

## A Social Reminder: What the Public Want from the Education Reform in Hong Kong

WONG Kai Shung

*Independent education consultant*

### Abstract:

*Background:* The Education Commission (EC) of Hong Kong, the advisory body set up by the government on the overall development of education in Hong Kong, began developing a policy of education reform in 1998 and published its blueprint in 2000. In 2006, the EC published its fourth official report on the progress of the reform – *Progress Report on the Education Reform (4)*.

*Discussion Focus:* The policy document developed in 2000 contains a paragraph that summarises the 14,000 public submissions received by the EC at that time. The EC has adopted this summary as its reform priority. It contains four socio-psychological elements – *joy in learning, effectiveness of communication, creativity, and sense of commitment* – and points out that education for lifelong learning should emphasise more on the *inner qualities* of a person than personal skills. The policy also recognises for the first time that human knowledge is constructed.

This paper analyses the texts of the 2006 progress report and the 2000 policy document and discovered that the progress reported has essentially neglected the priority stated in the policy.

In parallel with the textual analysis, the paper explores the meanings of the four socio-psychological elements from the perspective of personal inner qualities.

*Suggestions:* The paper is a reminder that the priority stated in the policy is what the public want and what the EC has promised to act on. It would be undemocratic and negligent for the EC to bypass it quietly. The paper suggests that the deep meanings of the four socio-psychological elements should be explored, to be followed by modification of the strategies of the reform so as to fulfil what the public want.

The paper also suggests supplementary empirical studies involving educational professionals to validate the results.

**Keywords:** Education Reform, joy in learning, effectiveness of communication

## 一個對社會的提示：大眾想從教育改革中得到什麼

王啟淞

獨立教育顧問

### 摘要

**背景：**教育統籌委員會（教統會）是政府成立的諮詢團體，以提供教育整體發展的意見。它從1998年開始制訂教育改革的政策，並於2000年公佈了藍圖。2006年，教統會公佈了教育改革進展的第四份正式報告——《教育改革進展報告（4）》。

**討論焦點：**2000年的政策文件中有一段，總結了教統會當時從公眾所收到的14,000份意見書。教統會採納了這個總結，作為改革的首要達致的目標。它包含四個社會心理學的元素：樂於學習、善於溝通、勇於承擔、敢於創新；並指出，要提倡終身學習，教育應重視個人的深層素質多於重視個人的知識與技能。政策更首次承認人的知識是建構而成的。

本文分析2006年的進展報告及2000年的政策文件的原文，發現所報告的進展大致忽視了政策中首要達致的目標。

進行原文逐段分析的同時，本文從個人的深層素質的角度，探究這四個社會心理學的元素解釋。

**建議：**本文是一個提示，提醒政策中首要達致的目標是大眾想要的，也是教統會承諾要處理的。教統會靜悄悄地迴避它是不民主的，或許是一種疏忽。本文提議應該對這四個社會心理學的元素作深入的探究，從而調整落實改革的策略，以達致大眾想要的目標。

本文亦提議，為提高效率，須要對教育專業人士的實際經驗進行研究。

**關鍵詞：**教育改革、進展報告、樂於學習、善於溝通

The Education Commission (EC) of Hong Kong published its *Progress Report on the Education Reform (4)* (EC, 2006) (hereafter called *Progress Report 4*) in December 2006. Here, *Education Commission* refers to the non-statutory advisory body set up by the government on the overall development of education in Hong Kong and *education reform* refers to the one developed by the EC since 1998 and documented in September, 2000 in its policy document *Learning for Life; Learning through Life: Reform Proposals for the Education System in Hong Kong* (EC, 2000) (hereafter called the *Policy* or the *Policy document*, depending on the context). The *Policy* was then adopted in the same year by the Chief Executive, the *de jure* head of the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) of the People's Republic of China (PRC) (Tung, 2000) as a governmental policy. The reform is still going on. *Progress Report 4* is the fourth report on the implementation of the education reform, the previous ones being published in 2002, 2003, and 2004 as *Progress Report on the Education Reform (1)* to (3) severally.

*Progress Report 4* summaries professional tasks in areas of curriculum reform, assessment mechanism, language education, support for schools, professional development, admission mechanism, and increase in education opportunities. It is likely that the reader would find herself impressed by the hard work and the large number of tasks taken up under the leadership of the Education Commission. In fact, the various tasks have been so comprehensive and the reform so colossal that the reader would like to know what the people of Hong Kong want from such a colossal reform and whether the tasks have actually been serving what people want. This paper, "A Social Reminder: What the Public Want from the Education

Reform in Hong Kong", attempts to answer this question and other related ones. The attempt is important because at one extreme, it can legitimise the authenticity of the reported tasks with respect to what the public want, or at the other extreme, it can send out a signal to the public and the government alike that the direction of the reported tasks has gone astray.

### **The Stated Priority of the Education Reform**

To find out what the public want, the formal way is to refer to the original *Policy document* (EC, 2000) and study the priority stated. The stated priority was summarised from 14,000 public submissions when the EC carried out its first-stage public consultation in 1998 and 1999 (EC, 1999). The number 14,000 from a public consultation is huge and this shows that the priority has also been fully legitimised by the public. The priority should therefore be more than sufficiently important to be used as a standard for judging the focus of the tasks reported in *Progress Report 4*, or any other tasks directly related to the education reform. Hereafter in this paper, the term *the Priority* will be used to refer to this stated priority. To understand what the stated priority is, it would offer a better perspective to start browsing over the overarching focus of the *Policy* and then fine-tune the understanding to the stated priority.

In his Forward to the *Policy document*, Antony K.C. Leung, the then Chairman of the Education Commission and later Financial Secretary of the HKSAR, emphasises the focus of the reform with coloured prints:

"Students" are the focal point of this entire reform, "life-long learning" and "all-round development" the spirit. (EC, 2000, p. i).

While keeping the student as a whole in focus, the *Policy document* further zooms in on enhancing the inner qualities of the student, and not merely teaching skills:

In a knowledge-based society, the knowledge cycle is short and information spreads fast. The workplace requires more than ever before good communicative skills, adaptability, abilities for cooperation, self-learning, exploration and independent thinking as well as creativity. High demands are now placed on the individual's personal qualities; even the training for a specific vocation should go *beyond the teaching of skills* and aim to enhance *the inner qualities of a person*. (EC, 2000, p. 38). [Author's italics].

The title of the *Policy document - Learning for Life; Learning through Life: Reform Proposals for the Education System in Hong Kong* - shows that it upholds lifelong learning. From this perspective, the belief that personal inner qualities are relatively permanent makes them more relevant for the *Policy* than personal skills.

A person has many inner qualities. One year before the publication of the *Policy document*, the EC had prioritised certain personal inner qualities

from the content of the 14,000 submissions. These inner qualities were then incorporated as elements of the priority of the education reform into the *Policy document* in 2000.

Our priority should be to enable our students to enjoy learning, to enhance their effectiveness in communication, and to develop their creativity and sense of commitment. (EC, 1999, p.15; EC, 2000, p.4, 30).

A small note is needed here. This paper uses the term “personal inner qualities” to describe the qualities of *joy in learning, effectiveness in communication, creativity, and sense of commitment*, which have been prioritised by the EC in the quotation above. The reader might have noted that these entities are very general and may not exclusively be the inner qualities of a person. It is likely that they carry features both of inner aspects and of more noticeable external aspects of procedural and declarative knowledge. The usage of “personal inner qualities” above is partly reflective of the explicit priority given by the EC to personal inner qualities over other skills, eg in the above quotation<sup>1</sup>, and partly contextual – so as to clarify the meanings within the preceding paragraphs.

---

<sup>1</sup> Since the *Policy document* was published, many people have used the term “generic skills” interchangeably with some other similar terms, like “higher order thinking skills” or “complex thinking skills” or “knowledge construction skills”, etc. The *Policy document*, however, has never used the term “generic skills” beyond discussions concerning the workplace, tertiary education, and senior secondary education. In the *Policy document*, “generic skills” is used to refer to a product of learning in tertiary and senior secondary education for graduates to serve the workplace and has not been used as a skill for learning at primary and lower secondary levels (Wong, 2006). However, Progressive Report 4 has used the term in primary and secondary education, a usage divergent from its use in the *Policy document*. It might be useful to note that “generic skills” was first used in employment literature to emphasise the importance of skills that are common to various different workplaces (Guile, 2002; de la Harpe et al, 2000).

## Method of Analysis

To use this stated priority as a standard for judging the focus of the tasks reported in *Progress Report 4*, it would be convenient to interpret the stated priority as consisting of four socio-psychological elements, ie,

- \* joy in learning,
- \* effectiveness in communication,
- \* creativity, and
- \* sense of commitment.

A simple way to start auditing the tasks reported in *Progress Report 4* against the stated priority of the *Policy* is to use texts that were used in the *Policy document* for defining its stated priority, eg “joy”, as keywords to search for relevant texts – in this case, relevant paragraphs – in *Progress Report 4*. The two sets of texts, one from the *Policy document* and the other from *Progressive Report 4*, can then be compared to identify any internal inconsistencies. It is sometimes not straightforward to identify some of the internal inconsistencies, in which case Derrida’s idea of deconstruction could be useful (eg Jackson, 2000; Gutting, 1996/2003; Norris, 1991). His general strategy is to take notice of any asymmetry in priority given by the author to some concepts relative to its opposing concept. If this asymmetry is reversed in some other parts of text, it signifies inconsistency in logical argument. For example, in the *Policy document*, the concept of “inner qualities” was emphasised by the EC over the concept of “skills”, which is implicitly considered as “outer”. The researcher would then pay attention to the priority given to each of “inner qualities” and “skills” in *Progressive Report 4* and remain alert whenever “skills” is given priority over “inner qualities”. When this reversal of priority occurs, it is likely that there has been political rhetoric or professional negligence. It should be noted that any such oppositions have

already been brought out by the original texts rather than by the subjective intention of the researcher, ie the inconsistency exposed is endogenous within the texts. The researcher, however, is free to use exogenous ideas for interpreting concepts, especially deep meanings, otherwise implicit inconsistencies could not be exposed.

In attempting to identify relevant texts in *Progressive Report 4*, it is often useful to include other suitable synonyms of the keywords. The search then not only would be more exhaustive but also could profile the peripheral inconsistencies against core ones. This would give the reader a better sense of the degree of relevance of the professional tasks to the stated priority rather than presenting an either-black-or-white picture.

It is necessary to point out that the centre of the study is the stated priority and not *Progress Report 4 per se*. The use of keyword search is to locate those parts of *Progress Report 4* and the *Policy document* that are as relevant to the stated priority as possible. The paper does not aim at writing a full critique of *Progress Report 4*.

## The Search for “Joy in Learning”

The result of a textual search for *joy* (which forms part of the words *enjoy* and *enjoyable*) identified no occurrence at all, regretfully. Instead of continuing the search wildly using a large number of synonyms of *joy*, the author decided to search for the definition of *joy of learning* in the *Policy document* and to use the definition to generate related keywords. This could target the search more accurately.

The result of textual searches for *joy* in the *Policy document* produced seven occurrences and one of them suggested a definitive quality:

Learning should be enjoyable and it does not follow that students will not work hard. It is only through hard work and achievements that they will derive satisfaction and joy. (EC, 2000, p. i—ii).

It points out that *joy in learning* should be accompanied with the satisfaction obtained from hard work and achievements rather than with hedonistic pleasure. *Satisf* was then used as a keyword for searching for *satisfaction*, *satisfied*, and *satisfying* in *Progressive Report 4*. The result was that there is no relevant occurrence either. At this point, it could be inferred that *Progress Report 4* has not taken as high concern the socio-psychological element of *joy in learning* in the Priority.

It would be presumptuous to say immediately that the reported tasks do not bring any joy in learning to students. The author continued to search for *achievements* and *hard work*, with a hope that *Progress Report 4* is not too far away from satisfying the *joy-in-learning* element of the Priority. The textual search on *hard work*, *hard-working*, etc and some common synonyms yielded no occurrence disappointingly. The search for *achiev* yielded 10 paragraphs, relevant to *joy in learning* to different extents, the most relevant and substantial one being probably the following:

In the TSA implemented in P3 and P6 respectively since 2004 and 2005, the percentages of students achieving basic competency in Chinese Language and English Language have been increasing continuously. As regards Chinese

Language, the percentage of P3 students achieving basic competency has increased from 82.7% in 2004 to 85.2% in 2006; whereas that of P6 students has increased from 75.8% in 2005 to 76.5% in 2006. As regards English Language, the percentage of P3 students achieving basic competency has increased from 75.9% in 2004 to 79.4% in 2006; whereas that of P6 students has increased from 70.5% in 2005 to 71.3% in 2006; (EC, 2006, p.29).

Of the 10 paragraphs, three showed that *Progress Report 4* has paid attention to achievements in whole-person development of students, eg,

Since the 2005/06 school year, the eight HEIs<sup>2</sup> funded by the UGC<sup>3</sup> have already implemented their students' self-recommendation scheme under the Joint University Programmes Admissions System to take into account non-academic achievements of applicants. (EC, 2006, p.47).

Seeing that it would not be possible to discuss validity issues in this short paper, the author gave these paragraphs the benefit of the doubt and assumed that the EC has paid much attention to (1) non-academic achievements of students and (2) basic language competency – but not necessarily the psychological effect of these achievements on the students. Juxtaposing what these 10 paragraphs had shown with the previous inference, it could be seen that the EC has conceptually emphasised organising

<sup>2</sup>“HEI” refers to “higher education institutions” in the original *Policy document*.

<sup>3</sup>“UGC” refers to “University Grants Committee” in the original *Policy document*.

more comprehensive types of opportunities in order to mass produce more achievements rather than focusing on socio-psychological ways to make these opportunities joyous. In other words, the emphasis, conscious or subconscious, has been more on quantity than quality of the learning experiences. It should be noted that increasing the types and numbers of opportunities for achievements is a two-edged sword. An opportunity could lead to a joyous experience, but, with comparable probability, it might also lead to a demoralizing experience, depending on many socio-psychological factors, eg presence of the suitable challenge and feedback. Even for potentially joyous activities, when too many of them are taking place simultaneously – eg when students are assigned projects in the Easter holiday by many different subject teachers with little coordination – it would produce anxiety, because attentiveness of the participating student on a manageable number of tasks has been deprived. Any strategy that aims at enhancing joy in learning should consider socio-psychological factors as more important than considering quantitative increase in achievements.

It is necessary to explain clearly a particularly important case of what it means by critical socio-psychological factors for joy to emerge in learning tasks. This case applies to three of the four elements of the stated priority: joy of learning, creativity, and sense of commitment. Neglecting these socio-psychological factors in any learning experience means that these three elements of the stated priority are probably seriously compromised. The Education Department of the Hong Kong Government once organised a conference based on the theme of *Pleasurable and Effective Learning* and published the proceedings in 1997 (Education Department, 1997). The proceedings quoted Csikszentmihalyi, M. and

Csikszentmihalyi, I.S. (1988) and Csikszentmihalyi (1990) and listed such factors, which are critical for optimising the quality of an experience generally:

- \* Clarity: There are clear purpose, meanings, basic principles/rules, and feedback in the experience.
- \* Challenge: There is a relatively high challenge in the experience.
- \* Matching skills: The skills (and resources) of the person match the challenge such that s/he feels neither bored nor anxious.
- \* Attentiveness: External stimuli irrelevant to the experience are kept low such that the person can pay high level of attention to the experience.
- \* Company: Those working with companions are more likely to optimise the experience.
- \* Effort: The person inputs time and psychic energy into the experience. (Education Department, 1997).

Regarding the use of this general concept of *optimal experience*, which has been coined *flow* by Csikszentmihalyi, M., in education and learning, Goleman (1994/1995) and Gardner (1993) respectively recommend it in the following ways:

Learning and flow: a new model for education. (Goleman, 1994/1995).

Healthiest way to teach children, motivating them from inside rather than by threat or promise of reward. (Gardner, 1993).

With this deeper understanding of optimal experience, it was possible to make the search more thorough by using keywords that could indicate whether the above factors have been considered in

*Progress Report 4.* The results were:

- \* Clear: 0 relevant occurrence.
- \* Feedback: 1 relevant occurrence.

The TSA<sup>4</sup> provides the school management with useful information on students' standards at the end of each key learning stage (P3, P6 and S3) in the three subjects<sup>5</sup> mentioned above. Thus, the TSA facilitates feedback on learning and teaching, curriculum enrichment and improvement of teaching. The Government will provide support to schools in need of assistance. (EC, 2006, p.20)

- \* Challenge or challenging: 0 relevant occurrence.
- \* Skill: 14 relevant occurrences, mainly various kinds of generic skills of students.
- \* Attention or attentive: 0 occurrence.
- \* Company or companion or partner: 0 relevant occurrence.
- \* Effort: 0 relevant occurrence.

The whole general picture regarding *joy in learning* was getting clear. The searches showed that, to implement the education reform, much attention has been paid to the teaching of various generic skills. But, a systematic strategy targeted at enhancing the quality of a learning experience to produce joy has been either non-existent or at best haphazard. There is no evidence that the teaching of skills has been carried out in environments orchestrated to include the socio-psychological factors needed to produce joy in learning. Regarding the TSA, although it has been providing feedback to

learning and teaching – a key socio-psychological factor – the feedback has been provided at a macro territorial level at the very long interval of three years in comparison with any students' learning task, which takes about one lesson to at most a few months. The TSA could thus be taken as a territorial monitoring system rather than a means of providing clear timely feedback to individual students such that she could alter her thinking within the time span of a learning task (Bransford, *et al*, 1999, p.129).

### **The Search for “Effectiveness of Communication”**

The search then turned to another element of the Priority: *effectiveness of communication*. Simple textual searches on *communicat* and on *effect* were made. Two and none occurrence(s) were/was found respectively.

- \* Communicat: 2 relevant occurrences.

To achieve the above seven learning goals<sup>6</sup>, schools should: . . .

- Infuse the priority generic skills (i.e. communication skills, critical thinking skills and creativity, etc.) into the learning and teaching of existing subjects/Key Learning Areas (KLAs) so as to develop students' independent learning capabilities in the acquisition and construction of knowledge; (EC, 2006, p. 12 - 13).

Over 70% of primary school heads and over 50% of secondary school heads reported student improvement in communication, critical thinking

<sup>4</sup> Territory-wide System Assessment

<sup>5</sup> Chinese Language, English Language, and Mathematics

<sup>6</sup> The seven learning goals set out by the Curriculum Development Council are *healthy lifestyle, breadth of knowledge, learning skills, language skills, habit of reading, national identity, and responsibility*. (EC, 2006, p. 12).

skills, creativity, self learning, learning motivation and interest, sense of national identity, respect for others, sense of responsibility and overall learning performance since the implementation of the curriculum reform in the 2001/02 school year. (EC, 2006, p.19, 51--52)

\* *Effect:* No relevant occurrence, although there were 23 irrelevant ones.

The first paragraph showed a general curricular plan of the territory's Curriculum Development Council, aligned with the *Policy*, and the second paragraph showed that positive results had been obtained. Although the validity of this kind of self-reported successes might be questionable, this paper would not side-track into the related validity issues.

Behind the self-reported improvements, there was, however, one important concept that had been overlooked. The above two paragraphs considered communication *as a generic skill*. The *Policy*, however, as quoted earlier in this paper, requests, "... even the training for a specific vocation should go beyond the teaching of skills and aim to enhance the inner qualities of a person (author's italics)". A question arose, What are the inner qualities, if any, of a person who communicates effectively? This question was important because if such inner qualities do not exist, the professional tasks reported in *Progress Report 4* would have no possible way to go beyond the teaching of skills. On the contrary, if effectiveness of communication does require certain inner qualities of a person, the reported professional tasks would have ways to go beyond the teaching of skills, positively implying that there would be much room for future development. For answering this question, the EC, ie the *Policy document* and the *Progress Report 4*, should first be consulted. As to

what part of these two documents might suggest an answer or a further hint, there was a clue in the first of the two paragraphs just quoted above; it contained the concept of *construction of knowledge*, which was considered an important purpose of learning the generic skill of communication. So, paragraphs in the *Policy document* containing *construction of knowledge* should be consulted. Textual searches were then carried out on *knowledge construction* in *Progress Report 4* and also on both *knowledge construction* and *communication* in the *Policy document*.

The search on construct in *Progress Report 4* produced no relevant occurrence except the one already quoted above.

The search on construct in the *Policy document* produced the following paragraph, which immediately confirms the importance of the concept of construction of knowledge as fundamental in the education reform:

In a knowledge-based society, students would no longer receive knowledge passively. Through the process of learning, they also continuously construct and create knowledge. (EC, 2000, p. 40).

This paragraph was very significant, in the sense that it was the first time in the history of local education policy development to acknowledge that knowledge is actively constructed rather than passively received.

The search for *communicat* in the *Policy document* found that, apart from being included in lists, eg a list of generic abilities (EC, 2000, p. 60) or a list of generic skills (EC, 2000, p. 88, 89, 100), there is no other explicit expression of any definitive inner qualities of *effectiveness of communication*.



So far it could be said that both the *Policy document* and the *Progress Report 4* assumed that a purpose of communication is for constructing knowledge. Thus, a very important meaning of *effectiveness of communication* should be the *effectiveness in using communication for the purpose of constructing knowledge*. This could now be used as a basis for a further exploration of what the inner qualities underlying effective communication are.

The fact that even the *Policy document* has not explicitly spelled out these underlying inner qualities suggests that these personal inner qualities are probably both tacit in nature and familiar to ordinary people. Being tacit, these inner qualities may be too difficult to describe. Being familiar to ordinary people, these inner qualities might be too commonplace for a high-status policy document. This is probably why the EC did not list out these inner qualities in a formal policy document. It is likely that they are taken-for-granted human assumptions underlying all everyday communications that aim at constructing knowledge. There was a hint for finding these underlying inner qualities – the word *effectiveness*. It refers to the effect (of the inner qualities of the sender) on the receiver in a communicative act; the emphasis is on the receiver rather than the sender. Thus the underlying inner qualities should be concepts in the study of pragmatics – “the study of the actual purposes and effects of meaningful utterances” (Flew, 1979, p.323). This reminded the author of Habermas’ theory of communication (eg Habermas, 1998; McCarthy, 1978) as a guide to list these underlying inner qualities:

*Honesty*. No one would believe in a habitual liar. Since the main purpose of communication as used in the *Policy document* and *Progressive Report 4* is the

construction of knowledge, the receiver of a message will insist that the message is true, so that s/he can share the knowledge in the message. A message suspected to be deceitful cannot be shared and will not be believed. Thus, the communication cannot be effective. Honesty is, therefore, an inner quality of a person effective in communication.

*Truthfulness*. Everyone would be cautious about a message that could be part of a larger strategic act. For example, a message aiming at intimidating or coercing a person to do something is likely to raise doubts and defence mechanisms, even though the message itself is true. The receiver of the message may choose to lie in order to protect herself. Any knowledge constructed using such communications is not likely to be valid because any consensus reached has been reached under force. Similarly, any message communicated for the purpose of, for example, eliciting information in order to harm a certain person may actually elicit a lie because the receiver of the former message may be suspicious and decide to protect the certain person. Sincerity in creating knowledge that is genuinely valid is indispensable in order to reach genuine consensus. So, truthfulness is an inner quality of a person effective in communication.

*Having Commitment to Truth*. A third personal inner quality important for making one’s communication effective is the person’s commitment to truth. People have much confidence in the truth of knowledge published in academic journals. Careful people would always check information from the media with information from other sources. Similarly, people have confidence in sharing knowledge with someone who is habitually rigorous in demanding truth of information received. It will take much more effort, eg triangulation of information, to share

knowledge with someone who believes in whatever information received. Thus, having commitment to truth is an inner quality of a person who is effective in communication.

*Openness of Mind.* At a higher level of subtlety, openness of mind is also an inner quality of a person, important for using communication to construct knowledge. The existence of doubts and queries is fundamental to the success of the process of knowledge construction. Without doubts and queries, false information cannot be scrutinised. What is more important is the right to have the doubts and queries cleared and the cooperation and openness of the person from whom the doubt probably comes. It is a matter of reciprocity; someone who cannot tolerate doubts and queries from other people cannot reach consensus with other people. Hence, he cannot be an effective communicator.

*Further Search for the Inner Qualities of Honesty, Truthfulness, Commitment to Truth, and Openness of Mind in Progressive Report 4.* The texts *honest, truth, open, trust, sincer, reliab, upright, virtuo, ethic, moral* were, therefore, also searched in *Progress Report 4*. Only *ethic* and *moral* produced one and five occurrences respectively. However, they were about moral education very generally and not particularly relevant to the inner qualities underlying effectiveness in communication. For example,

The Education Reform, which is student-focused, aims “to enable every person to attain all-round development in the domains of ethics, intellect, physique, social skills and aesthetics according to his/her own attributes so that he/she is capable of life-long learning, critical and exploratory thinking, innovating

and adapting to change; filled with self-confidence and a team spirit; willing to put forward continuing effort for the prosperity, progress, freedom and democracy of their society, and contribute to the future well-being of the nation and the world at large”. (EC, 2006, p. 5).

New initiatives launched for strengthening moral and life education include letters to young people on how to lead a meaningful life by the former Permanent Secretary for Education and Manpower, a project to publicize moral education through true stories of ordinary people, moral education resource books highlighting important core values and personal qualities as well as a celebrities talk series for the promotion of life education. (EC, 2006, p.17).

General moral education is certainly related to the development of the inner qualities underlying effectiveness in communication. However, there was no evidence that these inner qualities have been considered as priority and that some special strategies have been targeted on these inner qualities.

This seems to be a contradiction with the earlier finding of “student improvement in communication” as reported by 70% and 50% of primary and secondary school heads respectively. It is necessary to reiterate that the improvement reported is in the *skill* of communication rather than in personal inner qualities. In the subject of pragmatics, effectiveness in communication also requires *comprehensibility* of the communicated message. The skill of making communication comprehensible, being much more overt than the personal qualities of honesty, truthfulness, commitment to truth, and openness of

mind, has caught nearly all the attention of school educators whereas personal inner qualities are much more difficult to handle in the curriculum. It might be useful to illustrate the distinction between comprehensibility and the other inner qualities by an example. The messages presented in advertisements and speeches of politicians are nearly always persuasive and surely comprehensible. Should people believe them readily? Careful people would try to identify the intentions hidden behind the rhetoric of these advertisements and would recollect the track records of these politicians for such inner qualities so as to judge whether they should believe them or not. Local schools have always paid much attention to communication skills and comprehensibility, mainly syntactics and semantics, but not much attention to pragmatics – the *effects* of communication. This reasoning should resolve the contradiction.

### The Search for “Creativity”

The search then turned to the third element of the Priority: *creativity*. The keyword *creativ* produced three relevant occurrences. Two of them were the same as the two quoted above when *communicat* was searched (in the section *Results for Effectiveness of Communication*). Like *communication*, these two paragraphs together said that the element *creativity* is one of the generic skills, to be infused into the curriculum and has been improved since the implementation of the curriculum reform. At the same time, like *communication*, these paragraphs treated *creativity* like a dummy concept, ie, without mentioning any semantic information about the concept of *creativity*. The third occurring paragraph also treated *creativity* like a dummy concept:

professional development programmes for school heads and teachers on themes covering the curriculum reform, the planning and implementation of whole-school curriculum, strategies to cater for learner diversity and the use of diversified modes of assessment for improving student learning. To address the needs of teachers, the programmes on MCE [moral and civic education] will also be enhanced. Moreover, there will be training on the infusion of critical thinking and creativity in KLAs and in gifted education. (EC, 2006, p.16).

These three paragraphs obviously said little about how *creativity* has been improved in the implementation of the education reform. To safeguard against the possibility that other paragraphs in *Progress Report 4* might have been missed out in the search, the search turned to the *Policy document* to generate other keywords. The text *creativ-* was then searched in the *Policy document* and occurring paragraphs with irrelevant usages were then discarded. It was found that by *creativity*, the *Policy* associates (with reference to pages in the *Policy document*)

- \* a *prerequisite for success* (p. 3), a *basic ability* (p. 9), a *generic skill* (p. 100, 103), a *personal quality* (p. 114), *higher order thinking* (p. II-2), an *element of gifted education*,
- \* a *learning environment that will induce students to be curious, to question and to explore* (p. 34),
- \* the quality displayed by students when *more flexible modes of examination* is adopted

- Priority will be given to enhancing the

(p. 44), and

- \* the quality discouraged by rote learning (p. 107).

Although these associations are related to creativity in some ways, none of them is anywhere near any central meaning of the concept. Again, many other skills or abilities or qualities, eg *understanding*, could also be associated with these descriptions. It was thus accidentally found that the element *creativity* of the stated priority of the *Policy* is also treated somewhat like a dummy concept in the original *Policy document*. Therefore, the search could not rely on the *Policy document* itself to generate more useful keywords. For this reason, the search turned to some external sources (Amabile, T.M., 1983; Barrow and Milburn, 1986/1990; de Bono, 1992; Underwood, 2001). Since *creativity* could mean many things, the search restricted itself to those with educational interpretations. The interpretation of *creativity* with least reservation carries the central feature of “production of original work of high quality...” Possible common keywords could be *produce, compose, invent, innovate, discover, original, novel, heuristic, non-algorithmic, high quality, excellence*, and their derivatives. Another interpretation, popular in education, is *lateral thinking* in general problem-solving ability, although it begs an important question whether there is such a thing as general problem-solving.

Using these keywords and their derivatives, a few paragraphs from *Progress Report 4* were identified. But none of them was related to the two interpretations mentioned above, in fact not to *student creativity* at all. It was concluded that there was no evidence that the professional tasks reported in *Progress Report 4* have taken *student creativity* as priority of the education reform.

## The Search for “Sense of Commitment”

The initial search on *Progress Report 4* using *commit* produced no paragraph about the socio-psychological development of commitment of students after discarding irrelevant interpretations.

The search then turned to searching the *Policy document* with the same keyword *commit*, aiming to find out what the public want regarding the central meaning of *commitment* and thus obtaining more keywords.

It was found that the entities to which students should be enabled to develop commitment are *our families* (p. 32); *our society* or *our community* (p. 32, 45, 61, 110, 114, 149, II-1); *our country* or *our nation* (p. 28, 45, 60, II-1) (with page numbers referring to the *Policy document*). There were also suggestions on how to develop the sense of commitment. Two examples were:

The CDC will ensure that the curriculum as a whole will enable students to have a better understanding of their country in order to enhance their identification with and commitment to their country. (EC, 2000, p. 60).

Schools may also collaborate with different service organizations, such as uniform groups, youth service organizations and cultural bodies to organize life-wide learning activities which are conducive to developing students’ positive values and attitudes such as civic-mindedness and commitment to the country and the community. (EC, 2000, p. II-1).

Thus, having a better understanding and

participation in relevant activities were found to be the two main means to develop a sense of commitment. There was, however, no mention of

- (1) what kinds of understanding or participation are necessary<sup>7</sup>;
- (2) other means of creating a sense of commitment<sup>8</sup>;
- (3) any definitive description of the concept of commitment in the *Policy document*; and
- (4) other kinds of commitment, eg commitment to one's work, to helping the disadvantaged, to peace, to making scientific discoveries.

By referring to the *Policy document*, the following new keywords together with their derivatives were then generated: *family, society, community, country, nation, identification, and civic-mindedness*.

With these new keywords and their derivatives, *Progressive Report 4* was searched again. Many occurrences were found.

There were three relevant occurrences of *community*, eg,

**Support for Schools: Target:** Different sectors of the community are willing to provide support to schools and teachers in the implementation of the Education Reform. Apart from providing direct support to schools in terms of professional support and resources, the Government is also promoting collaboration between schools and other sectors of the community so as to provide our students with richer and more fulfilling learning experiences. (EC, 2006, p.31).

There were six relevant paragraphs with *nation* or *identification* occurring, all in the sense of national education and national identity, eg,

In addition to the continuing organization of national education courses in Beijing for senior secondary students, talk series and study tours to Beijing for better understanding of contemporary China, Military Summer Camp for Hong Kong Youth, Dialogue Session on “Shenzhou VI” [<sup>9</sup>] and summer camp interflow activities for secondary school students from Beijing, Hong Kong and Macao were also organized. Subsidies were also provided for programmes of the National Education Centre for strengthening national education. (EC, 2006, 17).

On-going national education programmes will include the national education courses, National Day celebrations, talk series and study tours to Beijing for understanding of contemporary China, Military Summer Camp for Hong Kong Youth and Understanding our Motherland Programme.

New initiatives will include the organization of a Symposium on National Education and Basic Law Education in 2007 and educational activities related to the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games, promoting national education through the activities organized by Dr Sun Yat-sen Museum and the revamping of the

<sup>7</sup> For example, is producing a critique, which might create a negative image, also a kind of understanding that creates a sense of commitment?

<sup>8</sup> For example, the effect of labelling (or more technically called “tagging”, in complexity studies).

<sup>9</sup> Second human spaceflight in low Earth orbit launched on 12 October 2005 by the People's Republic of China. (Wikipedia, 2009)

curriculum for national education courses held in Beijing. (EC, 2006, 17).

*Civic* occurred 8 times, mainly in the form of *Moral and Civic Education*, which is one of the four *key tasks* of the curriculum reform that has been implemented in parallel with the education reform. The promotion of *sense of commitment* in these occurrences is much more indirect than that in paragraphs promoting national education and identity.

From the results of the searches, it could be observed that *Progress Report 4* is very much concerned with the stated priority of enabling our students to develop a sense of commitment – even though the concern is exclusively focused on activities aimed at developing students' sense of commitment to their community and their country.

### **Concluding Remarks**

For this short paper, it is not necessary to repeat in the Concluding Remarks the results found in the paragraphs above. Instead, it is necessary to state the limitations of the research and to give recommendations. Regarding limitations, a general one can be deduced from the section *Method of Analysis*. The methodology of this paper exposes inconsistencies that are internal, and internal only. If the *Policy* or *Progress Report 4* has neglected something external, any such inconsistencies would, however, remain oblivious. An example could be the idea of evolution of complex adaptive systems (eg Axelrod and Cohen, 2000; Waldrop, 1992; Davis and Sumara, 2008), which has never been mentioned by the EC. The education system, school systems and sub-systems are all complex adaptive systems in nature and they do self-organise. The

education reform is a major reform in this era of complexity and the *Policy document* proclaims a shift of the paradigm of learning (EC, 2000, p.ii, 40-41). Without considering the evolution of complex adaptive systems, the EC would find it very difficult to create an education infrastructure that would allow these systems to evolve naturally, democratically and in a sustainable way. Without considering the properties of complex adaptive systems, the EC could hardly transcend itself beyond a top-down paradigm of reform. Since the theory of complex adaptive systems has not been mentioned by the EC, this paper could only touch this point here tangentially as an example of research limitation.

The second limitation of the research method is that it judges the professionalism of the tasks only by analysing the texts from a single report, which, as a governmental report, might actually be written by some administrative personnel leading the education reform but unfamiliar with education-related theories, such as socio-psychological factors necessary to produce joy, creativity and sense of commitment in an experience. The most likely error is that the voices of some of the professionals actually working on the tasks are not sufficiently represented in *Progress Report 4*, which was then used as the only target for analysis. Should this be the case, this research would reflect weaknesses in the administration of the education system rather than of the professional tasks. Whatever the reality, the possible limitation mentioned, however, should not prevent the analysis of the text. There are two reasons. First, readers of the paper are not blank slates; many of them are probably professionals having real experience with the education reform and can easily supplement the analysis of the text with how they have been perceiving the extent to which many of the tasks have respected the stated priority of their education reform.

Secondly, another research could be carried out to probe the voices of the professionals taking active part in the education reform. Triangulation is nearly always an improvement.

There is a third limitation. There are three other previous Progress Reports. It would be more complete to analyse all the four reports as a whole. The present analysis of only the last of the four reports, however, is still useful, in three senses. First, it still serves as the same reminder that the stated priority of the education reform is not merely a rhetorical symbol; it has been backed by the public when they submitted their 14,000 submissions to the Education Commission; the Priority has been formally legitimised by the Education Commission, the most authoritative consultative education body in Hong Kong. Secondly, it is easy for the reader to browse over the previous three reports to understand how valid the results of this paper is; the author has actually done a quick textual analysis of the four reports before choosing the most recent one for a publication purpose. Thirdly, following the methodology, this paper has made an interpretation of the four elements of the stated priority, mainly as personal inner qualities, which are what the *Policy* values for lifelong learning. Analysing all four Progress Reports does not necessarily strengthen this interpretation four times.

Some recommendations should be made in the concluding remarks. The broad recommendation is that there is a need to develop some definitive concepts and theories for making the four elements of the stated priority of the *Policy* accessible for large-scale research and development. It is a pity that the reform has been going on for years without such clear concepts and guiding theories. Although progress in many areas has been reported, according to the *Progress Report 4*, this progress is only weakly

linked to the upheld inner qualities of the students. As seen from the results of textual searches in the *Policy document*, *joy of learning* has been marginally referred to as *satisfaction after hard work* in the *Policy*; no related theories have been mentioned. *Effectiveness in communication* has been assumed to be *comprehensibility* of the sender's communication; no attempt has been made to link *effectiveness* of communication to the *effect* of the communication on the receiver. There has not been any attempt at all to say clearly what the *Policy* means by *creativity*, which generally has always been a confusing collection of psychological concepts. If pluralism is the *Policy's* choice, then at least it should spell out those constructs it aims to enhance in students. Regarding *sense of commitment*, it has been narrowly interpreted as something developed by understanding of one's country and community and participating in activities related to them. It leaves the reader of the *Policy document* quite puzzled whether commitment to, for example, reducing societal income gap, or knowledge creation in a certain field, or liberal education, etc, should also be essential elements for a student's sense of commitment in an education reform of such breadth and depth!

Additional to the broad recommendation, a particular one has to be given to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's theory of optimal experience (flow) mentioned earlier. Outside education, it is widely utilised by software designers to create enticing electronic games and by psychology professionals to enhance a person's quality of life. In education, the theory is very suitable for inducing the emergence of intrinsic motivation of learning. Regarding the *Priority*, the theory covers at least three of the four socio-psychological elements and is highly compatible with the idea of "integrated learning experience" promoted by

the *Policy* (EC, 2000, p.59). The government has introduced integrated subjects and key learning areas. Curriculum integration, carried out in this way, integrates the sub-structures of the written curriculum but might have insignificant effect on the quality of the learning experiences. It is time to go beyond the written curriculum and pay attention on the socio-psychological aspect of the curriculum, ie the learning and teaching curriculum.

A final point has to be made regarding the significance of emphasising the stated priority of the education reform. To the government, politically, respecting the priority stated in its own formal document means not only keeping its promise and showing that it is trustworthy but also demonstrating that it respects democratic values. The public has made a choice and the government, as civil servants, ought to consider it important to respect the choice of its own people. The stated priority is a formal statement of the choice of the people. Is it not a shame to leave this democratic decision oblivious?

At the professional level, respecting the stated priority includes setting up evaluation standards based on the rigorous interpretation of the stated priority. The *Policy* requires that the education reform should go beyond the skills of people and focus on the inner qualities of students. Yet *Progress Report 4* can only report on the work at the skill level. It is obvious that the next stage of the education reform should re-focus on the inner qualities of students. Some educators have expressed concern that the ambitious education reform of such magnitude could end up with the *Da Liangang* [Grand Steel Making

Project<sup>10</sup>] syndrome. This is an over-stated concern but figuratively, it reminds every educator, administrator and the public to respect knowledge and rigor, and to evaluate strategies in the light of relevant knowledge. A way to avoid the *Da Liangang* syndrome is to set up success/failure criteria rigorously. A well-known episode from science history illustrates the importance of success/failure criteria and serves to end this paper.

When Einstein proposed his general theory of relativity, he used it to predict a phenomenon impossible under the popular Newton's gravitational theory at that time: a certain distant star, lying just behind the Sun when viewed by an observer on Earth, should still be visible under certain conditions because the light rays from the star, sufficiently bent by the sun's gravitational field, would still reach Earth. Otherwise, he would claim that his general theory of relativity would be wrong. How bold the claim is; it is refutable! To test Einstein's theory, Arthur Eddington from the Royal Observatory at Greenwich led a team of physicists and saw the star under the prescribed conditions! Physics has been a successful leading human activity; physicists tend to use rigorous criteria grounded in the best knowledge available. (Chalmers, 1982; Ronan, 1983.)

---

<sup>10</sup> "Da Liangang" was a movement in China initiated by Chairman Mao in 1957 and later fuelled by some cadres and turned into a careless political mess in 1958. Mao pushed for reform in steel making in 1957 and some cadres made impossibly boastful claims about production figures. Ultimately, to save the National Chairman's face, nearly every person in the whole country was mobilized to make steel using his/her own home method, mostly lacking any experience or theory. The result was a nationwide fiasco, wasting a huge amount of materials containing metals as well as human resources. (丁抒, 2005)



## References

- Amabile, T.M. (1983). *The social psychology of creativity*. New York: Springer-Verlag.
- Axelrod, R. and Cohen, M.D. (2000). *Harnessing complexity: organizational implications of a scientific frontier*. New York: Basic Books.
- Barrow, R. and Milburn, G. (1986/1990). *A critical dictionary of educational concepts*. New York: Teachers College.
- Bransford, J.D., Brown, A.L., Cocking, R.R. (ed.) (1999). *How people learn: Brain, mind, experience, and school*. Washington, D.C.: National Academy.
- Chalmers, A.F. (1982). *What is this thing called science? Second edition*. Open University Press.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. New York: HarperPerennial, a division of HarperCollins.
- Davis, B. and Sumara, D. (2008). Complexity as a theory of education. *Transnational Curriculum Inquiry* 5(2) <http://nitinat.library.ubc.ca/ojs/index.php/teci> Accessed on 22 October 2009.
- de Bono, E. (1992). *Serious creativity*. London: HarperCollins.
- de la Harpe, B., Radloff, A., and Wyber, J. (2000). Quality and generic (professional) skills. *Quality in Higher Education*, 6(3): 231 – 243.
- Education Commission. (1999). *Learning for life (Review of education system: Framework for education reform)*. The second of a series of four major documents: *Education blueprint for the 21<sup>st</sup> century*. Hong Kong: The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. [Website: [http://www.e-c.edu.hk/eng/online/index\\_e.html](http://www.e-c.edu.hk/eng/online/index_e.html)] accessed on 26 February 2009]
- Education Commission. (2000). *Learning for life; learning through life (Reform proposals for the education system in Hong Kong)*. The fourth of a series of four major documents: *Education blueprint for the 21<sup>st</sup> century*. Hong Kong: The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. [Website: [http://www.e-c.edu.hk/eng/reform/index\\_e.html](http://www.e-c.edu.hk/eng/reform/index_e.html)] accessed on 26 February 2009]
- Education Commission. (2006). *Progress Report on the Education Reform (4)*. Hong Kong: The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. [Website: [http://www.e-c.edu.hk/eng/reform/index\\_e.html](http://www.e-c.edu.hk/eng/reform/index_e.html)] accessed on 15 February 2009]
- Flew, A. (1979). *A dictionary of philosophy*. London: Pan Books.
- Gardner, H. (1993). *Multiple Intelligences: The theory in practice*. New York: BasicBooks.
- Goleman, D. (1994/1995). *Emotional intelligence*. New York, Toronto, London, Sydney, Auckland: Bantam Books.
- Guile, D. (2002). Skill and work experience in the European knowledge economy. *Journal of Education and Work*. 15(3): 251-276.
- Gutting, G. (1996/2003). Sartre, Foucault and Derrida. In Bunnin, N. and Tsui-James, E.P. (ed.) *The Blackwell companion to philosophy*. Malden, USA; Oxford, UK; Carlton South, Australia; and Berlin, Germany: Blackwell.
- Habermas, J.; Cooke, M. (ed.) (1998). *On the pragmatics of communication*. Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
- Jackson, M.C. (2000). *Systems approaches to management*. New York, Boston, Dordrecht, London, Moscow: Kluwer Academic/Plenum.
- McCarthy, T. (1978). *The critical theory of Jürgen Habermas*. Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
- Norris, C. (1991). *Deconstruction: Theory and practice*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Ronan, C.A.. (1983). *The Cambridge illustrated history or the world's science*. Cambridge, New York, Melbourne: University of Cambridge and Newnes Books.
- Tung, C.H. (2000). *Policy Address 2000*. Hong Kong: Office of the Chief Executive of HKSAR. [Webpages [http://www.info.gov.hk/pa00/pa00\\_e.htm](http://www.info.gov.hk/pa00/pa00_e.htm) accessed on 20 December 2001 and <http://www.info.gov.hk/ce/speech/cesp.htm> accessed on 14 February 2001.]
- Underwood, G. (2001). *Oxford guide to the mind*. Oxford: Oxford University.
- Waldrop, M.M. (1992). *Complexity: The emerging science on the edge of order and chaos*. London: Viking.
- Wikipedia. *Shenzhou 6*. Webpage: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shenzhou\\_6](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shenzhou_6) accessed on 1 September 2009.
- Wong, K.S. (2006). *A Critical Review of the Proposals for Reform of the Education System in Hong Kong with Particular Reference to Curriculum Integration and Lifelong Learning*. Unpublished Doctor of Education dissertation presented to Durham University, United Kingdom.
- 丁抒。(2005)。〈大煉鋼禍延全國〉。《人禍》。網頁：<http://www.epochtimes.com/b5/5/7/12/n983773.htm> 2009年8月6日登入。
- [Ding, S. (2005). *Da liangang – a disaster for the whole country*. *Man-made Disaster*. Website: <http://www.epochtimes.com/b5/5/7/12/n983773.htm> accessed on 2009, August 6.]
- 教育署。(1997)。《愉快有效學習：研討會摘要》。香港：作者。[Education Department. (1997). *Pleasurable and effective learning: summary of conference*. Hong Kong: Author.]

## Author

Dr.WONG Kai Shung, independent education consultant

e-mail: [K.S.Wong@dunelm.org.uk]

[Received: 1.9.09, accepted 28.9.09, revised 3.11.09]