian-heritage learning culture. In Watkins, D. and Biggs, J. (eds.) *The Chinese Learner: Cultural, Psychological and Contextual Influences*, pp 45–67. Hong Kong: Comparative Education Research Centre and Australian Council for Educational Research.
- Carless, D. (2005). Prospects for the implementation of assessment for learning. *Assessment in Education* **12**(1), 39–54.
- Cheng, L. Y. (2005). *Changing Language Teaching through Language Testing: A Washback Study*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Clark, J., Scarino, A., and Brownell, J. (1994). *Improving the Quality of Learning: A Framework for Target-Oriented Curriculum Renewal*. Hong Kong: Institute of Language in Education.
- HKEAA (2006). School-based assessment: A brief introduction and a response to major concerns. <http://hkeaa.edu.hk> (accessed June 2009).
- Morris, P., Lo, M. L., and Adamson, B. (2000). Improving schools in Hong Kong: Lessons from the past. In Adamson, B., Kwan, T., and Chan, K. K. (eds.) *Changing the Curriculum: The Impact of Reform on Hong Kong's Primary Schools*, pp 245–262. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Pong, W. Y. and Chow, J. C. S. (2002). On the pedagogy of examinations in Hong Kong. *Teaching and Teacher Education* **18**(2), 139–149.
- Yung, B. H. W. (2001). Examiner, policeman or students' companion: Teachers' perceptions of their role in an assessment reform. *Educational Review* **53**(3), 251–260.
- Yung, B. H. W. (2006). *Assessment Reform in Science: Fairness and Fear*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Adamson, B., Kwan, T., and Chan, K. K. (eds.) (2000). *Changing the Curriculum: The Impact of Reform on Hong Kong's Primary Schools*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Biggs, J. (ed.) (1996). *Testing: To Educate or Select? Education in Hong Kong at the Crossroads*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong Educational.
- Carless, D., Joughin, G., and Liu, N. F., and Associates (2006). *How Assessment Supports Learning: Learning-Oriented Assessment in Action*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Curriculum Development Council (2001). *Learning to Learn: The Way Forward in Curriculum Development*. Hong Kong: Government Printer.
- Curriculum Development Council (2006). Basic Competency Assessments. <http://www.edb.gov.hk/> (accessed June 2009).
- Davison, C. (2007). Views from the chalkface: English language school-based assessment in Hong Kong. *Language Assessment Quarterly* **4**(1), 37–68.
- Kennedy, K. (2005). *Changing Schools for Changing Times: New Directions for the School Curriculum in Hong Kong*. Hong Kong: Chinese University Press.
- Morris, P. (1995). *The Hong Kong School Curriculum*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Morris, P. (2002). Promoting curriculum reforms in the context of political transition: An analysis of Hong Kong's experience. *Journal of Education Policy* **17**(1), 13–28.
- Stimpson, P., Morris, P., Fung, Y., and Carr, R. (eds.) (2003). *Curriculum, Learning and Assessment: The Hong Kong Experience*. Hong Kong: Open University of Hong Kong Press.
- Watkins, D. and Biggs, J. (eds.) (1996). *The Chinese Learner: Cultural, Psychological and Contextual Influences*. Hong Kong: Comparative Education Research Centre and Australian Council for Educational Research.
- Watkins, D. and Biggs, J. (eds.) (2001). *Teaching the Chinese Learner: Psychological and Pedagogical Perspectives*. Hong Kong: Comparative Education Research Centre and Australian Council for Educational Research.

Further Reading

- Adamson, B., Kwan, T., and Chan, K. K. (eds.) (2000). *Changing the Curriculum: The Impact of Reform on Hong Kong's Primary Schools*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Biggs, J. (ed.) (1996). *Testing: To Educate or Select? Education in Hong Kong at the Crossroads*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong Educational.
- Carless, D., Joughin, G., and Liu, N. F., and Associates (2006). *How Assessment Supports Learning: Learning-Oriented Assessment in Action*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Curriculum Development Council (2001). *Learning to Learn: The Way Forward in Curriculum Development*. Hong Kong: Government Printer.
- Curriculum Development Council (2006). Basic Competency Assessments. <http://www.edb.gov.hk/> (accessed June 2009).
- Davison, C. (2007). Views from the chalkface: English language school-based assessment in Hong Kong. *Language Assessment Quarterly* **4**(1), 37–68.
- Kennedy, K. (2005). *Changing Schools for Changing Times: New Directions for the School Curriculum in Hong Kong*. Hong Kong: Chinese University Press.
- Morris, P. (1995). *The Hong Kong School Curriculum*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Morris, P. (2002). Promoting curriculum reforms in the context of political transition: An analysis of Hong Kong's experience. *Journal of Education Policy* **17**(1), 13–28.
- Stimpson, P., Morris, P., Fung, Y., and Carr, R. (eds.) (2003). *Curriculum, Learning and Assessment: The Hong Kong Experience*. Hong Kong: Open University of Hong Kong Press.
- Watkins, D. and Biggs, J. (eds.) (1996). *The Chinese Learner: Cultural, Psychological and Contextual Influences*. Hong Kong: Comparative Education Research Centre and Australian Council for Educational Research.
- Watkins, D. and Biggs, J. (eds.) (2001). *Teaching the Chinese Learner: Psychological and Pedagogical Perspectives*. Hong Kong: Comparative Education Research Centre and Australian Council for Educational Research.

Relevant Websites

- <http://www.edb.gov.hk> – Education Bureau, The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, people's Republic Of China.
- <http://hkeaa.edu.hk> – Hong Kong Examinations Authority.