

# Policy Changes and Impact of the Education Reform in Hong Kong

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## Abstract

The education reform in Hong Kong has been in place since 2000. The reform is a gigantic one covering the entire education system. This paper examines some major policy changes pertaining to academic structure, curriculum, admissions system and school places allocation, examination and assessment reforms, Direct Subsidy Scheme schools and ‘through-train’ schools. Applying Bourdieu and Coleman’s concepts of cultural and social capital, we argue that while the new policies may be well-intentioned, their implementation is accompanied by the erosion of Hong Kong’s cultural and social capital.

**Keywords:** education reform, education reform in Hong Kong, impact of Hong Kong’s education reform, implementation of Hong Kong’s education reform, policy changes of Hong Kong’s education,

## Introduction

Hong Kong is implementing the concept of ‘one country, two systems’ after the return of its sovereignty to the People’s Republic of China in 1997. However, the post-1997 Hong Kong has been undergoing a metamorphosis in all socio/political aspects. Education is one of several sectors that have seen the profoundest changes (Ball, 1999; Hughes, 1999; Mok, 2003a). Subjected to the forces of globalization and change of sovereignty in 1997, the Education Commission proposed an unprecedented holistic education reform in 1999 (Education Commission, 1999). Presumably “Hong Kong is going to start the third wave of educational reform to pursue *future effectiveness* with a very strong concern for the relevance to the future of next generations and the society in globalization” (Cheng, 2005, p. 191).<sup>1</sup> The reform is a gigantic one in terms of its depth and magnitude (Cheng, 2000;

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<sup>1</sup> “Since the 1970s, the first wave emphasized *internal effectiveness* with the focus on internal process improvement through external intervention or input approach. Since the mid-1990s, the second wave pursued the interface

Mok, 2003b; Mok & Chan, 2002; Poon & Wong, 2004), covering the entire education system, viz. academic structure, admissions system, curriculum, assessment methods, medium of instruction, and teacher certification and training.

## **Aim and research method**

The aim of this paper is to analyse some major policy changes pertaining to academic structure and examination system, curriculum and assessment reforms, admissions system and school banding, Direct Subsidy Scheme (DSS) schools and ‘through-train’ schools (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2005) with a view to finding out whether such policy changes will help to improve education and bring about equality and fairness as claimed in the education reform documents. This is a documentary study adopting the concepts of cultural and social capital advocated by Bourdieu (1977, 1991, 1997) and Coleman (1997) in the analyses.

## **Conceptual framework**

The conceptual framework that we adopt is Bourdieu and Coleman’s concepts of cultural and social capital. Bourdieu (1997, pp. 46-58) classifies ‘capital’ into three types – economic capital, cultural capital and social capital. Our focus will be on the second and third types. Cultural capital exists in three forms, namely in the embodied state (i.e. dispositions of the mind and body); in the objectified state (i.e. cultural goods such as pictures, books and magazines); in the institutionalized state (e.g. educational qualifications) (Bourdieu, 1997, p. 47). The three forms of cultural capital constitute the unbroken chain in the transmission of knowledge which is inherent in any social network. Academic success or failure is usually perceived as an effect of individual differences in intelligence and aptitudes, but Bourdieu relates the unequal academic achievement of children from different social classes to the uneven distribution of cultural capital between the classes (Bourdieu, 1997). The educational system as a whole contributes to the reproduction of the structure of distribution of cultural capital among different classes. Cultural capital can be converted into economic capital, but it takes a long time to accumulate. The acquisition process of cultural capital actually “starts at the outset” and depends on “the cultural capital embodied in the whole family”; therefore, the initial accumulation of cultural capital for an individual is “only for the offspring of families endowed with strong cultural capital” (Bourdieu, 1997, p. 49).

Bourdieu defines ‘social capital’ as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition ... which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital” (Bourdieu, 1997, p. 51). Social capital is, therefore, a resource for individuals and is inherent in the structure of human relationships. According to Coleman (1997, pp. 80-95), both social capital in the family and social capital outside the family play an important part in the creation of human capital in the next generation. Family background is recognised as an important factor, if not the most important one, contributing to the achievement of a person. Coleman separates

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effectiveness in terms of school-based management, quality assurance, accountability and stakeholders’ satisfaction, with large-scale reforms” (Cheng, 2005, p. 191).

'family background' into three components: financial capital, human capital and social capital. Financial capital is measured by the family's wealth; human capital is measured by parents' education; and social capital refers to the relations between children and parents. Social capital can also be found outside the family, i.e. the parents' relationships with other parents, and also with the institutions of the community. In addition to parents, school is another actor pertaining to social capital. By analysing the concepts of trustworthiness, obligations, expectations, effective norms and sanctions as social capital in the education system, Coleman is able to demonstrate that different schools, with different social capital, produce different results. Schools with more social capital encourage studies and produce fewer dropouts and vice versa (Coleman, 1997, pp. 83-86). Certainly, parents graduating from schools with social capital would pass the social commodity on to their children.

## Background of reform

Hong Kong's education system is highly selective and competitive. In the elitist education era (prior to 1978), the provision of places in government-aided secondary schools and universities was limited. About half of the primary graduates could enter government-aided secondary schools, and among the rest only those who had economic capital (Bourdieu, 1997, p. 46) could afford higher school fees and send their children to private secondary schools. Only 2% of the age-appropriate group were admitted to university degree programmes in 1975 (University Grants Committee, 1998, p. 70). In the mass education era (since 1978), everyone has access to free and compulsory school education for nine years and the provision of senior secondary places is sufficient, and accordingly, the number of degree places has dramatically increased since the early 1990s – the percentage of students admitted to university increased from 7% in 1990 to 18% in 1995 (University Grants Committee, 1998, p. 70). Yet, parents continue to try hard to find ways to send their children to 'elite' (traditional and prestigious) schools, and students continue to struggle hard to enter high-band universities and popular degree programmes. Public examinations, such as Hong Kong School Certificate Education Examination (HKCEE) and Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination (HKALE), therefore, play a pivotal role in the selection process and occupational success.

Under this highly competitive examination-oriented education system, both students and parents experience enormous pressure. The lucky few manage to stand out and succeed while the rest lose out. The Education Commission depicts the education system of Hong Kong as follows:

*Our education system appears to have stagnated in the industrial age. The system still caters to a selected few, while disadvantaging the majority and creating a large number of losers. There are comments that kindergartens are teaching our children a curriculum that is too advanced for their age; school children have to cope with too much homework; and the structure of basic education is fraught with hurdles and dead-ends (Education Commission, 1999, p. 15)*

As in most countries, education in Hong Kong is seen as a means to social mobility (Farrell, 1999), thereby economic opportunities and upward social mobility bring income/wealth – money is a shared value for the majority of citizens. That explains why students strive hard to make their ways through the system. Selecting people through the examination system is, in fact, a product of Chinese culture and colonialism. Traditionally, the Chinese have always valued study, and examination was a

mechanism used to select mandarins for the court. Likewise, civil servants in colonial Hong Kong were those who did well in both the public examinations of the education system and a series of entry examinations especially designed for the Civil Service.

Besides the examination-oriented nature, another feature that characterises the education system of Hong Kong is rote learning. Hong Kong students are generally criticized as lacking in creativity. The syllabus is stuffed with far too many details for memorization. The teaching methods are traditional and students are required to reproduce verbatim what is taught rather than to analyse and reconstruct what is taught. The Education Commission is of the view that the world is undergoing fundamental economic, technological, social and cultural changes. The process of globalization has been transforming the nature of society (Giddens, 2002). Hong Kong is also transforming from an industrial society to an information society. A knowledge-based society needs talented individuals ‘who are good learners, articulate, creative, adaptive’, critical and capable of life-long learning (Education Commission, 2000; Mok, 2003b). Therefore, it is necessary to redefine the role of education to meet the new demands of global changes in the new millennium.

It is against the above background that the post-1997 Hong Kong SAR government proposed the education reform. A reform proposal entitled *Learning for Life and Learning through Life: Reform Proposals for the Education System in Hong Kong* was published in September 2000. The Education Commission adopted the following principles in formulating its proposals: student-focused, no-loser, quality, life-wide learning and society-wide mobilisation. Indeed, the scope of the proposed reform is all-embracing. It covers all areas, including the academic structure (viz. the number of years in primary and secondary schools and university), the examination and assessment systems, the school places allocation system, the curriculum, the university admissions system, lifelong learning at senior secondary level and beyond, language benchmarking of teachers, and teacher professionalism.

## **The reform proposal**

The goals of making such gigantic changes are three-fold: reduce examination pressure; create more room for students to develop their potential and engage in more meaningful activities; and more importantly achieve educational equity. We will look at the following aspects of education reform: academic structure and examination system, admissions system and school banding, Direct Subsidy Schools and ‘Through-train’ schools, curriculum and assessment.

### *Academic structure and examination system*

Hong Kong adopts the British academic structure of six years of primary school, five years of secondary school, two years of matriculation course (i.e. a pre-university entrance course) and three years of university (i.e. the so-called 6-5-2-3 structure). For decades a student has had to clear three hurdles before entering university in Hong Kong, viz. the Academic Attainment Test (AAT) in Primary 6, the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE) in Secondary 5 and the Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination (HKALE) in Secondary 7. In order to reduce the pressure of examination, the Academic Attainment Test was abolished immediately after the Reform Proposal was released in September 2000, followed by the proposal in *The New Academic Structure for Senior Secondary*

*Education and Higher Education* (Curriculum Development Council, 2005) that the current two public examinations, i.e. the HKCEE and the HKALE, be replaced by one public examination – the Hong Kong Diploma of Senior Education (HKDSE) in 2012. To pave the way for the change in the examination system, the academic structure will need to be changed to a new structure of six years of primary school, three years of junior secondary, three years of senior secondary and four years of university (i.e. the so-called 6-3-3-4 structure).

Such structural changes are indeed gigantic ones and will affect the individuals as well as the society as a whole. How to maintain the academic standards while abolishing the examinations is the most pressing issue for educators and parents. Traditionally, academic standards hinge largely on examinations. Students are ranked according to their performance in both internal and external examinations. In Hong Kong students are so adapted to examination that it has become the driving force for study. It is impossible to replace them overnight. Once examinations are abolished, students may slacken and academic standards may dip. It is obvious that abolishing examinations alone does not automatically and necessarily lead to more meaningful activities in the classroom. Other measures must be introduced to make schooling enjoyable and fruitful, thus intrinsically motivating students to study.

Changing the examination system gives rise to one problem which is apparently technical yet having far-reaching implications for the cultural capital and social capital both at the individual level and the society level – i.e. the allocation of school places in the admissions system.

### *Admissions system and school banding*

Traditionally students in Hong Kong have been selected to a higher level of study through examinations or tests. There used to be four entry points in the entire school system, viz. from kindergarten to Primary 1, from Primary 6 to Secondary 1, from Secondary 5 to Secondary 6, and from Secondary 7 to university. The entry to Secondary 6 and to university is based on the two public examinations of HKCEE and HKALE respectively. The entry to Primary 1 and Secondary 1 is based on the criteria set by the Education Bureau, which were fundamentally changed under the reform. The rationale for changing the former in 2001 was that the old system engendered elitism, which in the view of the Government created inequality and unfairness. Under the former allocation system, the principals of primary schools could select 65% of Primary 1 students through the discretionary places admission stage according to the points system laid down by the then Education Department,<sup>2</sup> whereas the remaining 35% were centrally allocated by the then Education Department to the school nets in which the students reside.

Consequently the elite schools could select the better students in terms of background and academic potential. Obviously the alumni of elite schools can exercise their social capital (i.e. connection with the elite schools) as well as with other alumni (Bourdieu, 1997; Coleman, 1997), so their children stand a higher chance of being admitted to their alma mater. As elite schools usually produce students with higher academic attainment, most of their alumni are able to receive good university education, which ensures a job with a high salary upon graduation. Belonging to the educated middle or upper-middle class, such alumni possess sufficient cultural capital and economic

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<sup>2</sup> The Education Department and the Education and Manpower Bureau were merged in January 2003.

capital to assist their children in learning. For example, quite a lot of female professionals give up their careers in order to stay home and coach their children while many others can afford to have private tutors at home.

The new Primary 1 admissions system reduces the percentage of principal-selected students from 65% to 20%, and increases that of the centrally allocated students from 35% to 50% while the remaining 30% are automatic admissions for the siblings of the current students and the children of staff. In the name of equality and fairness, eventually all students in the same district will be randomly allocated to primary schools through the central allocation system irrespective of background. The increase of centrally computer-allocated places in the new Primary 1 admissions system is apparently fairer to poor students whose parents do not have economic, cultural (i.e. well educated) and social capital (i.e. connections with the schools and other alumni holding key positions in the community) to support their access to elite schools or Band 1 schools. However, contrary to what the Hong Kong Government claims, one would argue that this random central allocation system is far from being a genuinely fair system. As in other parts of the world, the so-called elite schools are centred in several 'good' and expensive districts, so admission to these schools depends initially on whether one's family can afford to move into those districts. Formerly when the quota at the principals' discretion was larger, the principals could also select some students whose parents had neither cultural nor social capital but who were bright students. That is why social mobility in Hong Kong used to be higher. Social mobility can be achieved through the means of education (Farrell, 1999). Thus, the new Primary 1 admissions system has created new inequality and inequity in access to education. In addition, social mobility is a mechanism to narrow the gap between different classes. Under the new Primary 1 admissions system, the gap between the rich and the poor is widening not only in monetary terms, but also in terms of cultural and social capital. As Bernstein argues, "The class system has deeply marked the distribution of knowledge [which is a form of cultural capital] within society" (1977, p. 477). The lower socio-economic-status class will stand a much less chance of being admitted to elite schools, and not be able to accumulate their cultural capital and social capital, thus always remaining at the bottom of society.

Secondary 1 admission is even more competitive than Primary 1 admission because it hinges on whether students will be allocated to high banding schools, and thus having great implications for admission to university. In the old admissions system, students were categorized into five bands (i.e. Band 1 being the top ones and Band 5 being the bottom), and all Primary 6 students had to go through the Academic Aptitude Test (AAT) for selection. The Education Commission was of the view that categorizing students into five bands was unfair to the less able students – the 'losers' in the old education system. The AAT added immense pressure on students. It was thus abolished in 2000 and the student banding was broadened from five bands to three bands in 2001. The move has artificially narrowed the gap between elite schools and ordinary schools. It has in effect levelled down the standards of elite schools, and is thus unfair to more capable students. Besides, it is proposed in the document on Secondary School Places Allocation (Education Commission, 2005) that a new pre-S1 streaming test will replace AAT as the scaling tool for S1 admission. The proposal is even more unfair to the P6 students because their 'fate' (i.e. whether they are allocated to high band or low band schools) depends entirely on the performance of their seniors in the new pre-S1 streaming test in the previous two years.

The new Secondary 1 admissions system affects the accumulation of cultural capital of both the individuals and the society. It goes without saying that the students in the ordinary schools will stand a lower chance of entering Band 1 schools whereas the students in the elite schools will stand a better chance of being admitted to their affiliated elite secondary schools. However, under the new banding system even the traditional elite schools are forced to admit some so-called Band 1 students, who used to be labelled as Band 2 according to the old banding system. Obviously this would affect teaching and learning as students of different abilities are put in the same class. In the long term the standards of the elite schools, which are part of the cultural capital of the society, will also be affected.

### *Direct Subsidy Schools and ‘Through-train’ schools*

Apart from making changes to the examination system, the admissions system and the school banding, two new school types have been created in order to reduce the examination pressure and labelling effect on students, which are two of the main reasons for launching the education reform. The two new school types are Direct Subsidy Schools and ‘Through-train’ schools.

The Direct Subsidy Schools Scheme first started in 1992 by the then Education Department mainly to include some private schools in the public sector. Under the education reform, the Government states that it is necessary “to develop a strong private school sector ... so that parents have greater choice in finding suitable schools for their children” (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2004),<sup>3</sup> so the original Direct Subsidy Schools Scheme has been revised and more generous terms are offered in order to attract the traditional elite schools.<sup>4</sup> Those schools that join the scheme receive a subsidy in a lump sum from the Government according to the number of students enrolled in the school. The greatest advantage of the scheme is to decentralise the following areas to the schools: budgeting, school management, admission of students, medium of instruction, additional revenue from the school fees,<sup>5</sup> and the curriculum.

The greatest disadvantage for the schools is that the schools run the risk of insufficient enrolment, which means the subsidy from the Government is not guaranteed, unlike government-aided schools, which are fully subsidized by the Government. The disadvantages for the teachers are that they may get less salary than their counterparts in government-aided schools, and that they are not entitled to the Provident Fund run by the Government.

Since the traditional elite schools are “the victims of the new admission system in the education reform” (Poon & Wong, 2004, p. 149) as discussed previously, there is a growing tendency for them to join the Direct Subsidy Schools Scheme. So far, some top tier elite schools such as St. Paul’s Co-educational College, Diocesan Boys’ School and Diocesan Girls’ School have already opted out of the public school sector. In order to enter such schools, one has to pay an extremely high school fee.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Unlike the practice in other countries, both school and university education is mainly provided by the government in Hong Kong.

<sup>4</sup> They refer to 22 grant schools plus a few aided schools, which have been established for at least fifty years with some up to more than one hundred years.

<sup>5</sup> Students studying in government-aided schools do not need to pay school fees in Primary 1- Secondary 3.

<sup>6</sup> The school fees of St. Paul’s Co-educational College, Diocesan Boys’ School and Diocesan Girls’ School are \$48,000, \$28,000 and \$38,000 per annum.

Once again, it is unfair to the underprivileged class because they do not have sufficient economic capital, cultural capital and social capital (Bourdieu, 1997; Coleman, 1997) to send their children to these elite schools, which were comparatively more accessible in the old days when studying in these schools was free and admission to them was primarily based on academic results. Therefore, the neo-liberalist view of the benefit of “parentocracy” or parents exercising greater choice in finding suitable schools for their children is enjoyed only by a small selected group with economic capital, cultural capital and social capital (Brown, 1997; Chen & Pun, 2007; Choi, 2005).

Another new school type is ‘Through-train’ schools. The then Education Department issued a consultation document on *Arrangements for implementing the ‘through-train’ mode* on 13 June 2001. The model means linking a secondary school with a primary school which shares the same philosophy and pedagogical aspiration to ensure genuine continuity in the curriculum, teaching methodology and students’ personal development. In fact, very few secondary schools in Hong Kong have feeder primary schools, and the majority of secondary schools with feeder primary schools are traditional elite schools. The deadline for submitting the application has twice been deferred from May 2005 to May 2007, and then to May 2012. The other schools are not enthusiastic to join the scheme because it is a tricky issue, depending on a number of factors, such as academic standards, cooperation of the stakeholders. This proposal is strongly opposed by the traditional elite schools mainly because according to the guidelines of medium of instruction policy proposed in 2005, a school needs to admit a minimum of 85% English-capable students in order to be qualified as English-medium school (Education Commission, 2005). If an elite secondary school goes ‘through-train’, it has to admit all the students of its affiliated primary school. It means the elite school may not be able to satisfy the minimum requirement and therefore be forced to change its medium of instruction from English to Chinese. In that case the elite school will lose its popularity as English medium instruction *per se* is a brand name that parents love chasing (Poon, 2000).

Analysing the policies more carefully, we argue that eliminating traditional elitism seems to be a hidden agenda of the reform in the Secondary School Places Allocation (SSPA) system through changing the admissions system and implementing the ‘through-train’ mode and the Direct Subsidy Scheme (DSS) in the name of reducing examination pressure and labelling effect on students, but the effect is just the reverse.

### *Curriculum and assessment*

Curriculum reform in its broad sense encompasses changes in the syllabus, the teaching methods and the assessment methods. The traditional school curriculum in Hong Kong is “subject-dominated”, focusing on “remote/abstract knowledge” (P. Morris, F. Kan, & E. Morris, 2000). Several documents on curriculum reform have been issued by the Curriculum Development Council since the Education Reform Proposals document was published in 2000: *Learning to learn: Life-long learning and whole person development* (Curriculum Development Council, 2001), *Basic Education Curriculum Guide (Primary 1 - Secondary 3)* (Curriculum Development Council, 2002), *English Language Curriculum Guide (Primary 1 – 6)* (Curriculum Development Council, 2004), and *Curriculum and Assessment Guide (Secondary 4-6)* (Curriculum Development Council & Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority, 2007). However, these documents only incorporate the spirit of the education

reform, outline a framework for curriculum reform, and provide some general guidelines for developing materials. The file of exemplars provides merely the isolated experimental work of some schools and there are no concrete and specific guidelines for teachers to develop and implement a school-based curriculum. The concepts advocated in the curriculum reform are all abstract principles lumped together, such as providing students with essential life-long and life-wide learning experiences for whole-person development in the domains of ethics, intellect, physical development, social skills and aesthetics, helping students to develop nine generic skills to construct knowledge in the context of eight Key Learning Areas and through cross-curricular activities, creating more time and space for teachers and learners to think more and reflect more, and developing a school-based curriculum that caters for the needs of individual differences. Some principles are contradictory. For example, it would take up a great deal of teachers' time to develop cross-curricular activities or a school-based curriculum, so the ideal of creating time and space for teachers could hardly be realized. Neither would students be given time and space in the presumably wider and deeper new curriculum.

Under the curriculum reform some new teaching and learning methods are advocated, for instance, project learning and online learning. Such methods make learning more independent and interesting. However, family support is a pre-requisite for these methods to be carried out. Those students with well-educated parents (i.e. cultural capital) stand a better chance of producing high quality projects than other students whose parents' educational level is low. Online learning assumes that students have access to the Internet at home, but not all families can afford it. Besides, life-wide learning involves learning outside the classroom and beyond school, for example, learning the piano and tennis, going to museums and visiting historical monuments, participating in an English immersion programme overseas. Such activities would inevitably disadvantage students of lower-income background because their families do not have sufficient cultural capital (i.e. knowledge) and economic capital (i.e. money) to support life-wide learning. Therefore, teaching and learning methods are seemingly neutral yet can be unfair to underprivileged students.

As for assessment, traditionally only the examination results count. Under the education reform school-based assessment has become a component in both the Chinese and English subjects in the public examination. It accounts for 20% of the students' total academic score in the form of doing tasks, projects, portfolio, etc. The students' learning profile, which recognizes students' other talents and achievements in music, art and sport, etc., will be introduced. Norm-referenced reporting of public examination results of all subjects will be replaced by standards-referenced reporting with a new five-level system,<sup>7</sup> whereby Level 5 signifies the highest academic achievement, which includes the top 10% of candidates. The proposed reporting system would "reduce significantly the proportion of students currently receiving unclassified assessments and no recognition for their learning". It is apparently fairer to low achievers, but at the expense of high achievers, who would fall into the same category of Level 5 with other moderate achievers. Of course, the suggestion of further discriminating those at Level 5 by means of a descriptor of 'Level 5 with High Distinction' or 'Level 5 with Distinction' is one solution. However, school-based assessment and the student learning profile would definitely favour those students from higher-income families as these students can get more financial support (i.e. economic capital) from home and utilize the cultural capital of their parents (i.e.

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<sup>7</sup> The Chinese and English language subjects started in 2007.

knowledge and educational qualifications). As for poor students, their families have neither the economic nor the cultural capital to capitalize on (Bourdieu, 1997). As mentioned previously, project learning, life-wide learning, interactive learning and other talents, which require financial back-up, are far more demanding in terms of the scope, variety and depth of learning than the traditional knowledge-based curriculum and one-off public examinations.

In sum, the Hong Kong SAR Government has so far been very concerned with academic structural changes, for example, the academic structure, the admissions system, the examination system, and the like, but not much has been done about improving the actual quality of education. Therefore, it is argued by Hong Kong educational academics that to launch the education reform without paying heed to the *quality* of education may bring about unintended and undesirable consequences on Hong Kong's education as a whole, in particular eroding the cultural capital of Hong Kong society, according to the principles espoused by the French sociologist, Bourdieu (1977, 1991, 1997). The education system as a whole contributes to the reproduction of the structure of distribution of knowledge (i.e. cultural capital) among different classes (Bernstein, 1977). Capital is a potential source of benefit, but it takes time to accumulate. The three forms of cultural capital constitute the unbroken chain in the transmission of knowledge which is inherent in any social network.

## **Impact of the reform**

The education reform of Hong Kong draws on the concept of neo-liberalism (Choi, 2005; Friedman, 1962; Law, 2004a, 2004b). Centralization and over-reliance on the government are perceived as two distinctive features that need changing in Hong Kong's education. The major education reform policy changes pertaining to the examination system, curriculum and assessment, the admissions system, Direct Subsidy Scheme and 'through-train' schools as mentioned previously are typical examples of decentralization and marketization espoused in neo-liberalism (Choi, 2005; Mok, 2003a; Mok & Chan, 2002; Poon & Wong, 2004).

What impact does it have on the education sector as well as on the society as a whole during the process of implementing the above policies in education reform?

### *Impact on the education sector*

Policy and practice do not necessarily match with each other, as evidenced in other education policies in Hong Kong, such as the medium of instruction policy (Poon, 2000). The impact of the implementation of the education reform policies on the education sector is four-fold. Firstly, the traditional elite schools are the worst hit of all schools. Most traditional elite secondary schools have directly-linked primary schools. Since these schools are very popular among parents, for years they have had more than enough bright students for them to select, including the offspring of their alumni, when the principals had more power to recruit students before the reform. Nonetheless, ironically the new Primary 1 admissions system implemented in September 2001 takes a centralized path rather than a decentralized one as it ought to be. The percentage of Primary 1 students centrally allocated by the Government to schools has increased from 35% to 50% as mentioned previously. The rationale for such random central allocation of school places is equality and fairness, but the quality of student intake of

the traditional elite primary schools will definitely fall. In addition, under the ‘through-train’ mode, the traditional elite secondary schools are required to admit *all* students from their feeder primary schools, including some low band students as mentioned previously. Hence, the academic standards of the traditional elite secondary schools will certainly drop. The recent proposal of incorporating the medium of instruction grouping assessment as part of the Secondary 1 admission criteria together with the proposal of tightened requirements for English-medium schools (Education Commission, 2005) will pose a further threat to the traditional elite secondary schools – the possibility of being forced to switch to Chinese-medium. The dilemma facing the elite schools is whether to maintain their own tradition by joining the ‘through-train’ or to maintain their high standards by severing the link with their own feeder schools, with which they share the same mission, vision and tradition. In order to maintain their standards and have more autonomy in school management, some elite schools are searching for a way out before they are levelled off. Going DSS (Direct Subsidy Scheme) seems to be the only alternative. By forcing the elite schools to go ‘private’, the Education Bureau has also destroyed the cultural and social capital, accumulated over decades in Hong Kong society, available to all students.

Secondly, it is doubtful whether the academic excellence of Hong Kong as a whole can be maintained. The elite schools in Hong Kong have played a significant role in the transmission of knowledge and thereby accumulation of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977, 1997). Through the system of public examinations, the elite schools were able to absorb the most brilliant students in the colony and subsequently breed a climate of academic excellence and these schools have also established a social network (i.e. social capital) with similar background, which further facilitated the transmission of a cultural heritage “which is considered as being the individual property of the whole society” (Bourdieu, 1977, pp. 487-489; Coleman, 1997). For many years, they have been maintaining the academic standards for local schools and playing the role of exemplary schools. Numerous outstanding local scholars, political leaders, and senior officials are graduates of elite schools.<sup>8</sup> It is legitimate that they are given the right to preserve their own traditions. However, they are condemned as the causes of inequality and unfairness, keen competition and immense pressure on children. We argue that if the elite schools are levelled down in the name of equity as evident in the row between the 22 Grant Schools and the then Secretary for Education and Manpower in 2001,<sup>9</sup> the academic excellence of Hong Kong might be sacrificed.

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<sup>8</sup> The Chief Executive, Donald Tsang, a graduate of Wah Yan College; the Secretary for EMB, Arthur Lee, a graduate of St Paul’s Co-educational College; the founding chairperson of the Democratic Party and Senior Counsel, Martin Lee, a graduate of King’s College; Vice-Chancellor of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, Lau Chun-ye, a graduate of St. Paul’s Co-educational College; President of Lingnan University, Edward Chen, a graduate of Queen’s College; the former Chief Secretary, Anson Chan, a graduate of Sacred Heart Canossian College; the Chairperson of the Legislative Council, Rita Fan, a graduate of St. Stephen’s Girls’ College; former Permanent Secretary for EMB, Fanny Law, a graduate of St. Mary’s Canossian College; the Chairperson of the Education Commission and former Executive Councillor, Rosanna Wong, St. Stephen’s Girls’ College. The list can go on.

<sup>9</sup> The 22 Grant Schools are the most prestigious elite schools in Hong Kong that have a long history. The then Secretary for Education and Manpower, Mrs. Fanny Law, sent a letter to the Grants Schools Council in January 2001 criticizing them and urging them “to review critically existing practices and keep up-to-date with community aspirations” (“Row,” 2001). In response to the criticism, the then chairperson of the Grant Schools Council, Mrs. Rosalind Chan, counter-attacked Mrs. Law by saying that the Grant Schools were “disappointed that a person in your [Mrs. Law’s] position should make such biased and indiscriminate allegations and insinuations on the entire Grant Schools establishment, based on imperfect observations and hearsay” (“Rosalind,” 2001).

The third impact pertains to the general standards of schools. In the new Secondary 1 admissions system implemented in September 2001, students are re-categorized from five bands to three bands, once again in the name of equality and fairness. One consequence of the new measure is that the difference in standards between schools has been narrowed, thus, equity is achieved, but that the difference in standards between students within the same school has been widened. The widening gap between students in the class makes teaching and learning even more difficult. In the end those poor students whose parents have less economic capital and cultural capital, are the ones who ultimately suffer as they are not likely to get support from home. In addition, the abolishing of public examinations prior to the establishment of a new learning culture and mechanism leads both teachers and students nowhere. The examination system has been a creditable and familiar mechanism to classify students. It serves as impartial standards to test the ability of students. It is disastrous to overturn the mechanism and it is not easy to find another creditable mechanism which is acceptable to the community as a whole.

Last but not least, the impact of the education reform on teachers is tremendous. On the one hand, decentralization of the curriculum and the assessment in the form of School-Based Curriculum and School-Based Assessment respectively gives teachers more professional autonomy. However, in practical terms, for teachers education reform means much more work and pressure. As every class has about 40 students, administratively teachers need to do more paper work, for instance, compiling student portfolios, writing reports, marking more individual projects and assessing students' talents, etc. Pedagogically, they need to prepare for the new curriculum, and upgrade themselves, for example, by passing the language benchmark test.<sup>10</sup> The greatest pressure for teachers is, in fact, the new appraisal system, which emphasizes "performativity" and "accountability" – the " 'market form' which is intended to subject education to the dynamics and culture of competition and business" (Ball, 1999, p. 3).

Based on the tremendous negative feedback from school principals,<sup>11</sup> newspaper reports (Clem & Forrester, 2006; "Government Assessment," 2006; Lee, Yiu, Pang, Chong, 2006) and our contact with the local teachers, we find that they are, in general, not supportive of the education reform (for the initial discussion on the positive and negative aspects of the education reform, see Tam, Ma, Tang, & Yeung, 2000). The reform policies have been hastily implemented, and there are far too many measures at a time. The education policy-makers and implementers regard teachers as opponents rather than as allies. For them teachers are conservative and lazy. Their English standards are criticized as low, and so they are held responsible for the declining standards of the students. The criticism is certainly not fair to the teachers. The senior officials just ignore how demanding teaching in Hong Kong schools is. In

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<sup>10</sup> According to the original proposal, all English language teachers are required to take the language benchmark test. Those who fail will not be eligible to teach the subject, which means they will have to leave the teaching profession. Because of strong opposition from the Professional Teachers' Union, the Government gave in and granted exemptions to those English teachers who had English as their major subject in their undergraduate study and who have received professional training in English language teaching. In-service teachers are given a choice to take the benchmark test or to take a training course. Pre-service teachers, however, need to pass the benchmark test before joining the profession.

<sup>11</sup> About one thousand principals/vice-principals strongly criticized the education reform in the 1<sup>st</sup> School Principals' Conference held at Hong Kong Institute of Education in March 2004; similar views were reported in an article in Ming Pao ("Pressure Facing Principals," 2005)

the last ten years or so, teachers have been bombarded incessantly with new initiatives from the education authorities, for instance, Target-Oriented Curriculum, Chinese-medium instruction policy, language benchmark test, Continuing Professional Development, project-based learning, school-based assessment, self-assessment and external assessment, and the like. Teachers get agitated when they realize that they are characterized as culprits in the education reform. Some measures – such as reducing the starting salary of graduate teachers by nearly 20% in 2000, and forcing all language teachers to take the language benchmark - have heightened their dissatisfaction, which eventually took more than 6,000 teachers to the streets on 10 June 2000 (“Six Thousand Teachers,” 2000). That was the first time that the teachers had protested against the Government on the streets in nearly two decades. About 10,000 teachers took to the streets again on 22 January 2006 (Clem & Forestier, 2006). The education reform has antagonized the entire teaching profession,<sup>12</sup> which is a valuable cultural capital of the society.

### *Impact on Hong Kong society*

In addition to the education sector, the education reform policy changes will have a far-reaching impact on Hong Kong society as a whole in three ways. First and foremost, education will further segregate the poor from the rich. Traditionally, education serves as a means of selection and social mobility (Bernstein, 1977; Farrell, 1999) in Hong Kong. There have been ample examples in the last few decades of people from the grassroots succeeding in climbing up the social ladder because they did well in the public examination in Primary 6 and so were allocated to ‘elite schools’. The Chief Executive Donald Tsang is a typical example. However, with an increasing number of elite schools being forced to switch to DSS, only those who have economic capital can send their children to elite schools. Poor students are unable to make use of the cultural capital (i.e. high standards and brand name) as well as social capital (i.e. connections of the schools with the community and its alumni) generated by the long history and potential resources of the elite schools. In consequence, society will be further segregated.

Likewise, the new admissions system and school banding allow parents very limited choices when they select schools for their children. Parents have basically lost confidence in local education because of the reform in recent years. Since it is human nature to provide the ‘best’ education in whatever sense of the word to their children, middle-class parents think that if elite schools are levelled down, they will have no alternatives but to send their children abroad or to international schools. Hence, there is a growing trend of middle class parents capitalizing on their economic, cultural and social capital to transfer their children to international schools and English Schools Foundation (ESF) schools in Hong Kong, and increasingly more sending their children overseas for study. According to the statistics of the Hong Kong British Council, the number of children going to schools in the United Kingdom has reached a record high in recent years.<sup>13</sup> The waiting period of entry into the local ESF schools is at

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<sup>12</sup> Recently, two teachers have committed suicide because of heavy work pressure due to the education reform. This subsequently led to the largest demonstration ever held by teachers. Over 10,000 teachers participated in the mass rally organized by the Hong Kong Professional Teachers’ Union on 22 January 2006.

<sup>13</sup> The number of people applying for student visas to Britain in 1999/2000 was 15,000 (“Surge of infants,” 2001). The number was 19,000 in 2003/2004 (“Education Expo,” 2006). The British Council estimated that the actual figures of

least two years. According to Government figures, the size of students going overseas might be as high as 100,000 in 2004.<sup>14</sup> Again, the grassroots with neither economic nor cultural and social capital will be deprived in this respect. Some may argue that the present admissions system allows elite schools to give priority to their old students' offspring, who are usually better off, and by doing so it is unfair to the low socio-economic class. We argue that the notion of equity in reality is more adhered to in the former system than the new one because grassroots students stand a very good chance of being admitted to elite schools through the public examination if they work hard. Under the new admissions system, people rely mainly on their luck, or ultimately on their economic, cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 1977, 1991, 1997; Coleman, 1997) because well off people will move to the districts where the elite schools are located, as mentioned previously. In this light, we argue that there is more substantial equity in the former system than in the new one.

The third impact on society is the related brain drain. If the trend of better off people sending their children abroad persists, local schools and universities will be rendered second rate, and not likely to attract first rate students. Neither will they be able to produce high quality graduates. Recently, there is an emerging trend of Hong Kong companies giving priority to Hong Kong students graduating from overseas universities in their recruitment. A vicious circle is formed if this trend persists. Then Hong Kong will be losing its finest brains. This means its cultural capital will be eroded. The so-called equity may be achieved at the expense of excellence.

The brain drain problem, together with the declining standards in education discussed previously as a result of carrying out the reform policies, will impact on Hong Kong's economy in the long run. Hong Kong is a tiny place lacking in natural resources, which has to rely on its cultural and social capital; otherwise, Hong Kong will lose its competitive edge in the midst of globalization.

## Conclusion

The education reform policy changes pertaining to academic structure and examination system, curriculum and assessment reforms, admissions system and school banding, Direct Subsidy Scheme schools and 'through-train' schools proposed in the post-1997 Hong Kong (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2005) aim at relieving students from the pressure of examination and building up a learning community in order to meet the new demands of the knowledge economy. However, the education policy-makers of Hong Kong simply apply the concept of neo-liberalism to Hong Kong education without considering its social setting. For decades, public examinations have been used to classify the abilities of students in Hong Kong. Abolishing and merging public examinations, changing the curriculum and assessment methods, together with adopting new mechanisms in the admissions system, have brought about an undesirable impact on the education sector as well as the society as a whole.

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students pursuing their studies in the U.K. should exceed the above because some students are British passport holders and need not apply for visas.

<sup>14</sup> According to the statistics by the Census and Statistics Department of the Hong Kong Government, in 2002 the total number of students going overseas was 74,000, of which 62% (46,000) was for tertiary education. However, in 2004, the number of students for tertiary education rose to 72,000, a rise of 58%. If students for secondary and primary schools were added, the figure might reach 100,000.

How to allocate Primary 1 and Secondary 1 school places is more than a technical problem. It involves the issues of equity, excellence, elitism and free choices. Contrary to the view that the Government ignores the issues of equality in the current reform, we argue that the Government has been emphasising too much the concept of equality (Tse, 2005). There appears to be a contradiction in the approaches adopted by the education policy-makers. Hong Kong has been hailed as a “paradise of capitalism” where competition and elitism are taken for granted in the business world. However, the education officials detest competition and excellence in the education field; they follow instead a ‘socialist’ route, emphasizing formal equity and denouncing elitism. The revised criteria for allocating Primary 1 school places, and the central allocation of students to schools near their homes and the like are unfavourable to the grassroots, and the elite schools in particular. On the other hand, they follow the capitalist route by forcing the elite schools to go ‘private’, so that social classes will be further segregated.

Maybe one could argue that it is not important whether to maintain academic standards and to improve education in general, and that the most important underlying agenda of the education reform is to dethrone the British system through brushing the traditional elite schools run by the churches outside the public system. However, the greatest impact of this is the destruction of cultural and social capital accumulated over the past decades in Hong Kong. As Ball argues, “We may indeed have to face more unbearable evidence of ‘nasty deeds done in the name of good’” (Ball, 1999, p. 6).

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# 香港教育改革的政策轉向及其影響

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## 摘 要

自 2000 年開始，香港進行一個大規模的全方位教育改革。這篇論文檢視其中有關學制、課程、入學制度和學位分配方法、考試和評核改革、直資學校和「一條龍」學校的一些主要政策轉向。本文會引用 Bourdieu 和 Coleman 的文化資本和社會資本兩個概念來分析以上的政策轉向，發現這些新政策的意願是良好的，可是實踐起來卻消耗了香港社會的文化資本和社會資本。

**關鍵字：**教育改革、香港教育改革、香港教育的影響、香港教育的實踐、香港教育的政策轉向

