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INNOVATION IN SECONDARY EDUCATION: A CASE OF CURRICULUM REFORM IN HONG KONG

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Introduction

The New Senior Secondary Curriculum (NSS) stands as a key element of Hong Kong's post-colonial education reforms. Its genesis lies in proposals to revamp the educational system launched at the turn of the millennium (Education Commission, 2000) and related curriculum reform initiatives (CDC, 2001; CDC & HKEAA, 2007). The NSS component is being implemented across Hong Kong secondary schools since September 2009.

The NSS includes changes to the structure and content of the senior secondary curriculum (i.e. years 10–12). The structural element is a move from a four year to a three year program with students entering university one year earlier than previously. An adjunct to this is that instead of undergoing high-stakes examinations at years 11 and 13 as per the previous British-influenced system, students are involved in only one public examination in year 12 via the new Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE). This includes school-based assessment (SBA), where grades awarded by their own teachers for work in schools count towards the high-stakes examination results.

The content aspects of the NSS aspire to provide: a more flexible, diversified curriculum to cater better for learners' varied interests, needs and capabilities; a broad-based curriculum replacing one that required specialization in either science or humanities; stronger synergies between schooling and future career or higher education options; and greater emphasis on preparation for lifelong learning through nine generic skills, including collaboration, communication and creativity.

This chapter aims to provide a critical analysis of the English Language components of this NSS curriculum. The chapter is organized as follows. First, we outline a framework which guides our analysis of reform in secondary

education in Hong Kong. We then describe the English language components of the NSS and outline its implications for teaching, learning and assessment. We use recently collected data to illustrate teacher and student views of the early implementation of the NSS. We draw out wider implications for educational reform, focusing particularly on potentials and challenges in using assessment as a lever for pedagogic change.

Conceptual framework: technological, political and cultural perspectives on reform

We frame our analysis through the lens of an influential framework developed by House (House, 1979, 1981; House & McQuillan, 2005). This framework argues that an adequate understanding of school reform requires three perspectives: technological, political and cultural. The technological perspective assumes a rational-linear model of educational change and sees reform as mainly a process of research, development and diffusion. This rationalized model is often favored by government planners who are attracted by the hierarchical control it appears to bring. The political perspective views innovation as a process of conflicts, negotiation and compromise between groups and factions. Central to such an orientation are issues, such as power and legitimacy. The cultural perspective relates to meanings and community values, and reflects an ecological perspective. It examines innovation within the specific culture and sub-cultures of the educational setting in which reform is being implemented. We use the tri-partite framework to analyze below selected pre-existing features of school curriculum reform in Hong Kong. At the end of the chapter, we relate it to our discussion of the NSS initiative.

Technological

A technological perspective on school reform in Hong Kong is represented by the way in which reforms have typically been developed. Within this perspective, we address two elements: first, centralized and bureaucratic processes; and second, policy borrowing or policy transfer.

Curriculum development in Hong Kong has long been characterized as centralized and bureaucratic (Morris, 1995; Morris & Adamson, 2010), with teachers having little input to or influence on curriculum reform proposals. Well-presented visions, guidelines and syllabi are compiled, but there is relatively modest detail or attention to classroom implementation. A repercussion is that there is frequently a mismatch between curriculum *intentions*, what the syllabus suggests should take place in the classroom and curriculum *realities*, what actually occurs in the classroom (Morris & Scott, 2003). The lack of teacher ownership and participation in reform in Hong Kong has meant that innovative curricula have usually only been adopted superficially. This is a re-occurring theme in the wider literature as teachers

often rely excessively on superficial similarities between their current practice and reform ideas, and may lose important aspects of a reform in the desire to assimilate it into existing knowledge structures (Spillane et al., 2002). Furthermore, teachers in Hong Kong are faced with their own priorities, such as guiding students through competitive examinations which affect university entrance. If pedagogic reform is not aligned with congruent assessment change, it is unlikely to be taken seriously by teachers (Carless, 2013).

A second strand within a technological perspective is that of policy borrowing. This typically involves the transfer of policies, whereby one country seeks to ameliorate its educational problems by adopting a policy or practice deemed successful in another country (Phillips, 2006). Hong Kong has traditionally looked to major Anglophone countries for ideas about curriculum reform and many borrowed innovations have failed to embed themselves successfully as they contained elements which were not congruent with local norms and values. This has been particularly the case when inquiry- oriented or student-centred approaches have met resistance from Hong Kong teachers or students, more accustomed to conventional practices.

Political

A key political dimension to educational reform in Hong Kong involved the retrocession to mainland China in 1997. The incoming post-colonial government sought to establish its legitimacy by launching curriculum reforms which were, or appeared to be, different from the previous government (Morris, 2002). The NSS is one of the major initiatives of the post-colonial government, and notably the structural reform brings the school system in line with the Chinese system of six years of secondary school and a 4 year bachelor degree.

A weakness of the Hong Kong political system is that there is only a limited form of democracy, so governments tend to lack legitimacy in the eyes of various sectors of the population. This sometimes results in protracted negotiations between factions, inevitable compromises and reversal or amendment to policies deemed unpopular. Within education, influential forces include representatives of elite schools, well-connected business leaders, teachers' unions and parents. A repercussion is that there has been a tendency for reforms to be viewed as a tacit compact between government and schools in which reforms are mainly symbolically promoted and symbolically implemented (Morris & Scott, 2003). In such cases, the visions of reform are often only partially implemented.

Cultural

Hong Kong is a setting influenced by Confucian cultural values, although Confucianism itself has a contested and evolving identity (Wong & Wong,

2002), and Chinese beliefs span a huge spectrum of differing and contradictory ideas (Ryan & Louie, 2007). Wider societal orientations are also enacted through existing and changing sub-cultures at professional, school or individual levels (Morris & Lo, 2000). Following from these points, discussion of culture is fraught with risks of stereotyping and over-simplification, but despite this danger we do wish to attempt an outline of some conventional culturally based teaching, learning and assessment practices which impact on the prospects of pedagogic reform.

The traditional authoritative teacher role in Confucian-heritage cultures (CHCs) as source of knowledge and wisdom is often supplemented by close personal relationships between teachers and students. Teaching often contains elements which are both 'teacher-centered' and 'student-centered' (Biggs & Watkins, 2001) in that the teacher orchestrates but a concern for students' and their needs is at the forefront. The role of teacher as orchestrator of classroom activities is exemplified by interactive whole-class teaching being much more common than independent student work individually, in pairs or groups.

There is also a strong cultural element to assessment practices in CHCs. Assessment in the form of competitive examinations is deeply rooted in the Chinese tradition and can be traced back over 2,000 years to the Han dynasty. This historical and culturally based orientation sees major purposes of assessment as providing through examinations a level playing-field and a means for social mobility. Whilst these aims are laudable, their practice in Hong Kong has often led to emphasis on reliability at the expense of validity, and limited modes of assessment. An unintended adjunct has been that the de facto goal of education is to pass examinations.

Summary in relation to the three perspectives

To sum up, we note a number of features which have characterized attempts at reform in Hong Kong. Reform ideas are usually sound and draw on good practice internationally and regionally in line with global trends. They are expressed within a number of documents that outline the goals of reforms and contain curriculum guidelines. Teachers rarely have strong objections to the substance of the reforms, although they often perceive that they are not directly integrated with the priorities of schools and teachers. Schools and teachers are generally left to adopt, adapt or downplay reform initiatives in that there is limited support for change or pressure to do more than pay lip-service to reform rhetoric. This suits the needs of both parties, because government does not have the confidence or will-power to pursue energetically the implementation of potentially challenging or unpopular reforms, whilst schools are often too busy with their own priorities and agendas to have time to engage with multiple innovations. Cultural aspects are particularly relevant in relation to reform of English language teaching because Chinese ways of

learning the mother tongue through, for example, painstaking practice of the written form of Chinese characters are very different to more communicative orientations to learning English as a second or foreign language.

The English language curriculum in the NSS

English is one of four core subjects in the NSS, the others being Chinese, Mathematics and a new subject Liberal Studies – worthy of brief comment because it exemplifies some of the broad-based aspects of the reform. Liberal Studies contains elements of science, humanities and liberal arts with the aim of broadening students' knowledge base and enhancing their social awareness through the study of a wide range of issues.

The English language component of the NSS is framed around three interconnected strands. These comprise English for interpersonal communication, for developing and applying knowledge, and for responding and giving expression to real and imaginative experience (CDC & HKEAA, 2007). The third strand represents an extension of previous curricula, in terms of strengthening the provision of language arts. This is incorporated within an elective section of the NSS (25 percent of curriculum time) consisting of eight modules categorized into four language arts subjects (learning English through poems and songs, short stories, drama and popular culture) and four other electives (learning English through workplace communication, debating, social issues and sports communication). Through these eight electives, students are presented with opportunities to apply subject knowledge and other generic skills including communication, critical thinking, creativity and collaboration. These electives represent the major innovative thrust to the NSS English curriculum.

The elective modules have a number of commonalities: they are mostly aimed at encouraging students to engage with authentic materials highlighting the use of English language in context; they are all designed to be exploited through a series of task-based activities; and they seek to promote student productive skills, orally and in writing. Materials for the NSS often include texts with different styles, registers and genres with varying levels of difficulty. The aspiration as stated in the NSS documents and suggested schemes of work are that teachers will exploit the use of imaginative texts because they are by nature open to multiple interpretations and so can facilitate genuine interaction among learners. Emphasis is placed on arousing students' emotional experiences and their responses to the text instead of a sole focus on its mechanical aspects. The curriculum makes frequent references to the importance of students' sharing experiences, their personal involvement in texts, and the development of their attitudes and values. The curriculum documentation also invites schools to develop their own assessment methods for these electives, and proposes innovative methods, such as multi-media presentations, portfolios, projects and creative tasks.

Schools are expected to select two to three electives from both the language arts and other electives which best suit the interests and abilities of their students. The choice of elective modules then aspires to promote greater creativity in English lessons so, for example, students who embark on the poems and songs elective are encouraged to engage in tasks that lead to them re-writing song lyrics and producing their own poems. The short stories elective invites students to write and present (or perform) their own story. At the same time, the electives emphasize the practical nature of English outside the classroom such as in the context of the workplace or a debate, and in the discussion of social issues and current affairs around them.

The implementation of the three-year senior secondary academic structure in Hong Kong also aims at developing a stronger alignment between curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. We address the relationship between these core components next.

Teaching, learning and assessment in the NSS

The NSS invites English teachers to move their practice further towards notions of teacher as a facilitator who supports the development of independent student learning capabilities. In a specific section of the curriculum document (CDC & HKEAA, 2007: 68), teachers are given guidance on how to make this shift possible, including negotiating learning goals and content with learners, adapting teaching to student responses and enhancing the quality of interaction in the classroom. The same document also calls for teachers to adopt a flexible approach to the organization of their classrooms so that pair work and group work become more frequently used tools for promoting peer collaboration during lessons. Teachers are also encouraged to develop higher-order thinking skills in their students through the use of more open-ended questions.

These suggestions about fostering more open, probing questions in class resemble the type of dialogic classroom talk that has been discussed by international authorities, such as Robin Alexander (e.g. Alexander 2008) and Neil Mercer (e.g. Mercer & Littleton, 2007). The implementation of this kind of interactive English language classroom in Hong Kong carries, however, a number of challenges. The conventional view of a teacher in CHCs is to see their main role as imparting knowledge to students, who accordingly may be placed in a mainly receptive role. Attempts to introduce a more communicative orientation to language teaching in Hong Kong over the last twenty years or so have had only limited success (e.g. Carless, 2004).

A further barrier to interactive pedagogy is student reticence and anxiety about active participation in English lessons (e.g. Tsui, 1996). These issues are exacerbated by issues of Chinese identity and resistance to English as a foreign language of colonial ancestry (e.g. Lin, 1999). Under these influences, local students may be reluctant to pose questions or negotiate with their

teacher, and thereby hindering the NNS curriculum planners' aim of promoting learner enquiry in English language classrooms. This is illustrative of a number of tensions facing ELT in Hong Kong. English is simultaneously an important language for study, wider communicative purposes and a subject that most students in the lower half of the achievement scale find difficult or even unpleasant. In the secondary school arena, English becomes a subject for examination purposes more than a means of communication. Accordingly, we turn next to this critical issue of assessment.

The assessment and examination system is a key factor impacting on pedagogy and curriculum reform. This is the case in most contexts, but particularly so in CHCs where examinations take on an almost religious fervour (Kennedy et al., 2008). Previous ELT reforms in Hong Kong have often foundered on the rocks of an examination system which during the 1980s and 1990s moved at a slower pace than curriculum innovation proposals. An important initiative in regard to the NSS is SBA (Davison, this volume). SBA is intended to promote a positive washback on language pedagogy by encouraging student oral work and engaging students with extensive reading of texts and viewing of non-print material, such as movies. SBA involves teachers in the high-stakes grading of their students, and also encourages all stakeholders to engage with the published assessment criteria.

From a technological perspective, SBA has many positives. It went through a detailed research, development and diffusion process. It has a number of technical attributes: it permits a wider range of assessments than traditional pen and paper tests; it acts as a tool to encourage extensive reading; and it can activate student involvement in assessment. Through the latter, students become more aware of standards and criteria; and their classroom role as participants in peer- and self-assessment is strengthened.

Political perspectives on reform are also highly relevant to the SBA initiative, particularly in view of the highly politicized nature of assessment reform (Pizorn & Nagy, 2009). SBA has experienced some criticism from teachers and teachers' unions in view of the considerable additional workload for teachers in terms of preparation and implementation of SBA tasks; training sessions for SBA; marking, moderation, retention and storage of samples. Whilst some of these challenges relate to perceptions and school decision-making that does not necessarily match with the views of the SBA developers, this does not detract from the reality that SBA does increase the workload of the already heavily burdened English teachers in Hong Kong. These concerns about SBA led to some dilution of the proposals in that the results of two tasks are submitted for grades instead of the original plan of four. This pragmatic and politically driven compromise reduced teachers' burden, but it also decreased the diversity and richness of assessed tasks.

Also significant in relation to assessment are cultural elements which are still being played out. The extent to which SBA can operate fruitfully on a large scale in a CHC setting remains unclear. A number of socio-cultural barriers to

its successful implementation arise: a preoccupation with reliability and fairness at the expense of validity (Pong & Chow, 2002); a lack of trust in the ability of teachers to grade their own students fairly, although the HKEAA evidence (e.g. Lee, 2008) indicates that they are able to do so; and the challenges of using assessment formatively in an examination-oriented setting (Carless, 2011).

The implementation of elective modules

We now use semi-structured interview data from an ongoing case study of an ‘average’ school in the New Territories of Hong Kong to illustrate teacher and student views of the early implementation of the NSS. Some salient issues emerged in relation to the elective modules; as indicated earlier this is one of the key innovative elements of the NSS. We provide some teacher comments on some of their perceptions of school selection of electives:

We chose short stories because we have always been teaching reading and in the popular culture elective there is a section on newspapers which is familiar to all of our students.

We didn’t ask our students what they wanted to study in the electives. It’s easier to teach certain electives based on our experience and knowledge.

Our teachers are not literature expert so we stayed away from things like drama and poems.

From these comments, and others omitted due to lack of space, we infer that the selection of electives is based more on what teachers are comfortable with, and what has gone on before, than on the needs and interests of students as suggested in the government documents. Although the English curriculum is accompanied by detailed ‘Suggested Schemes of Work’ which outline examples of task-based lessons, specify target knowledge skills, provide helpful resources and suggest time allocation for each elective module, schools and teachers are concerned about teaching unfamiliar subject matter, like drama and poems. Our interaction with teachers also reveals that while teachers appreciate using creative texts, many feel that they lack confidence in using language arts materials in their own classrooms.

Teachers also commented on teaching, learning and assessment in the elective modules, for example, as follows:

We don’t ask the students to produce any substantial learning tasks for their electives. We just give them more input because it is easier that way. If we have to spend time marking portfolios and projects we would lose time for the core course.

The electives are courses for students to see language in different settings. But the HKDSE does not have a paper on the electives. The exams are mainly the same as the old ones, so we prefer to teach students

the skills for that. The students like language arts but they want exam practice more. Teachers and students are under pressure to get good grades in HKDSE.

The first quote indicates tensions, such as time and workload, and teachers preferring tried and tested methods of providing input rather than more complex learning outcomes and assessments envisaged in the curriculum documents. The second quote reinforces some of the tensions of examination- oriented education in relation to the elective modules.

A further theme in our data related to professional development and support. Some examples of teacher comments are as follows:

The teachers in this school are not confident about those new types of subjects and I don't think the training from the government will help very much.

Language arts is new and colleagues worry that they are not teaching it the right way, they are not trained for language arts

The Education Bureau gives out lots of ideas, handbooks and PowerPoint presentation after power point presentation but they don't help much. We are not told or shown how to use the ideas. We need trainers who know the real life of the classroom.

We infer from these quotes that there is professional development available, but that it does not appear to be meeting the needs of the teachers. A potentially positive initiative, however, is the use of financially generous English Enhancement Grants to buy in school-based professional development tailored to the needs of schools. An advantage is the flexibility this entails, but a drawback reported by teachers is that it involves them in carrying out new administrative responsibilities in relation to liaising with providers, drafting tenders and compiling reports on how funding has been utilized.

In sum, the small-scale evidence we have compiled indicates that the reforms have generally been welcomed. Our data has reinforced, however, a view that in developing school curricula, a gap tends to arise between the goals of the planned curriculum and what is actually achieved at the school level. Policies like appreciation of literary texts, poems and song lyrics may well show the Government's desire to promote change but when teachers have minimal support for implementation, they are uncertain how to proceed. This reinforces the point made by Morris and Scott (2003) that reform in Hong Kong has often been symbolic rather than real.

Student voices

Linked to the challenge of how to implement the new curriculum is the issue of how students respond to it. Students are an important voice in educational

reform and it is valuable to gauge how students are reacting to the NSS. Based on focus group interviews carried out with year 11 students in our case study school, the following extracts provide perceptions of how students are responding to the electives:

We looked at different social issues like assisted suicide, unemployment, the popularity of reality TV shows and urban development in Hong Kong. These are interesting topics for teenagers like us because they are new. We need to know what is happening around us.

I liked poems last year. I used to be afraid of poems because they have difficult language but my teachers introduced us to some humorous poems. I wrote a free verse poem. It gives me confidence.

I liked short stories most of all. Reading different types of stories improves my vocabulary and I prefer the style of a short story. The twists at the end of the stories are memorable.

The general picture which emerged was that students perceived English under the NSS as being more enjoyable and permitted them a more active role in engaging with stimulating English material. We also collected a number of comments which cast light on students' perception of the kind of learning that was ensuing:

In the junior form we looked at advertisements...print and non-print and we had to design our own advertising slogan and poster for a product we designer. The adverts in the class were very creative. I can't imagine how creative they could be.

We can work together in class to talk about the stories. I like talking to my classmates and sharing ideas. We can be more creative that way.

Our teacher tells us that there is no fixed answer when we are giving opinions on a story so we try to think of more ideas. It is fun to hear other points of view.

A common theme running through these comments is that of creativity, one of the generic skills which the reforms are designed to develop. A stated goal of the NSS is to allow for the personal involvement of students through the use of creative texts and the positive student comments point to the elective element of the NSS being seen by students as motivating and rewarding. Importantly, these students' responses seem to present a counterpoint to the previously mentioned concern of barriers to these types of open-ended dialogue communication. The students seem to appreciate and value creativity, which indicates a different image to stereotypical views of a CHC learner as relying excessively on memorization and rote-learning.

More complex was the relationship between the electives and student perceptions of their priorities. Two student comments illustrate this aspect:

I like the electives because they are a break from the normal curriculum.

They are fun and we can try new things.

The electives are not part of the final exam in school so we don't study seriously for them.

The first comment which implies that the electives are a welcome break from the regular curriculum indicates a lack of understanding that the electives form part of that same curriculum. Our further discussions with students revealed tensions in relation to dichotomies between enjoyable learning and examination-oriented education. Whilst the electives were viewed positively, they were taken less seriously because they did not count as part of the HKDSE. The intention in the syllabus was that the electives are important means of developing student competence in English language (which by implication should help them in all forms of study, including examinations). The narrower interpretation of students and teachers was that if there is no formal assessment of the elective, it does not demand a significant amount of study time. In these students' eyes, if there is no direct assessment of knowledge gained from the elective modules then there is no need to study seriously for them. This kind of interpretation undoubtedly weakens one of the aims of the NSS which was to reduce students' examination pressure through the implementation of a broad-based, process-oriented approach that placed emphasis on aesthetics as well as academic knowledge.

Overall, the tentative evidence from our small-scale data collection appears to suggest that students are responding positively to the NSS in terms of enjoyment. This is a positive verdict because a lack of motivation to engage with English has been a challenge for ELT in Hong Kong for several decades. The issue of assessment represents various tensions and we return to this important aspect of reform in the conclusion.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have explored the NSS in Hong Kong through the lens of a tri-partite framework on educational reform. From a technological perspective, the reforms are plausible at rhetorical levels and draw on themes which could be seen as international good practice (e.g. promotion of authentic materials, task-based language teaching, and a focus on needs and interests of students). We have also suggested that whilst some aspects of the NSS, such as use of language arts to promote active and enjoyable learning, have been taken up, there has been some evidence of surface implementation rather than the more extended reforms envisaged in the documentation.

Drawing on political dimensions, we have reinforced previous work suggesting that the weak political legitimacy of the Hong Kong government leads to compromises in educational reform, and a surface approach to policy

implementation. Striving too hard to implement policy may lead to unwanted conflicts with schools, so is best avoided (Morris & Scott, 2003).

From a cultural perspective, we have been mindful of the dangers of oversimplified or culturally deterministic statements. These caveats, notwithstanding, we have reviewed some of the tensions between well-established teaching practices in CHCs, and those which are more in tune with the international trends referred to above. Cultural issues are also at play with regard to how classrooms might be organized, and how assessment should be conducted. A notable finding which reinforces the complexity of discussions of culture relates to students' positive comments about their appreciation of creativity as an aspect of the NSS. A stereotypical viewpoint of the CHC learner would not necessarily bring creativity to the forefront.

A key implication for the management of change arising from this chapter relates to the role of assessment in promoting change in schools. Whereas exhortations to modify pedagogy or the curriculum can be downplayed or ignored, changes to assessment are invariably heeded by teachers and students because of their high-stakes impact. So whilst our data show that the NSS electives were viewed positively by teachers and students, they were not seen as a major part of the curriculum because there was no high-stakes assessment explicitly attached to them. Conversely, SBA profoundly affects the behaviors and responses of students and teachers because it is a core element of the HKDSE examination grade. Like most innovations, SBA is re-interpreted in line with teachers' own personal assumptions and experiences. In assessment reform, teachers' re-interpretations often lead to partial and incomplete implementation of the ideas of test developers. Following from this, teacher beliefs mediated through societal values are probably even more significant in affecting what goes in classrooms than the washback of high-stakes examinations (Deng & Carless, 2010).

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