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Education Reform in HK: the Ideal versus the Reality about Competition¹

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Abstract

This paper argues that the stumbling block to effective education reform in Hong Kong is a misguided philosophy that wrongly puts the blame on examinations as the source of anxiety and distortion of the education process, when in fact it is “the musical chair game” set-up that pervades the education system from primary school through universities, that is distorting the entire education process.

¹ This paper was presented at the HKERA 2002 International Conference, December 20-21, held at the Chinese University of Hong Kong

1. Introduction

In order to achieve greater focus this paper explores only one aspect of education reform, the reforms that center around *competition*.

It is the thesis of this paper that education reformers have a strange ambivalence about competition. On the one hand, they are wary of the potentially ill effects of competition, particularly through examinations, on the personal development of pupils. On the other hand they insist on what I call *the principle of musical chair*, holding that excellence can only be the privilege of a few. We have no quibbles with the merit of competition on a level playing field and “natural selection.” Competition provides a mechanism whereby a position or a student place is made available for the one who can potentially make the most out of it. But competition should avoid condemning people to the ranks of the failed ones as far as possible. Competition in education should give people second and third chances as far as possible. That way, competition can bring out the best in people and avoid distorting the process and the content of education. On the other hand, there is no educational value in arbitrarily designating that “the top 3 per cent” is excellent or the bottom third “poor,” particularly when the “poor” label is harmful to the development of the

full potential of students.

Today, even when education reformers decry the harms of competition and want to do away with as many examinations as possible, they continue the inhumane practice of handing out trophies to the “successful ones” and the ignominious label of “failed ones” to the unsuccessful ones. Meanwhile they reinforce this idea about success and failure by making sure that such a system pervades the entire education system. They want competition among universities, among schools, and among teachers for the trophies, making sure that those who fail to win the trophies are considered second rate.

2. Musical Chairs among Universities

Consider, for example, Recommendation 1 of the Sutherland Report:

“That a small number of institutions be strategically identified as the focus of public and private sector support with the explicit intention of creating institutions capable of competing at the highest international levels.”

In Hong Kong we currently have eight UGC-funded institutions. “A small number” must mean fewer than eight. What does this mean? This is a musical chair game and means that universities other than the select few are second rate. This is fine if the rest are truly second rate. But what if all our universities are just doing fine and really rank among the very good universities in the world? What if all the staff are doing the best they can in research and teaching? Can we have eight fine universities? All of our universities recruit staff globally and competitively. Objectively, we have to say that universities in Hong Kong are all very good. If only three can be called excellent, with the result that public and private support will elude the rest, the staff and students of the universities deemed second rate will get demoralized. Clearly this very process of “competition” breeds mediocrity. The damage to their images will only reinforce the difficulties of their emerging as excellent universities. To avoid being branded second rate universities have to struggle among themselves for the envied selected few slot, much as primary six leavers have to struggle among themselves to get into “band one” schools,² or they will be classified as second rate and looked upon as under-performers.

In recent years “top-slicing” unit budgets to inject into a pool to fund “excellent”

² It is understood that no secondary school is designated “band one,” “band two,” etc. but they effectively fall into these categories under the present system.

work is common practice. The Area of Excellence competition has been in full force for four years since 1998 and follows exactly this kind of “winner takes all” model.³ University faculty are keenly of the extreme stress and burden this exercise has caused on them. In today’s world universities cannot afford to look complacent and not to engage in this back-breaking game. Hours of meetings and hours of writing produce piles of documents each portraying the potentially excellent work that each contending group will do. In due course several are selected for an interview and presentation. Finally a handful will be selected to receive the trophy, which range upward from 20 million dollars. The panel will decide who is excellent and gets everything and who is not and gets nothing. In the name of excellence, hours of work and meetings and piles of documents go down the drain.

Consider again Recommendation 11 in the Sutherland Report:

“That, in consultation with the institutions, the UGC build on the success of the RAE(research assessment exercise) in allocating research funds on the basis of research performance, and devise means to sharpen the RAE, so that the highest levels of research excellence can be identified and funded accordingly.” Again, “the

³ First Round AoE: 99 initial proposals, 41 formal proposals, 8 shortlisted for further evaluation, 3 were funded; Second Round: 55 initial proposals, 16 shortlisted, 4 finalists and 3 funded.

benchmark of comparison should always be the best in the world, not simply the best in Hong Kong.”(p.38)

No one will quarrel with the need to put bucks where the bang is greatest. But pursuing “the highest levels of research excellence” may not be the most efficient or the most beneficial for society. Do we want to put all our public funds to support sports to nurture Olympic medallists, or do we want to allocate sufficient funds so that the man in street can benefit from sports? From the community’s point of view, what is deemed to be “the highest level of excellence” may not be that excellent. What really counts is benefits to the local community. After all, our schools and our universities are intended to serve Hong Kong’s interest first. Should we not modify the last sentence in the last paragraph to read “the benchmark of comparison should always *the best for Hong Kong*, not simply *the best in the world*”?

I cite from the Sutherland Report not to show my grudge against that particular report. I do so to alert the community and our education reformers to the need to have the interest of Hong Kong at heart, when they go about their education reform exercises. Why do we need to be the best in the world? Is the best in the world always the best for Hong Kong? Harvard University is considered to be one of the

best in the world. Are the recommendations made by the Harvard Report for health care reform the best for Hong Kong?

3. Critical Thinking and Musical Chairs in Secondary Schools

For too long our local education reform has been driven by “expert opinions” abroad. While we ask our youngster to have critical, independent thinking we as adults appear to lack that very critical, independent thinking. We decided not to teach grammar in schools because experts thought that communicative teaching and learning was more effective. We decided to de-emphasize examinations and assessments because many of the advanced countries did so. But today many of the advanced countries have discovered that they were wrong, but because we were forever the follower we have yet to change our course. While we have been asking our youngsters to dare make their own judgements we have not dared to find our own way and to reason. And we have not dared to challenge the view that the best brand names need not be the best for us.

While we ask our youngsters to find peace in their minds if only they will do their very best, in reality we have been engaging in the game of musical chair and

penalizing those who lose. Prior to 2002 if students completing primary six were not “good enough” they would fall into “band four or band five,” segregated, and expected to rot. As from 2002 if they are not “good enough” they would fall into “band three.” If a submission for AOE funding is not “good enough” it would not get any funding. If a university is not “good enough” to be selected for “focused support” it would only be considered a mediocre university.

In the sixties, competition was accepted as a fact of life, because resources then allowed the government to provide publicly funded, subsidized, or “assisted” secondary education for only about 15 per cent of all pupils who had completed primary 6. Many school leavers had to pay much higher fees to attend private schools or drop out of school. Public examinations were the means of deciding who will get the few government funded or assisted secondary school places. At first, entrance from each school is limited to 60 per cent of its primary 6 pupils⁴, At the time, students were tested their proficiency in Chinese, English, and Arithmetic.

With the onset of compulsory education for nine years, which was introduced in 1979, starting in 1978 primary school leavers no longer needed to write the Secondary

⁴ In exceptional cases where previous examination results suggested that the candidates of a particular school were unusually strong, the percentage of entries could be increased to as much as 100 per cent. The 60 per cent entries constraint was relaxed to 80 per cent in 1969 and dropped in 1970.

School Entrance Examination. Instead, they had to face an Academic Aptitude Test that would be used, along with internal assessment in schools, for allocating secondary school places to them. Since examinations in Chinese, English, and Arithmetic were acknowledged to be the source of much anxiety, the test was intended to be designed to minimize drilling and preparations. The same spirit, namely an aversion for examinations, was repeated in a government commissioned report, *A Perspective on Education in Hong Kong*, (November 1982) which held the “conviction that the effects of sorting and sifting through examinations are the more educationally harmful and socially unjust the deeper they reach down into the earlier stages of a child’s development and education career.” “The importance of reducing the number of examinations is immense.”

Yet the change of the secondary school entrance examination to an aptitude test did not reduce anxiety and drilling. Similarly the ban on using written examinations as an assessment tool for admitting students among public and subsidized schools did little to relieve the anxiety of both students and parents. The reason is clear. As long as the musical chair game continues, students, parents, teachers, and headmasters would be on their toes.

Consider the following passage, taken recently from the government's homepage:

To provide students with more room for an all-round, balanced and coherent learning life, the Primary One Admission (POA) and Secondary School Places Allocation (SSPA) mechanisms are being reformed by stages. The new interim POA mechanism has started to be implemented, which follows the principle of vicinity in allocating school places, and the objective is to reduce the incentive for drilling children in early childhood education. As regards the SSPA, the Government has announced in July 2000 the endorsement of the EC's recommendation to abolish the Academic Aptitude Test with effect from the 2000/01 school year to enable students and teachers to concentrate their efforts on meaningful learning activities. The number of allocation bands has also been reduced from five to three with effect from the allocation exercise in 2001. The percentage of discretionary Secondary One places will be increased by phases. An interim review of the SSPA mechanism will be conducted in the 2003/04 school year before deciding on the long-term mechanism.

This examination of the examination reform and allocation mechanism reform suggests that we are still in square one. Despite the setting up of school systems linking secondary schools to primary schools, despite the ban of written tests, the abolition of the Secondary School Entrance Examination and later the Academic Aptitude Test, we have not relieved the pain and pressures on students and parents. Indeed, with the musical chair game still in place, with the bottom band still awaiting the unfortunate ones to be so classified, it is not difficult to understand why parents weep with their children when they fail to get into their choice schools in Primary One.

4. The Role of Examinations

If we really want to bring out the best that is in our young people, and prepare them for life, they have first to believe that provided that they work hard, there is always a second chance, and that their potentials have yet to be realized. The awareness of second chances will relieve people of anxiety. That is why we need more examinations, not fewer examinations. We have to recognize that examinations are the fairest, the most objective way of assessing performance, because that is the definition of examinations. Indeed, any objective and fair assessment of performance can be called an examination. To minimize the impact

and implications of single examinations we should give our children more examinations, and we should assess their performance in areas that matter—reading, writing, arithmetic, general knowledge. We should not be averse to drilling, because drilling helps build up proficiency, and proficiency builds up confidence. Drilling is, by the way, also the basis of all creative activity. Can you imagine a musician who is highly creative and yet not totally familiar with the music scale? Can you imagine a writer who can write poems and stories and novels and yet not totally familiar with the use of language?

A 1999 cover story in Newsweek carries the subtitle: “As Americans Embrace Testing, Asians Pursue Creativity.” Inside, the author writes: “...unnoticed in most of the rest of the world—a great change is sweeping across America, with the systematic testing of children’s knowledge now dominating the school year.”(p.37) This silent revolution in American education is a response to the relative decline in basic knowledge as revealed in such tests as the International Assessment of Educational Progress administered by the Educational Testing Service(Newsweek, 1992). The more recent apparent divergence of approaches underlines the fact that both basic skills and creativity are important. Productive and ingenious creativity must be built on strong basic skills. The drilling for basic skills is important but

must not go overboard. Avoiding the anxiety caused by a destructive musical chair game will help reduce anxiety over examinations. The optimal solution appears to be where the “east meets the west.”

So I conclude that while forming through-train school systems may be a good thing for some reason, reducing anxiety and pressures is certainly not one of the reasons. If we believe in competition and second chance, we may allow the top 20 per cent of students compete for their choice schools among themselves, while assigning all the other 80 per cent randomly to other schools. It is only when these other schools source students equally that they may compete on a level playing field. A common complaint for sourcing students with a wide range of abilities is that this may teaching difficult. But we can divide up students into classes with different ability or performance levels. We can allow a student to move to a stronger class if his performance warrants it. Let there be more mobility. This is what I call second chance. Mobility from class to class is easy. Mobility from one band of school to another band is difficult. It is also highly unfair as the “bottom band” school keeps losing good students.

5. Conclusions

So what does this leave us? It is that even though competition is a fact of life and we have to accept it, we must try to minimize the “musical chair effect” by giving people second chances. Let excellent students, excellent schools, and excellent universities emerge naturally and through competition on a level-playing field. Let us not pre-designate schools or universities as top or bottom institutions. Let us not label students as bottom band. We cannot do anything about people’s opinions and beliefs, but we certainly should not entrench these opinions and beliefs by shaping our institutions and the mind-set of our students and the public in such a way as to reinforce those opinions and beliefs.

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