

Dancing with Two Legacies: Hong Kong's Education in Transition

By Kai-ming Cheng

Before Hong Kong returned to Chinese sovereignty in 1997, it was a British colony but one that lived within the Chinese tradition. China and Britain have significant educational traditions of their own, and it is important to understand how education in Hong Kong has been accommodated and shaped by these two strong but different cultures.

The British Legacy

The characteristics of Hong Kong's education system are perhaps most easily understood by looking at its elite schools. These are, above all, the 22 Grant Schools whose style and contributions are cherished by the Hong Kong community. They have a long history—most were established in the 19th Century—and have served as models for many that came into being later.

The Grant Schools are sponsored by the major church bodies: the Roman Catholic Church, the Anglican Church (called the Shing Kung Hui in Hong Kong), the Church of Christ in China and the Methodist Church. This also reflects the general model for schools in Hong Kong: financed by the government but managed by “school sponsoring bodies”.

However, most of these churches do not see evangelism as the primary function of their schools, something that is well understood by both parents and the community at large. Families send their children to them not because of any religious commitment, as might be the case with religious schools elsewhere, but because they are respected for their educational ideals and the achievements of their graduates.

The Grant Schools are liberal in their outlook, and their graduates typically enter elite universities with little difficulty. However, Grant Schools also are well known for the breadth of their students' lives and their strong student autonomy in organizing school activities. Their graduates, who usually gain higher education experiences after secondary

schooling, are highly regarded in society. They are enviably bilingual and bi-cultural, and many go on to occupy prestigious positions and high status in both private firms and the government. They constitute the most prominent social group in Hong Kong.

To a degree, Grant Schools reflect the grammar school traditions of Britain, though they are not boarding schools, with an emphasis on developing the whole person. Such ideas have become the norm for core values of schools in Hong Kong.

The Chinese Tradition

However, it would be incorrect to describe them as being influenced only by the British legacy. The Grant Schools also are popular with local parents because they enable students to do well in public examinations and gain admission to good institutions of higher education, either locally or abroad. In fact, their graduates continue to be highly sought after by leading universities overseas.

The Chinese tradition of education has evolved from the imperial civil examination system introduced in the early 7th century. Designed solely as an instrument for selecting and recruiting candidates for the official bureaucracy, the imperial civil examination valued and rewarded meritocracy, competition and hard work. It was a powerful institution built upon social aspirations (or social pressures) rather than individual interests, and rendered examinations as the only measure for future success and achievement. All these aspects of the imperial system remain values in the education systems of Chinese communities, and still underpin the educational values admired by parents and students.

Almost all local schools in Hong Kong reflect these same values, and Grant Schools are not exceptions. Their students and graduates are known for being hard-working and competitive, able to thrive under heavy social pressures. The significance of such a traditional education culture is demonstrated in international comparisons of student achievements or student abilities. In almost all such comparisons, Hong Kong is always ranked among the top.

The other dimension of the Chinese tradition is an emphasis on “moral education”, which in practice extends far beyond the Western concept of morality. “Moral education” in the Chinese context is a

holistic notion that includes nearly all aspects of education: ethics, values, relations, responsibilities, discipline, respect, honesty, emotions, leadership and so forth. These are also represented in the broad learning experiences and student autonomy built into the structure of the Grant Schools. This has made Hong Kong's elite schools nearly unique in meeting expectations of both British and Chinese cultures.

The Local Schools

The term "local schools" is often used with two meanings. It can be used, literally, as the opposite of international schools that have flourished in Hong Kong in the past two decades. And the term also can be used, in a rather unfair and cynical way, to imply a connotation of mediocrity. The latter reference started after the introduction of nine-year compulsory education (in 1978) for all Hong Kong children, followed by a massive expansion of the public school system. Most of these were modeled after the Grant Schools, with an emphasis on both academic achievements and student activities.

However, over time, with the spread of secondary education to the populace, the education system in Hong Kong has seen an increasing disparity among its schools. The tolerance of remarkable disparity is perhaps part and parcel of the culture for meritocracy, but it is reinforced by the student allocation system which allows primary school leavers to be classified according to their academic merit, and which sees those with the highest academic abilities allocated to the more popular schools. The sense of equity in school standards is very weak in Hong Kong, even though the outcry for fairness and justice ranks high in the political arena for almost all other social issues.

In addition, there are fine local schools that were established about 30 years ago. This second-tier of elite schools is appreciated by parents, and is comparable to the best public schools in other systems. However, there are also schools that find themselves in great difficulty when trying to cope with a student population that is increasingly diverse and from increasingly complex backgrounds.

Various policy measures have been adopted to encourage school initiatives for improving their quality. One remarkable innovation has been the use of a Quality Education Fund to support quality improvement projects initiated by the schools themselves. The QEF started with a

capital endowment of HK\$5 billion (US\$640 million), and has enabled schools to engage in many kinds of activities that would have been inconceivable within the limits of normal government appropriations. However, an ever-strengthening emphasis on administrative accountability, with its quantitative indicators and benchmarking, has distracted the schools from concentrating on developments specific to their individual needs.

The International Schools

There are many international schools in Hong Kong. Their total is disproportionately high when compared to the expatriate population of the city. In reality, over 80% of the students in most of them are ethnic Chinese from local families. These schools charge much higher fees, and have become a refuge for parents whose students cannot enter local elite schools but who are not prepared to send their children abroad. Hence, the international schools have become the substitutes for private elite school that would exist in other countries.

However, many parents do send their children to overseas private schools, mostly to boarding schools in the UK or private schools in US. These parents mostly are intellectuals or professionals. They tend to believe that the outcome of local schooling can be rather precarious, and in any case they don't want their children to suffer from the hard grind of preparing for examinations so common in Hong Kong schools.

In between local public schools and international schools is a category of Direct Subsidy Schools. This category was created in the 1990s as a part of a deregulation process, so that the management in public schools is less dictated by Government directives. DSS schools also are funded by government appropriations, but enjoy much greater discretion in the spending of these funds. They also enjoy freedom in setting admission policies and are allowed to charge tuitions within limits.

The Education Reform

Hong Kong launched a comprehensive education reform in 1999, much like the reform trend in most Asian systems, but perhaps with a much more comprehensive conceptual underpinning. This reform sought to revise the system's structure, moving away from the British tradition of

seven years with O-level and A-level examinations, and opting for a six-year secondary system. It also included a fundamental curriculum reform that transformed rather narrow “subjects” into broader “key learning areas”. These key learning areas are meant to cover the concepts of all the major learning experiences, including but going beyond academic study.

The major milestones of the reform will come in 2009 when senior high schools will introduce the new curriculum concept, and 2012 when universities are to accept student at an average age of 18 (rather than 19 as under the existing older system). The university curriculum will then be of 4-year duration in the norm.

Education change in Hong Kong may be one of the most sweeping yet sustained reforms among various systems around the world. It started with the general assumption that “society has changed”, and hence all its measures are underpinned by this understanding of societal changes and the need for a more contemporary understanding of human learning. The latter is proving day by day that the existing education we have no longer fulfills its mission of preparing young people for the society they will enter.

Education as Autonomy

However, it would be wrong to think of these education developments as resulting from government policies. Education in Hong Kong basically has its own momentum and, given an appropriate platform, it can take on an evolution of its own.

One such development is in the realm of information and communications technology. Compared to Singapore, for example, Hong Kong was rather late in developing ICT for schools. What little the Government did attempt several years ago did not bear fruit. However, ICT in schools in fact has developed rapidly, and now compares favorably to the situation in the most developed economies. This remarkable development is very much attributable to schools’ own initiatives plus professional input from university academics.

Another impressive development is the dramatic expansion of higher education. Since 2002, when a reform document only hinted at exploring the feasibility of establishing community colleges in Hong Kong, many

of them have emerged, due totally to non-government initiatives. In only four years, to 2006, the enrolment of students in higher education has achieved a quantum leap from 30% of the relevant age group to 65%.

Meanwhile, although most universities in Hong Kong are public institutions, they rank rather high in international comparisons, and certainly take a lead among public institutions around the world. Among these institutions are the University of Hong Kong, established 1911—a traditional university that has become a leading contemporary institution—and the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, established 1988, which enjoys high prestige despite its young age.

Looking ahead

Like most of those around the world, Hong Kong's education system suffers from its inability to keep up with societal changes. Its ongoing educational reform is significant perhaps not only for reshaping the education system, but also for its attempt to liberate schools, teachers and policy-makers from an almost inborn conservatism in the education arena. If Hong Kong is a place that prospers due to its freedoms and entrepreneurship, then such a spirit finally is beginning to have a role in the evolution of its education system.

Changes in Hong Kong have influence beyond its borders. The education reforms and the concepts underlying them are being noticed by other jurisdictions in the region, including the Chinese mainland. As Hong Kong continues to become an even more significant metropolitan center, its contributions should go well beyond the fields of finance and business to include contributions to humanity in the realms of education, culture, health, sustainability and spirituality—with a positive influence across the region.

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