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Equity vs Excellence: A Preliminary Exploration of Hong Kong’s Education Reform

Anita YK Poon*

and

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Abstract

Although Hong Kong’s education system has long been criticized as lacking in creativity and putting too much emphasis on rote learning, on the whole it has served Hong Kong well in the past in that it has bred outstanding business, academic and political leaders who maintained the competitive edge of Hong Kong. The traditional elite schools played a most important role in the process. The education reform, which is still on going, aims to overhaul the entire system by introducing the ‘through-road’ model through changing the existing admission mechanism of Primary 1 and Secondary 1 students, combining different bandings and merging two public examinations into one. We argue that, the education reform may be well-intentioned in eliminating the differences between schools but the social consequence of the reform is the decline of academic excellence and a worsening of the brain-drain problem in Hong Kong.

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Introduction

Hong Kong is presumably 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.¹ The Education Commission proposed an unprecedented holistic education reform in 1999. The reform is a gigantic one in terms of its depth and magnitude, covering the entire education system, viz. the academic structure, the admissions system, the curriculum, the assessment methods, the medium of instruction, and teacher certification and training.

In this paper we will analyse only the proposal for ‘through-road’ education, in connection with the two recent consultation documents on academic structure and curriculum reform, and medium of instruction and secondary school places allocation.² We will examine the ‘through-road’ reform both as a concept and as a social practice. We will explore the possible ‘danger’ of this model as a social practice in the context of Hong Kong society. In sum, we

will argue that the quality of education might be sacrificed although the goal of equity may be achieved.

**Background**

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 could afford higher school fees sent their children to private secondary schools. Only 2% of the age-appropriate group were admitted to university degree programmes in 1975. 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, correspondingly, degree courses have dramatically increased since the early 1990s – the percentage of students admitted to university increased from 7% in 1990 to 18% in 1995. 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.

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2. Ibid.
Under this highly competitive examination-oriented education system, both students and parents experience enormous pressure. A few lucky ones are able to stand out and succeed while the rest are losers. The Education Commission\textsuperscript{5} 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.”

As in most of the countries, education in Hong Kong is seen as a means to social mobility, and upward social mobility brings income/wealth – money is a shared value of the majority of citizens. That explains why students strive hard to make their way through the system. Selecting people through the examination system is, in fact, a product of Chinese culture and colonialism. Traditionally, the Chinese valued studying, 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 in the education system and a series of entry examinations especially designed for the civil service.

In addition to the examination-oriented nature, rote learning is another feature that characterises the education system of Hong

Kong. Hong Kong students, including those successful and ‘elite’ ones, are generally criticized as lacking in creativity. The syllabus is stuffed with far too many details for memorization. The teaching method is 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. Hong Kong is also transforming from an industrial society to an information society. A knowledge-based society needs talents ‘who are good learners, articulate, creative, adaptive’, critical and capable of life-long learning. Therefore, it is necessary to redefine the role of education to meet the new demands of global changes in the new millennium.

Agenda of Education Reform

It is against the above background that the post-1997 Hong Kong SAR government proposed the education reform. The reform was envisaged to be conducted in the following three stages:

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Stage 1:
Aims of education
- The focus of this stage was on the aims of education for Hong Kong in the 21st Century.
- The public consultation was launched in January 1999 and ended in March 1999.

Stage 2:
Framework for education reform
- The focus of this stage was on the review of the academic structure, the curricula and the assessment mechanisms.
- The public consultation was launched in September 1999 and ended in December 1999.

Stage 3:
Education reform proposals
- The Education Commission drew up reform proposals on the academic structure, the curricula and the assessment mechanisms.
- The public consultation was launched in May 2000 and ended in July 2000.
- Recommendations were submitted to the Chief Executive upon completion of consultation.

Figure 1 Stages of the Review of Education Reform
(Adapted from Education Commission (1999), p. 14)

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 adopts the following principles in formulating its proposals: student-focused, no-loser, quality, lifelong 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 gigantic re-engineering project is still under way and the overall impact of the reform cannot yet be assessed. As mentioned previously, this paper focuses on the proposed nine-year 'through-road' model in basic education.

Concept of 'through-road'

What is the 'through-road' concept? It means students will enjoy studying without going through too many hurdles of public examination. The rationale behind this concept is that reducing examination pressures can create more room for students to develop their potentials and engage in more meaningful activities, which the present system is lacking in. Structurally two levels of 'through road' are involved: nine years' compulsory basic education and senior secondary education. For decades a student has had to go through three hurdles before completing school education 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. Apparently 'through-road' is a sound proposal because it helps to remove the greatest stumbling block in Hong Kong's education system, which is basically examination-oriented as mentioned previously. However, how to maintain the
academic standards is the most imminent issue for the educators and parents.\textsuperscript{7}

Traditionally, the academic standards hinge largely on examinations. Students are ranked according to their performance in both internal and external examinations. The examination culture is so deeply rooted in the minds of students that examination itself has become the driving force to study. Once examination is abolished, students may slacken and academic standards may dip. Therefore, abolishing examinations alone does not automatically and necessarily lead to more meaningful activities in the classroom. Other measures must be introduced to improve the quality of education and make schooling enjoyable and fruitful, thus intrinsically motivating students to study. It is in this context that a ‘through-road’ with quality education becomes meaningful as a concept, not a ‘through-road’ with the same old content.

Curriculum reform in its broad sense encompassing changes in the syllabus, the teaching methods and the assessment methods is of utmost importance. Several documents on curriculum reform have been issued by the Curriculum Development Council since the Education Reform Proposals document was published in 2000: \textit{Learning to learn: Life-long learning and whole person development} (2001),\textsuperscript{8} \textit{Basic Education Curriculum Guide (Primary 1 - Secondary}

\textsuperscript{7} There are positive and negative aspects in the through-road education concept. For details, see Vicky Chiu-wan Tam et als.(2000). The controversy of through-road education. In \textit{Journal of Psychology in Chinese Society}, vol. no.2, pp.151-162.

3) (2002), 9 *English Language Curriculum Guide (Primary 1 - 6)* (2004) 10 , and the consultation document on senior education curriculum reform. 11 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 ideal concepts 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 of these concepts are contradictory to each other. For example, it would take up a great deal of teachers’ time to develop cross-curricular activities or a school-based curriculum, so it simply pays lip service to the ideal of creating time and space for teachers. Neither would students be given time and space in the presumably wider and deeper new

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10 English is the only subject that has a further guide. Curriculum Development Council (2004). *English Language Education Key Learning Area: English Language Curriculum Guide (Primary 1 - 6).* Hong Kong: Government Printer.
11 Education and Manpower Bureau (2005).
curriculum. Besides, life-wide learning involves learning outside the classroom and beyond school, which would inevitably disadvantage students of lower-income backgrounds.

It is proposed in the latest consultation document\textsuperscript{12} on the reform in academic structure and senior education 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 addition to the results of the public examination, school-based assessment in the form of doing projects, which accounts for 15%-30% of the total scores for students’ academic achievement, and the student learning profile, which recognizes students’ abilities and achievements other than academic performance in public examinations such as achievements in music, art and sport, will be introduced. Norm-referenced reporting of public examination results will be replaced by standards-referenced reporting with a new system of Levels 1-5, whereby Level 5 signifies the highest 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”.\textsuperscript{13} It is apparently fairer to the low achievers, but at the expense of the 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.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid. pp.80-82.
\textsuperscript{13} Education and Manpower Bureau (2005). p. 83.
However, school-based assessment and the student learning profile would definitely favour those students with higher-income family background as these students can get more support from home.

To build a ‘through-road’ with quality education, the quality of teachers is the most essential component. Teachers are the frontline workers who interpret and explain the curriculum and take the students through the system. Teacher education is, therefore, crucial in the current reform. The early 1990s saw a paradigm shift in teacher education in the West, and teacher education is no longer perceived as a one-off training, but as a Continuing Professional Development process (CPD). The Advisory Committee on Teacher Education and Qualifications (ACTEQ) has been working on reforms to improve the professional quality of Hong Kong teachers since June 2002. A document entitled *Towards a learning profession – The teacher competencies framework and the Continuing Professional Development of Teachers* was subsequently published in November 2003. Teachers are expected to attain various generic competencies in four domains (the teaching and learning domain, the student development domain, the school development domain and the professional relationships and services domain) through both structured learning and other modes of CPD in a 3-year trial cycle between 2004 and 2007. Language teachers are among other teachers the most directly and immediately affected. Long before the publication of the CPD document, it was announced in 2000 that serving language teachers (both English and Putonghua)
be required to go through benchmarking of their language proficiency by 2006. In addition, both English and Chinese language teachers who do not possess a degree in language are encouraged to pursue a diploma in the related discipline according to the Standing Committee on Language Education and Research (SCOLAR). Theoretically it is always good to enhance teachers’ professionalism. However, will professionalism be enhanced by merely upgrading qualifications? Will learning communities be automatically established by merely achieving professionalism?

Apart from the curriculum, the assessment and teacher education, the admissions system is another factor contributing to the building up of a ‘through-road’ with quality education. Again, we will first look at the conceptual level of the admissions system from Kindergarten 3 to Primary 1, and from Primary 6 to Secondary 1. There have been fundamental changes in the allocation of school places to Primary 1 and Secondary 1 since 2000. 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 discretionay places admission stage according to the points system laid down by the then Education Department, whereas the

16 The Education Department and the Education and Manpower Bureau were merged in January 2003.
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 students of better backgrounds. The new 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 the staff in schools. It is envisaged that eventually all students in the same district will be randomly allocated to primary schools through the central allocation system irrespective of their family backgrounds. However, 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 in Hong Kong, so admission to these schools depends initially on whether one’s family can afford to move into those districts.

Likewise, eliminating elitism seems to be a hidden agenda for the reform in the Secondary School Places Allocation (SSPA) system. Nevertheless, the overt rationale is to reduce the examination pressure and labelling effect on students. Under the old admissions system students were categorized into five bands (i.e. band 1 being the top ones and band 5 being the bottom ones), and all Primary 6 students had to go through the Academic Aptitude Test, which formed part of the selection criteria. The Education Commission was of the view that categorizing students into five bands was unfair to less able students – the losers in the old education system, and that the examination block - the Academic
Aptitude Test – added immense pressure to students. The AAT was thus abolished in 2000 and the student banding was broadened from 5 bands to 3 bands in 2001. The broadened banding has artificially narrowed the gap between elite schools and ordinary schools. It has in effect levelled down the standards of the elite schools, and is thus unfair to the elite students. Besides, it is proposed in the recent consultation document on Secondary School Places Allocation\(^\text{17}\) 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.

In sum, the Hong Kong government has so far been very concerned with academic structural changes, for example, to change the academic structure, to change the examination system, to change the school places allocation system and the like, but not much has been done about improving the actual quality of education. Therefore, to promote the concept of ‘through-road’ without paying heed to the quality of education may bring about unintended and undesirable consequences on Hong Kong’s education as a whole.

**Implementation of ‘through-road’ model**

Despite some possible ‘danger’, conceptually the proposed ‘through-road’ may be an ideal model that helps to resolve some fundamental problems in Hong Kong’s education system. However,

\(^{17}\) Education Commission (2005).
is it also an ideal model in real practice in the context of Hong Kong? What impact does it have during the process of implementation?

As argued previously, the implementation of ‘through-road’ hinges on other structures and aspects of education, the reforms of which are by no means easy and straightforward. At the level of basic education, until 31 August 2000 students were required to take an Academic Aptitude Test in Primary 6\(^{18}\) in order to be placed in Secondary 1. In an attempt to tackle the root of the examination culture, the government made a hasty announcement on 4 July 2000 to abolish the AAT starting December of that year,\(^{19}\) even before the deadline for public consultation of the entire education reform expired on 31 July 2000. What is more problematic is that the authorities concerned did not have a new mechanism in mind that could replace the AAT as a scaling instrument when they made the decision to abolish the AAT, so an interim measure of using the old scores of the AAT was introduced. Five years have passed and the new mechanism has yet to be devised. It was finally proposed in February 2005\(^{20}\) that a new pre-S1 Hong Kong Attainment Test would be devised to replace the AAT, starting hopefully from 2008.

The following are some problems that may arise if the ‘through-road’ model is to be implemented as a social practice in Hong Kong at the level of basic education:

As is well known, the great majority of primary schools in Hong Kong do not have linked secondary schools, and there is a

\(^{15}\)The AAT was used to adjust the marks of the internal examinations of all primary schools in Hong Kong for the allocation of secondary places. It was abolished in the academic year 2000-2001 as a result of the education reform.

\(^{19}\)South China Morning Post, 5 July 2000.
wide gap between secondary schools in terms of their academic standards, while geographically, most of the ‘elite’ schools concentrate on Hong Kong Island. How to allocate students from primary to secondary schools is more than a technical problem. Without the mechanism of a test or an examination, which is apparently more objective, how can the new mechanism both guarantee fairness to every student and satisfy the demands of the parents? Therefore, the success of the first phase of ‘through-road’ model hinges on whether the Secondary One admission mechanism can be widely accepted by the stake-holders, i.e. students, parents and schools. Under the Secondary One admission mechanism a ‘through-train’ mode was proposed. The then Education Department issued a consultation document on *Arrangements for implementing the ‘through-train’ mode* on 13 June 2001. By ‘through-train’ mode is meant 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. A ‘through-train’ secondary school *must* admit all the Primary 6 graduates of its linked primary school so as to realize the principle of education for all without discrimination.

There are three methods in the proposed mechanism for allocating Secondary One places, two of which follow the ‘through-

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train' mode. The third method – central allocation – is and will remain the major way of allocating students to secondary schools.

(1) Existing schools switching to ‘through-train’ schools – There exist some secondary schools in Hong Kong that do have directly linked primary schools, and according to the present Secondary One admission mechanism, up to 85% of the Secondary One intake of these secondary schools come from their feeder primary schools. The ‘through-train’ mode requires them to admit 100% of the Primary 6 graduates of their feeder schools. In addition, these secondary schools must reserve no less than 7% of their total number of Secondary One places for pupils of other primary schools seeking admission through the discretionary places admission stage or Central allocation. However, there are two envisaged problems. Firstly, only a small number of schools fall into this category because the majority of primary schools do not have directly linked secondary schools. Secondly, even those secondary schools that have feeder primary schools may not want to adopt the ‘through-train’ mode because this system implies that the secondary schools must accept even the low standard students from their ‘through-train’ schools, who, in the present system, are already screened out.

(2) Newly-operated ‘through-train’ schools – some secondary schools are encouraged to match with some primary schools in the same school net or run by the same sponsoring bodies by their own volition. In addition to admitting all the students from their ‘through-train’ schools, these secondary schools must reserve no less than 20% of their total number of Secondary One places for pupils of
other primary schools seeking admission through the discretionary places admission stage or Central allocation. One envisaged problem is that there is probably a difference in standards between these schools. Which secondary school is to link with which primary school is a tricky issue. Naturally, high band secondary schools do not want to link with low band primary schools.

(3) Central allocation – This, in fact, forms part of the existing Secondary School Places Allocation system whereby Primary 6 students are centrally allocated to secondary schools in the same school nets according to their bandings. All schools other than the above two types fall into this category. One big problem is the criteria for central allocation. The Academic Aptitude Test was used to adjust the standards between schools. Now that it is abolished, which mechanism will be used? The interim measure announced by the then Education Department is to use the scores of the Academic Aptitude Test in the last three years until 2000. Immediately some schools opposed the proposal because some of them are new schools and they do not have old scores as their reference points. In addition, the scores or standards of some relatively new schools are on the rise and it would be unfair to judge them by their previous standards. As mentioned previously, using a new pre-S1 Hong Kong Attainment Test in lieu of the old Academic Aptitude Test scores as proposed in the recent document is not fair to the students because the allocation is based on their seniors’ test scores rather than their own.

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22 Ibid.
Since the above (1) and (2) methods for allocating Secondary 1 places are based on the ‘through-train’ mode, it is worth examining how the ‘through-train’ mode is being implemented. Schools were invited to submit their application for becoming ‘through-train’ schools by May 2005. The deadline has now been deferred to May 2007. Those secondary schools with feeder primary schools have great reservations about going ‘through-train’ because they are obliged to admit 100% of their primary graduates, which means admitting also some low-band students. Likewise, the secondary schools without feeder primary schools would have to think twice about whether to link with some primary schools in the same school net. Moreover, one recommendation in the recent medium of instruction review document\textsuperscript{24} aggravates the situation. Medium of instruction is proposed to be used together with the new pre-S1 Hong Kong Attainment Test as the criteria for Secondary 1 school places allocation. Consequently, the English-medium schools must satisfy the requirement of admitting a minimum of 85% of English-able students; otherwise, they will be required to switch to Chinese-medium – which is the last thing that schools want. The ‘through-train’ mode as proposed to be practised in Hong Kong is in effect against the existing social values – i.e. English-medium schools are superior to Chinese-medium schools, and good English is the road to a successful career. Therefore, elitism and high standards must be maintained. This is why very few schools to date have switched to ‘through-train’.

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid, p.44.
Problems will also arise if the 'through-road' model is applied to senior secondary education. In the recent two rounds of consultation on the reform in academic structure, it was proposed to replace the existing structure of five years of secondary, two years of matriculation plus three years of university (5 + 2 + 3) by the new structure of three years of junior secondary, three years of senior secondary plus four years of university (3 + 3 + 4). The 'through-road' will then be extended till the last year of the school system. That means students will have to take only one public examination before entering the university, and the existing Hong Kong Certificate Education Examination taken in S5 and Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination taken in S7 will be merged into one public examination – i.e. Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education. The proposed new senior secondary curriculum apparently offers a much wider choice of subjects, which include career-oriented studies, than the old curriculum. However, students' choices will actually be much more limited because altogether they will take 6 or 7 subjects instead of 8 or 9 subjects in the existing curriculum. Of the 6 or 7 subjects 4 are core subjects (there are 3 core subjects now). That means students can select 2 or 3 elective subjects only. The new curriculum lacks breadth and depth. It is envisaged that the standards of senior secondary education will decline, thus widening its gap with university education. The rationale for introducing career-oriented studies in the new curriculum is equity because some students are not academically-

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26 Ibid. pp.15-16.
oriented. The new assessment reporting method mentioned previously also favours lower-ability students.

**Impact of the ‘through-road’ on the education sector**

The ‘through-road’ model will impact on the education sector in five ways. Firstly, the traditional elite schools\(^{27}\) will be the worse hit among all other 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 second generation of their alumni. Nonetheless, under the new Primary 1 admissions system implemented in September 2001, these elite primary schools now have less power to select their own students because 50% of their P1 students are centrally allocated by the government. Thus the quality of the student intake of the traditional elite schools would definitely fall. Under the proposed ‘through-train’ mode the traditional elite secondary schools are required to admit all students from their feeder primary schools, including some low band students. Hence the academic standards 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 as mentioned previously\(^{28}\) will pose a further threat to the traditional elite schools – the possibility of being forced to switch to Chinese-medium schools. The dilemma facing the elite schools is

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\(^{27}\) They refer to 22 grant schools plus a few aided schools, which have been established for at least fifty years with some up to one hundred years.
whether to maintain their own tradition by joining the ‘through-train’ or to upkeep their high standards by severing their link with their own feeder schools, with which they share the same mission, vision and tradition.

Secondly, one objective social consequence of the education reform is to eliminate elite schools in the name of equity through changing the admissions system and implementing the ‘through-train’ mode and the Direct Subsidy Scheme (DSS). The rationale behind the new measures is that the present system engenders elitism, and that low banding students have no chance of being admitted into prestigious schools. Moreover, the EMB argued, it is the existence of the traditional elite schools that induces keen competition among students and between schools, and above all, driving parents to exert immense pressure on children. Based on this assumption, Mrs. Fanny Law, the then Secretary for Education and Manpower, sent a letter to the 22 grant schools, indicating that “There is a strong sense of dissatisfaction with the traditional elite schools (by the public)”, and urging them to “review critically existing practices and keep up-to-date with community aspirations”.

Traditional elite

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28 Education Commission (2005), p.44.
29 A scheme started in 1992 by the Education Department. Those schools that join the scheme will receive a subsidy in lump sum from the Education Department according to the number of students enrolled in the school. The greatest advantage of the scheme is autonomy of school management, and the greatest disadvantage is that the schools run the risk of insufficient enrolment, which means the subsidy is not guaranteed. One envisaged disadvantage for the teachers is that those teaching in the Direct Subsidy Scheme schools may get less salary than their counterparts in government-aided schools.
30 The 22 Grant Schools are the most prestigious elite schools in Hong Kong that have a long history.
31 Sing Tao Daily, 8 February 2001.
schools became the scapegoat. In response to the criticism, the then chairperson of the Grant Schools Council, which includes 22 prestigious schools, 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". The row between the government and the Grant Schools is revealing. 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 seems to be the only alternative. Traditional elite schools such as St Paul’s Co-educational College and Diocesan Boy’s School have already joined the scheme. In fact, to create elite private schools is another hidden agenda of the Education Commission. In the past several years the elite schools have been approached and strongly urged to join this scheme.

In our view, the elite schools in Hong Kong have long traditions and they are superior in academic excellence and school discipline. For many years they have been maintaining the academic standards for local schools and playing the role of exemplary schools. Numerous local outstanding scholars, political leaders, and senior officials are graduates of elite schools. It is legitimate that they are given the right to preserve their own traditions. However, they have now become the culprits in the currents of education reform. They

33 Ming Pao, 26 July 1999; Sing Tao Daily, 14 February 2001.
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, the quality of education in Hong Kong might be sacrificed.

The third impact pertains to the standards of schools. A measure of the ‘through-road’ and ‘through-train’ proposals was to re-categorize students from five bands to three bands with effect from 1 September 2001. One consequence of the new measure is that the difference in standards between schools will be narrowed, thus, equity is achieved, but that between students within the same school will be widened. This issue is totally ignored by education policy-makers. How to cope with individual differences is a big issue facing both the teachers and the school. In addition, the abolishing of public examinations prior to the establishment of a new learning culture and mechanism leads both teachers and students to nowhere. For decades Hong Kong teachers and students have been used to the examination culture, which is, in fact, rooted in Chinese tradition. Besides, examination has been a creditable and familiar mechanism to rank students. It serves as impartial standard to test the ability of students. It is disastrous to overturn the mechanism and it is not easy to find another creditable mechanism accepted by community.

Last but not least, the impact of the education reform on teachers is tremendous. For teachers, education reform means practically much more work and pressure as every class has more than 40 students. Administratively, they need to do more paper work, for instance, compiling student portfolios, writing reports, marking
more individual projects and assessing students' talents, etc. Pedagogically, they will need to prepare for the new curriculum, and upgrade themselves, for example, by passing the language benchmark test. Most importantly, education as a means of social mobility denotes that students are stratified and public examinations are means of ranking. It is impossible to replace them overnight. In addition, based on the tremendous negative feedback of the principals, newspaper reports and our contact with the local teachers, we find that they are, in general, not supportive of the education reform.

The reform measures have been implemented too hastily and far too many at one time. For the education policy-makers and implementers, instead of soliciting support from teachers, they regard teachers as opponents. Teachers are thought to be conservative and lazy. Their English standards are criticized as low, and so they were held responsible for the declining standards of the students. The criticism was certainly not fair to the teachers. The senior officials just ignore how demanding teaching in schools in Hong Kong is. In the last ten years or so teachers have been bombarded incessantly with the new initiatives issued by the Education Department, for instance, the School Management Initiative, School-based Management, Target-Oriented Curriculum, School-based Curriculum, Streaming Policy, Chinese-medium Instruction Policy and the like. Teachers get agitated when they realize that they have become the culprits in the education reform.

34 The 1st School Principals' Conference held at Hong Kong Institute of Education in March 2004.
Some measures – such as reducing the starting salary of the graduate teachers by nearly 20% in 2000, and forcing all language teachers to take the language benchmark test\textsuperscript{36} - heightened their dissatisfaction, which eventually took more than 6,000 teachers to the street on 10 June 2000.\textsuperscript{37} That was the first time that the teachers had protested against the government on the streets in nearly two decades. The education reform has antagonized the entire teaching profession.

**Impact of ‘through-road’ on society**

In addition to the education sector, the proposed ‘through-road’ model will have a far-reaching impact on Hong Kong society as a whole. First and foremost, education will further segregate the poor from the rich. Traditionally, education serves as a means of selection and social mobility in Hong Kong society. 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’, which guaranteed a golden path for them. The new Chief Executive Donald Tsang and former Financial

\textsuperscript{35} Sing Tao Daily, 6 March 2001; South China Morning Post, 23 March 2000.

\textsuperscript{36} According to the original proposal, all English language teachers are required to take the language benchmark test. Those who fail will not be eligible for teaching 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.

\textsuperscript{37} Ming Pao, 11 June 2000.
Secretary Anthony Leung, who admit that they are from the grassroots, are typical examples.

In the proposed new system of allocating students as mentioned previously, elite schools will be given much less choice to select their own students. Different bands of students will be admitted and as a result their academic standard will be lowered. To escape the fate, the elite schools may eventually be forced to join the Direct Subsidy Scheme and go private. St. Paul's Co-educational College joined the DSS in September 2002, the Diosesan Boy’s School also went DSS in September 2005 and they now charge much higher school fees.\(^38\) It is forecast that other elite schools will follow suit.\(^39\) That means only those who can afford higher school fees can send their children to elite schools, while the low socio-economic class will be deprived of the chances. In consequence, the society will be further segregated.

Likewise, the proposed new system will 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 will feel 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 transferring their children to international schools and English Schools Foundation schools in Hong Kong, and increasingly

\(^38\) St Paul’s Co-educational College charges HK$46,000 annually; St Paul Boys HK$36,000 and Diocesan Boy’s School HK$26,000.
more sending their children overseas for study. According to the statistics of the British Council of Hong Kong, the number of children going to schools in the United Kingdom reached a record high in 1999-2000. The children who are sent abroad for study has gone down to 8 years old. The waiting period of entry into the local English School Foundations schools is at least two years. Again, the grassroots will be deprived in this respect. Some may argue that the present allocation 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 present system than the proposed new one because grassroots students stand very good chances of being admitted to elite schools through the public examination. Under the new allocation system, people rely mainly on their luck, or ultimately on their socio-economic status, because well off people will move to the districts where the elite schools are located. In this light we argue that there is more substantial equity in the existing system than in the proposed one, which is supposed to ensure formal equity.

One serious consequence of people losing confidence in the local education system is the problem of brain drain. If the trend of better off people sending their children abroad persists, local schools and universities will be rendered second rate, and they are not likely

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40 The number of people applying for student visas to Britain in 1999/2000 is 15,000 (*Ming Pao*, 11 February, 2001). The British Council estimated that the actual figures of students pursuing their studies in the U.K. should exceed the above because some people are British passport holders and need not apply for visas.
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 who have
graduated from overseas universities in their appointments. A
vicious circle may be formed if this trend persists. Then Hong Kong
will be losing its finest brains. The so-called equity will 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
‘through-road’ model will impact on Hong Kong’s economy in the
long run. Hong Kong is a tiny place lacking in natural resources, it
has to rely on its human resources. That means Hong Kong will lose
its competitiveness in the global economy.

Conclusion

To conclude, the ‘through-road’ model proposed in the post-
1997 Hong Kong education reform is an ideal way to release
students from the bondage of examination. This model seems to be
borrowed from the U.S. education system. Perhaps, it is too
idealistic. However, the education policy-makers of Hong Kong
simply transplant the concept to the Hong Kong soil without
considering the social milieu which engenders it. For decades,
examinations have been used to classify the abilities of students. At
the same time, the examination culture is so deeply rooted in the
minds of the stake-holders that once it is removed there will be a

void. New mechanisms are uncertain. So even at the level of concept the ‘through-road’ can be ‘dangerous’. One danger is the declining standards.

There are even more problems, both logistically and conceptually, if we look at the ‘through-road’ model at the level of practice. How to allocate Primary 1 and Secondary 1 school places involves the issues of equity, excellence, elitism and free choices. Apparently, there is 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; rather they follow a socialist route, emphasizing equity and denouncing elitism. The revised criteria of 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 or to eliminate elitism, the most important underlying agenda of education reform is to dethrone the British system and to replace British-style elitism with a new type of elitism in Hong Kong.42

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