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ISSUES OF EDUCATIONAL EQUITY, CURRICULUM, AND PEDAGOGY IN HONG KONG

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Introduction

The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) of the People's Republic of China (PRC) is an international metropolis of some seven million people and has marketed itself as 'Asia's World City.' While Hong Kong has experienced significant socio-economic development for numerous decades and high rankings on international exams like the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and Programme for International Student Assessment or PISA (Kell & Kell, 2010), there are still significant issues with its educational system and its ties to the political economy (Morrison, 2006; Wu, 2005). Within academic research and popular discourse, one of the issues is Hong Kong's use of direct-instruction models of curriculum and overall pedagogy (Yeung, 2012). These models can be found in many primary and secondary schools, in subjects including science, mathematics, and languages (Lam, 2008; Tong, 2010). A second issue is the overarching paradigm of high-stakes exams, including the TSA (Territory-wide System Assessment) and especially the DSE (Diploma of Secondary Education), which is portrayed as one of the primary reasons why Hong Kong must perpetuate rote, direct-instruction pedagogies due to their efficiency and objectivity in preparing for such exams (Berry, 2008; Chan & Yuen, 2014). A third issue, related to the first two, is a lack of development of leadership, creativity, and critical thinking amongst students who come through the Hong Kong system (Clark & Gieve, 2006; Luk, 2012).

In an effort to address some of the issues of justice and equity within Hong Kong, this chapter looks at developments with curriculum and pedagogy in the SAR with an emphasis on the years after the 'handover' of Hong Kong from the United Kingdom (UK) to mainland China in 1997. Not meant to be an exhaustive study, this chapter focuses on specific issues identified in discussions with a diverse group of tertiary students in Hong Kong who are studying to be teachers in the SAR. Utilizing an analysis informed by critical education scholarship, this chapter's analysis of curricular and pedagogical issues puts forth implications that are of relevance to international contexts connected to Asia and China, as well as educational issues of diversity, social change, and equity.

Framing the issues

Conceptual framework

This chapter's analysis draws from bodies of scholarship within the critical education tradition which tend to focus on issues of social justice, equity, power, control, resistance, and agency, with some common foundations in the work of Frankfurt School members and Paulo Freire (Freire, 1973; Morrow & Torres, 2002). These works provide generative lenses through which to look at how official and elite bodies of power (e.g., police, education ministry, multinational corporations) influence schools and societies towards their own interests, while often claiming to do so in the name of the citizenry or public good (Darder, 1991; Giroux, 1983). Critical scholarship has also discussed how students, educators, and other constituents within educational institutions can resist systems and practices of inequity and how they may develop their own social, economic, and political agency (Goodwin, 2010; McLaren, 1989). Amongst this backdrop of critical education, educational equity for this chapter can be generally operationalized as a type of social justice within Hong Kong's educational system. In this sense, educational equity can include challenging the ongoing institutionalized oppression of various communities (e.g., cultural deficit pedagogies with working-class girls, Han Chinese hegemony in Chinese studies) and developing agency for constituents through education, especially for communities that have been historically marginalized in school structures and institutions (e.g., low-income families who do not speak English or Cantonese).

Beyond Freire and the Frankfurt School, this chapter is also informed by scholarship which has provided generative critiques of critical education in praxis. These problematic areas have been attributed to critical education operating within North American or Western European, white, heteronormative, and/or male paradigms in theory and practice, which can restrict or undermine educational equity efforts that operate within and across other communities and paradigms (Hooks, 1994; A. I. Willis et al., 2008). While white feminists received much of the spotlight for these critiques in the early 1990s (Luke & Gore, 1992), critical education has also been significantly reworked and refined by scholars from 'racial minority,' indigenous, diasporic, and LGBT backgrounds (Asher, 2007; Grande, 2003; Yan & Chang, 2011). Responding to analyses of critical education as being too theoretical, over the past two decades, a large body of research has emerged from scholar–practitioners that details how critical education curricula and pedagogies have been effectively applied in contexts around the globe (Chang, 2015; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002). Often, these more recent works have utilized other disciplines (e.g., literacy, sociocultural learning, ethnicity, applied linguistics, legal studies) in collaboration with critical education scholarship, to provide more intersectional and reflexive approaches to educational equity (Chang, 2013; Gutiérrez, Morales, & Martinez, 2009; Haddix & Price-Dennis, 2013).

In Hong Kong, critical education scholarship has been developed and applied to its unique contexts for over 15 years (Ho, 2007; Lin, 2004; Mason, 2000). Such areas have included curriculum, English education, policy, history of education, and liberal studies, and they have provided important insights into challenging educational inequities and more authentically working with students (Flowerdew, 2005; Gao, 2012; Hui & Chan, 2006). As popular resistance to local and Beijing-developed policies of control continue in Hong Kong (Morris & Vickers, 2015), critical education scholarship can be a useful lens through which to analyze contentious issues within the SAR and develop new approaches towards educational equity.

As Hong Kong students continue to emerge as leaders within efforts for educational change (Ortmann, 2015), critical education can also be a helpful approach, given its significant corpus pertaining to student voice and engagement.

Context

Hong Kong's population is over 92% Chinese (not disaggregated for Chinese ethnic groups), with Chinese and English as its two official languages. It is considered an international metropolis that serves as one of the world's financial centres and has been one of the major gateways to China, Asia, and the Pacific Rim since the 1970s. Along with this economic development, the educational system has also significantly grown and changed over the past 50 years. This growth and change has been substantially examined by several studies on Hong Kong (Adamson & Morris, 2010; F. L. F. Kan, 2007; Pennycook, 2002; Sweeting, 2004). While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss these legacies of educational change under the UK and the PRC, this chapter does address some key developments in curriculum and pedagogy that concern educational equity. For contextual purposes, it is important to note a few key shifts in curriculum since public schooling was established in the early–mid 20th century.

One key development in Hong Kong was the large influx of migrants coming into the British territory from mainland China around 1949, due to civil war. By some estimates, Hong Kong's population nearly doubled at that time, and thus an exam was established for entrance to secondary schooling. In effect, this exam on languages (Chinese and English), general studies, and math kept the majority of primary students from continuing their education in government-funded schools. In 1962, general studies was removed from the exam, and in 1978, nine–year compulsory schooling was put into effect. It was at this time that the exam changed to 'band' the ability of students to determine which type of secondary school they could attend. As of 1981, students had to sit for different exams to go on to secondary years 4–7, depending on what type of schools they attended. There are estimations that less than a third of students went on to secondary years 6 and 7, and perhaps a fourth continued to post-secondary schooling. In the 1990s, the Chinese and English–Chinese schools were made to adopt the same time structure for schooling (5+2 years), and the policy of School-Based Curriculum (SBC) was in place. It was supposed to allow for a more flexible and customized curriculum at the campus level.

In 2000, the Hong Kong Education Bureau (EDB) initiated a series of significant reforms. In an effort to address worldwide changes in economies and societies, there were calls for the development of 21st-century skills that could help students address the needs of the information society and global economy. These calls for reform were influenced by constructivist and cognitivist learning research, which placed emphases on experience, process, and learner-centred curricula, as well as formative assessments (Carless, 2010). These reforms have often been grouped together under the banner of 'Learning To Learn' (LTL), with suggested practices of increased critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, teamwork, and project-based learning (R. H. P. Cheung, 2015; Mok, 2009). In 2004, the TSA (Territory-wide System Assessment) was implemented at the late primary and early secondary years and is intended to be a dynamic, data-driven tool for evaluating student competencies as well as school quality and accountability (Cheng, 2009; Darling-Hammond & McCloskey, 2008). More recently in 2012, the DSE (Diploma of Secondary Education) became the sole high-stakes public exam used to evaluate students' applications for tertiary education. Within the DSE's final score calculation, some teacher-administered School-Based Assessments (SBA) are included with the aim of generating a more dynamic assessment of a student's competencies. Despite over two decades of SBC, SBA, and LTL reforms, Hong Kong's curriculum still appears to be mostly didactic and

teacher-centred, with assessments being largely summative and used for screening and selection (Chan & Yuen, 2014; Deng, 2009). Various studies have found that the SAR has had relatively little efficacy in developing critical thinking and critical civic engagement through schools (Y. W. Leung, 2008; Walker, 2004), which has been evident since British rule and its aims of keeping contentious politics and dissent at a minimum (F. Kan & Vickers, 2002).

Student participants

This chapter draws from an initial analysis of an ongoing study concerning the state of education in Hong Kong and its connections with educational equity, popular culture, and the social and political agency of teachers and students. Study participants include educators (all levels), students (tertiary), and artists (visual, musical, dance) that comprise a group of 25, with this article's focus on five tertiary students. Although all have familial roots and education in Hong Kong, it is interesting to note that only those of Chinese ethnic background, who were born and raised in Hong Kong, identified themselves as 'Hong Konger.' The student participants went to different types of schools, from the lowest-ranking (Band 3) to the highest (Band 1). None of them attended private or international schools. For the five students, the following are their self-identified demographic characteristics:

1   Chloe: female, Hong Konger, lower middle class
2   Karen: female, Hong Kong citizen (parents from South Asia), lower middle class
3   Mona: female, mainland Chinese national, upper class
4   Charles: male, Hong Konger, working class
5   Keith: male, Hong Kong citizen (parents from Southeast Asia), working class

The students are in years 2 to 4 and are studying at the same university in Hong Kong to be teachers at the primary or secondary level in the HKSAR. These students were recruited from a snowballing sample that began by emailing a few undergraduate students of education at the campus. The initial opinions and analyses offered in this article are drawn from the students via individual discussion, small group roundtable discussions, and surveys conducted by the study's research team. These data were partially transcribed and analyzed in congruence with the inductive and interpretive traditions of critical theory discussed in the *Conceptual Framework*, particularly those that access student voices (Bautista, Bertrand, Morrell, Scorza, & Matthews, 2013; Oldfather, 1995). Peer debriefing also occurred with tertiary students from the same institution who have had training in qualitative research.

Static and shifting curriculum and assessment

In talking with the tertiary student participants, it appears that their opinions and experiences can be preliminarily grouped along two major critiques of Hong Kong curriculum and pedagogy. The first critique is that the curriculum is not engaging. The second is that the assessment system is rather invalid and inequitable. Both critiques were seen as imperative to address in order to achieve greater educational equity. Although participants noted significant structural problems within the Hong Kong system, they also shared some positive aspects. The students generally agreed that the Hong Kong educational system has some good intentions (e.g., diversity, student-centred reform) and that there are many good teachers in schools who work hard to provide an engaging and encouraging pedagogy for all students. Nonetheless, despite their apparent success matriculating through the primary and secondary institutions towards a B.Ed.

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degree, all of the students discussed significant issues within the system they graduated from and will soon work within.

Curriculum that is not engaging

"The curriculum isn't engaging to an extent . . . Some teachers try to get the motivation up, but the core issue is that it isn't addressing what society really needs."

– Charles

Despite the curricular reforms concerning e-learning and 21st-century skills, the student participants strongly felt that the Hong Kong curriculum in public schools is not engaging and contributes to significant problems for teachers and students. As far as e-learning, Chloe mentioned how educational technology was promoted within her secondary and tertiary education, but that it did not substantially change teacher pedagogy and student learning. She talked about how the paradigm was still heavily focused on memorization of facts and teachers as the source of knowledge, so the potentially high engagement from educational technology was lost. Charles discussed how his teachers tried to implement innovations in technology and instruction but often ended up staying with their established pedagogy for lack of training on the how and why of the changes. In addition, he felt that teachers and their students were left out of the deliberation of curriculum changes, which significantly reduced their effectiveness, as teachers and students were two of the best groups to make suggestions on changes.

In terms of 21st-century skills (e.g., critical thinking, creativity) and student-centred learning, the student participants related how there still appears to be a heavy reliance on drills and massive amounts of pen-and-paper homework. Mona shared how despite years of curriculum reform implementation, her sibling, "*In primary 3 needs to spend around 3 to 4 hours to complete their homework during weekdays, receiving more than 10 pieces of homework.*" She explained how this work had an emphasis on dictation and recitation that does not seem to be very effective. Mona mentioned how she was understanding of a rigorous workload, given her experience in mainland China, but the curriculum she helps her sibling with seems to end up pushing children to finish as quickly as possible just to get to the next assignment. Although there are some elements of 21st-century skill development in the homework (e.g., visual arts, community service), she noticed that they are often not well-integrated into the textbooks or the overall continuity of each subject. In her observations, this lack of integration and consistency has led to students not developing a strong understanding, appreciation, or application of 21st-century skill reforms: they just run through it because they have to.

Whether discussing 21st-century skills, e-learning, or other attempts to make curriculum more relevant and engaging in Hong Kong, the participants seemed to agree that there was a lack of connection with students' everyday lives, including their problems and aspirations. When discussing curricular innovations in the context of educational equity scholarship (Osumi, 2003), Karen mentioned how it is not normal for teachers to engage personal or societal problems in class and apply classroom learning to addressing those problems. She looked upon her own experience as an English tutor and how the objectives just seemed to be about getting through the written curriculum, without much regard for the actual needs of the students, to say nothing of making personal connections with them. In light of these critiques, it can be said that Hong Kong is similar to other countries with related policies. So what makes Hong Kong's situation different? One particular indication can be the level of desperation felt by students. In more recent dialogue, participants discussed how 22 students in eight months had committed suicide. On this issue, the participants made direct connections between the

desperate behaviours of some students and an education system that does not engage with students' lives: this issue was also put forward by local media (E. Cheung & Chiu, 2016). As with the issues of curriculum (lack of student engagement, input, and feedback) mentioned in the first paragraph, the alienation and lack of connection with students' lives can possibly push them to more desperate acts outside of official schooling.

In taking a step back and looking across the participants' thoughts, all spoke of a disconnect between school curriculum and real life, whether that of the individual students, their families, or society. They mentioned innovations connected to calls for '21st-century skills,' and pointed out how these innovations were usually superficial and seemed to be more about quickly satisfying the demands of school administration or the EDB, rather than actual student or societal needs and learning. These points are similar to those made by critical scholars on varied educational systems that have also embraced neoliberal schooling approaches, which create new possibilities and problems, as well as perpetuate ongoing inequities to school communities that have historically been marginalized in those systems (Apple, 2001). Despite initiatives that have pushed for 21st-century standards, accountability, and performance driven by smart technology and data, we continue to see alarming inequities in schools where students, teachers, and school communities are alienated from an educational process and ecology that helps build their agency; instead, they often just generate standardized products used to define and limit them (Jordan & Kapoor, 2016; Lipman, 2011).

As has been heavily examined in critical research that looks at inequities for marginalized groups, this study's participants touched upon Hong Kong's disparities where, in Charles's words, "*In schools, middle-class kids have what working-class kids don't have, and there are negative attitudes passed on between parents and their kids.*" Charles's statement about the perpetuation of working-class negativity towards schools, and the higher-income students who excel in them, is similar to what has been widely examined in critical ethnography and action research (Valenzuela, 1999; P. Willis, 1977). Yet while Hong Kong's context may be somewhat congruent with other regions, what is different is that this study's participants reported elite schools (e.g., private international, Band 1) as also having unengaging 'drill-and-kill' curricula. This is unlike other developed nations, where more elite schools often have a more progressive and holistic pedagogy, which is believed to better equip students to become more fully developed leaders (Anyon, 1981; Finn, 1999). This study's participants did not emphasize inequities coming from a stratification of more engaging curriculum and pedagogy at elite schools. Instead, they felt that inequities can be found amongst the capital that wealthier pupils have to receive high-end out-of-school tutoring and enrichment (sometimes referred to as shadow education), to teach them what they are supposedly being taught in their schools already. With this private support, wealthier students can often excel above others on assignments and exams, towards the ultimate goal of attending a higher-ranking university and obtaining a higher-salary career. Indeed, these participant insights into the privileges exercised by more well-off Hong Kong students has been corroborated by local scholarship (Kwok, 2004; Zhan, Bray, Wang, Lykins, & Kwo, 2013). In the next section on assessment, we take a closer look at how the disengagement, inequities, and lack of agency for many Hong Kong students gets further reified by the reigning examination system.

Curriculum towards an invalid assessment system

"The exams here are strange . . . While they are efficient and check students' knowledge swiftly, they put too much effort on reciting back information and don't help much for students' generic skills like creativity, critical thinking, and also for their future studying."

– Mona

In the previous section on curricula, the participants critiqued Hong Kong's education system as being very disengaging for many students, which helps lead to a number of academic and social problems. Almost all of the participants described the disengaging curricula as being reified in various ways by the paradigm of Hong Kong's exam structure. The students described how teachers, administration, parents, and the educational bureaucracy all offer this explanation. In this section, we see how participants describe the flaws of the exams themselves and how the exams sustain flawed pedagogy towards educational inequities.

All of the participants described how in the educational experiences of their friends, family, and themselves, the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (DSE) was the paradigm that their education seemed to center around. Keith mentioned that in his secondary school, the bulk of his education focused on preparing for this exam at the end of high school. While he acknowledged that some of the skills they learned in order to take the exam are important, he spoke of how it really limited the experiences and learning of students. Karen's experience also supported these ideas about limitations, citing how the DSE "*is pretty much what is emphasized in schools,*" and it gets in the way of teachers teaching different things the students should be learning. What was shared across several students' experiences was how curriculum tended to focus on test-taking skills, and pedagogy was filled with drills, memorization, and centring on the teacher or the textbook as the keepers of knowledge. For Mona, she did not like how students receive the same or similar exam content across multiple semesters and did not see the point of so much repetition in valid evaluations of students.

Charles did have a few positive notes on the exams, stating, "*To a little extent, for university prep, the DSE can be valid. Like the analytical skills from General Studies is a valid tool.*" However, Charles went on to question the bulk of the validity of the DSE and TSA as measures of student competence. He questioned how valid the assessments were in figuring the various strengths and weaknesses of students and if they were able to tell much about a person's potential in studies and life in general. In this sense, Charles's thoughts raise issues of equity in the exams, as they do not account much for assessing diversity in skills, opinions, and experiences. For example, he mentioned how "*the exams fail to promote the students' communication skills, working with other people, practical judgments. It does not get connected to their own life and personal issues. It doesn't emphasize personal qualities across subjects . . . This is not on the exams, so teachers don't teach it. In the end, employers can't use these exams to learn about them, it doesn't tell them of their skills and attitudes.*" Chloe, Charles, and Keith all alluded to the long-term problems of this exam system in Hong Kong. They cited how even tertiary peers are used to being spoon-fed by teachers on specific ways to complete tests and papers, to the point where they cannot really exercise their own critical thinking or creativity and prefer to just be steered by professors across a term on how and what to turn in for the final assessment, and then they move on to the next class to repeat the process.

Chloe added additional critiques of the exam system, citing issues of race, ethnicity, language, and class. She discussed the written "*pen-and-paper paradigm*" of the exams, even for subjects like physical education and visual arts. Here she felt that the exams were inequitable for those who are not as strong at writing but may be better at speaking, visual arts, and other forms of articulation. In addition, she felt that as the exams are in Chinese, they also hold back ethnic minorities, low-income mainland immigrants, and others who do not speak Cantonese or read and write Chinese fluently (Bhowmik & Kennedy, 2012; Pérez-Milans & Soto, 2014). While Chloe thought that it makes sense to administer some subjects in Chinese, others should be given in the language the student knows best, to get a more valid assessment of what the student knows of that subject instead of his or her fluency in Chinese. Chloe's suggestion here is supported by critical research on bilingual education and its pivotal role as a mechanism for

educational equity when it comes to marginalized ethnic and linguistic groups (Martínez, 2010; McCarty, 2003). This issue of language is also connected to class, which both Charles and Chloe discussed. For example, students who are not fluent in Chinese may receive a highly disengaging and discouraging curriculum if they attend their local school where the mode of instruction (MOI) is Chinese. This will most likely hold back their learning in most subject areas and lead to poor marks on the DSE. If students have significant family income, they may be able to attend an international-type school where they can be taught in the MOI that meets their needs. However, Chloe noted here that the more prestigious and/or private schools tend to choose students from certain wealthy backgrounds and legacies (e.g., siblings are alumni, parents have made large donations). Thus even if the student's family can muster the funding to pay, the student still may not be accepted. If students do not have so much financial capital, they can try to apply and then commute to a different school that can support their language. However, many of the schools that serve communities with large ethnic minority populations tend to be low-ranked with fewer opportunities. These various factors of class, privilege, and ethnocentrism skew the validity of SAR's assessments.

In examining the students' thoughts about the validity of Hong Kong's assessment system and the inequities that emerge, connections can be made to existing research on the SAR. The paradigm of the high-stakes exam culture has been thoroughly discussed in the literature, including its ramifications for a lack of development in diverse forms of assessment and pedagogy (Berry, 2010; Bryant & Carless, 2009). As in other literature that analyses exams such as the DSE, TSA, or even the international PISA, there is a significant critique of whether they actually assess student competence (Chan & Yuen, 2014; Labaree, 2014). As previously mentioned, there have been significant attempts at assessment policy reform that are couched within the language of 21st-century skills, 'Learning to Learn,' and student or school-based schooling (Law, 2003). Yet these reforms have often been ill-received by various stakeholders for reasons like ineffective teacher training, a disconnect with the local exam 'culture,' and the ever-looming pressure of the DSE that derails even well-meaning educators' efforts at change (K.-C. Leung, Leung, & Zuo, 2014; Tong & Adamson, 2015). The local exam 'culture' issue is one that is not named so frequently in the research of other developed systems, such as the United States. Yet in the HKSAR, there often seems to be a much more pronounced explanation of how the assessment system should not or cannot change, due to it being a strong component of the local 'culture' around education, as well as being a cornerstone of the classical Chinese history and culture that many Hong Kongers have come to claim (Sun, 2015; Watkins & Biggs, 1996). These claims have been critiqued in the literature as being oversimplified, cultural essentialist (Clark & Gieve, 2006; Kennedy, 2002), and ultimately invalid, but nevertheless they continue to hold a prominent position in the popular and academic discourse.

Whether it is reading students' views or the literature on assessment reform, it appears that a more valid and effective assessment system in Hong Kong would require a significant overhaul – but in what areas? We have previously mentioned teacher education, the exam 'culture,' and the seemingly ubiquitous pressure of the DSE. In its analyses of the roots of educational inequities, critical educational research often takes a step back and utilizes a broader framing informed by sociology, political economy, and/or sociolinguistics. In this framing, the gaze tends to look towards groups within a given educational system that are set to profit from the status quo in socioeconomic and political ways (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Kumashiro, 2008). One established area of research concerns social reproduction of the status quo through schools, where dominant ideologies, policies, and cultural practices in an educational system tend to privilege the system's wealthy and elite and thus help perpetuate their dominance in society (Nasir & Hand, 2006; Spring, 1991). The degree to which this privileging is explicitly

engineered by the elite and wealthy is debated, but a common assertion is that curriculum and assessment in such systems do not facilitate critical thinking or civic engagement and thus debilitate the general citizenry's ability to question leadership and challenge inequities of the status quo (Au, 2009; Sleeter, 2007).

Social reproduction studies within critical research emerged during the latter half of the 20th century when schools tended to be modelled after factories, which have largely disappeared in many developed regions, including Hong Kong. Nevertheless many of these critiques of schooling systems can still be relevant today despite changes that reflect neoliberalism, globalization, and the IT boom. Although the study that this chapter focuses on is in its early stages, it is possible that continuing data analysis may reveal links between participant critiques of Hong Kong schooling and broader social inequities. As there is a small but significant body of educational research on Hong Kong that makes use of critical education theory and methodology (Chiu & Walker, 2007; Choi, 2005; Li & Zhang, 2016; Lin, 2012; Wong, 2007), continuing efforts of this research project hope to illuminate some of the connections between curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and broader issues of social justice.

Implications for the future

Given its status in the world's current socioeconomic and political climate, growing attention in research is being placed on mainland China, including in areas of educational research. Trending topics have included China's massive potential markets, numerous fields that encompass the teaching of Mandarin and English, and Shanghai's methods in achieving top international exam scores. While it has become increasingly integrated into the PRC, Hong Kong has a long and unique history with 'the West' and other regions of the globe. These historical and current states of the SAR can offer multiple insights into a transnational world with ever-shifting migrations of labour, booming Chinese populations, and the PRC as one of the world's superpowers. For teachers and researchers, Hong Kong is a generative case study with a generally higher level of education, democratic infrastructure, and internationalization than many nearby cities and regions, especially compared to those in mainland China. Thus Hong Kong presents numerous vantage points through which to examine current issues and topics that come together at the intersections of the Chinese diaspora, mainland Chinese hegemony, and issues of educational equity and democracy.

In this chapter, the initial findings from a study of diverse students, educators, and artists were analyzed, with particular emphases on five students and their thoughts on curriculum and assessment in the Hong Kong educational system. As all of the participants are studying to become educators, they had a number of thoughts about the strengths and weaknesses of schooling in the SAR. Their two main critiques are aligned with large bodies of research which posit that Hong Kong curricula can be quite disengaging and that the assessment system is significantly flawed. When critically examined, the participants' critiques are rather consistent in their identification of how Hong Kong seems to employ a curriculum orientation of social efficiency, with splashes of academic rationalism. In other words, justifications for the problematic curriculum come from the notion that the compulsory exams dictate curriculum to be that way, as the exams enable access to universities, which in turn are supposed to enable access to well-paid careers and a bright future. This knotty loop is often referred to as 'teaching to the test' in the critical literature and is deemed one of the primary mechanisms of neoliberal schooling systems which continue or exacerbate inequities.

So what is unique about the Hong Kong context? One difference concerns the aforementioned splashes of academic rationalism, which in the SAR can take the form of 'the Chinese

learner' and how the problematic curriculum and exams are sometimes justified by the notion that it is within the Hong Kong and classical Chinese culture to carry out schooling in such ways. This rationalization of Hong Kong's education system can also be extended to how elite schools also use 'drill-and-kill' pedagogy, despite their greater access to resources and innovations. The participants spoke of how even if teachers want to change, administration or parents will not want them to, as they have a fixed idea of what schooling, hard work, and achievement should look like. In addition to these issues with academic rationalism and 'traditional Chinese culture,' the participants also identified issues of language, ethnicity, and class. Students who come from poor, working-class, ethnic minority, or non-Chinese-fluent backgrounds are significantly disadvantaged in the Hong Kong system. As has often been studied in the critical literature, such disadvantages are normalized and embedded in the official schooling system and public discourse, to the point where inequities for certain students' families are considered normal with nothing to be done about them. While there is a massive out-of-school education industry in Hong Kong, its potential to challenge the status quo is heavily nullified when all students are pretty much expected to employ such 'shadow education,' even at ages as young as 2 years.

The 21st century has sometimes been referred to as 'the Asian Century,' where economies, ideologies, and paradigms of society and culture shift away from Europe and the United States. As with other global shifts, 'the Asian Century' has the potential to facilitate great change, hopefully towards challenging some of the enduring inequities we have seen in schools and societies. As data collection and analysis continue with this study's students and other participants, there remains a hope that the voices and experiences of students and future educators can critically inform paths towards greater educational equity within Hong Kong.

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