

Chapter 4

Background to the Hong Kong Education System



David Coniam and Peter Falvey

Abstract This chapter provides the reader with an introduction to the Hong Kong education system and the development of teacher education in Hong Kong. It should be noted that descriptions of the Hong Kong education system have been provided in other articles by Coniam and Falvey (see Coniam and Falvey in *Validating technological innovation: The introduction and implementation of onscreen marking in Hong Kong*. Springer, Singapore, pp. 1–7, 2016; Coniam & Falvey, 2013, vi; Adamson and Li in *Education and society in Hong Kong and Macao: Comparative perspectives on continuity and change*, The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, pp. 35–60, 2004). Readers should not, therefore, be surprised to come across similar descriptions in the current chapter. The authoritative work on the Hong Kong education system pre-1841 to 1941 is Sweeting (*Education in Hong Kong pre-1841 to 1941*. Hong Kong University Press, Hong Kong, 1990; *A phoenix transformed: The reconstruction of education in post-war Hong Kong*. Oxford University Press, Hong Kong, 1993). (See also Tang and Bray in *Journal of Educational Administration* 38(5):468–485, 2000).

Overview of the Hong Kong Education and Examination Systems

Background

Hong Kong was governed by the UK for 156 years from 1841–1997, when the territory was finally handed back to Mainland China and became the Hong Kong

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Special Administrative Region (HKSAR). During that period, the education system was based on the UK model.

Received opinion was that the British brought education to Hong Kong. Sweeting (1990, p. 2), however, rejects that notion by observing that well before the advent of the British, schools already existed in Hong Kong. After the British arrived in Hong Kong, education came mainly from missionaries; e.g., Italian missionaries began to provide schooling to British and Chinese young males in 1843. The push for the education of Chinese in a British system did not begin until the rise of social awareness in the Chinese community following the 1919 May Fourth Movement and the 1934 New Life Movement in China. Educating the poor did not become a priority until they accounted for the majority of the population.

Education and Examination Structure

The structure of mainstream education for many years was nine years of compulsory schooling in Hong Kong, six in primary school and three in junior secondary school. Over the past thirty years, however, few students actually received only nine years of education. Most received at least eleven years of education. The effective structure was six years of primary education, followed by five years of secondary education leading to the first public examination, the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE), and for a few, a further two years of education leading to the Hong Kong Advanced Level Examinations (HKALE) —the precursor to university education.

However, since 1997, the date of the handover of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty, there have been substantial changes to the state education system. For instance, the policy toward the language of instruction changed dramatically when Chinese medium education was promulgated soon after the handover. Incidentally, the government made a policy out of reality for the majority of its students by increasing the nine years of compulsory education to twelve years as of 2009. Furthermore, a decision to change the secondary school structure to six years not five or seven was a major initiative. Now secondary education in Hong Kong resembles the structure of secondary education in China, Australia, and the USA and lasts for six years. Major changes to the education system are shown in Table 4.1.

As shown above, under the New Academic Structure (NAS), the six years of secondary education lead to the *HKDSE (Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education)* examination (see below for a fuller description). After the HKDSE, students move on to work or to post-secondary, vocational, or tertiary courses. Because of the restructuring of the HKDSE, most tertiary courses are now of four years' duration.

There are three main groups of schools: government; subsidized (usually administered by religious organizations and charities); and private schools. Secondary schools are 'banded' (i.e., streamed) into three bands according to the academic level of students coming from the primary sector. Band 1 is the highest band.

Table 4.1 Education system

Under British rule		Since 2009—New Academic Structure	
Education system	Examination system	Education system	Examination system
Primary—6 years		Primary—6 years	
Secondary—5 years	Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE)	Junior secondary—3 years	
Upper secondary—2 years	Hong Kong Advanced Supplementary Level Examination (HKASLE) Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination (HKALE)	Senior secondary—3 years	Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE)
Tertiary—3 years	Graduation	Tertiary—4 years	Graduation

Hong Kong has always been very examination oriented. However, more continuous and formative assessment has emerged in recent years including a large move to school-based assessment (see the description of the grading system for the HKDSE below).

For decades, it was common for two primary schools to share one set of buildings with separate morning and afternoon sessions. Nowadays, however, changes to the population have resulted in the majority of primary schools being whole-day schools.

In the 2016–2017 financial year, the total budgeted government expenditure on education was HK\$84 billion (approximately US\$10.8 billion), representing 17% of total government expenditure (<http://www.gov.hk/en/about/abouthk/factsheets/docs/education.pdf>, accessed November 2017).

English Language Learning in Hong Kong

Students in Hong Kong begin learning English at Primary 1 (age six), and students receive, on average, four to six hours' English language tuition a week in primary schools, and seven to nine hours' English language tuition in secondary schools (see Nunan, 2003). It is suggested by the EDB that about 17–21% of school hours should be devoted to English language education (<https://cd.edb.gov.hk/becg/english/chapter2.html>, accessed November 2017).

Panel Chairs

Panel chairs are heads of department—teachers who are appointed to coordinate, administer and, if qualified, provide academic leadership for all the teachers in a school who teach the panel chair's subject. The panel may consist of ten staff or more and, until relatively recently, included a number of teachers whose major teaching subject was not English.

Heads of department/panel chairs in Hong Kong secondary schools undertake many professional as well as administrative duties, including selecting textbooks, inspecting tests and homework, and approving locally produced materials (Benson, 2010). The discussions over the duty of English heads of department indicate that the latter should have language, curriculum, and managerial expertise to manage their department. On this basis, there evolved, from within the school sector, a trend to accept a rather higher baseline for the appointment of heads of department (LPATE Level 4) than for English language teachers (LPATE Level 3) (Coniam and Falvey, 2002; this volume, Section IV).

Teacher Education

Teacher training has been a neglected activity until recently. Until the 1990s, it was still a worldwide phenomenon that teachers were untrained (Li & Kwo, 2004). The lack of teacher training was related to a variety of factors, such as teacher training being just a small part of the educational system; the belief that any person who completed a particular level of education could teach students at lower levels; and, possibly, the schools' budgets as trained teachers are better paid (Li & Kwo, 2004). Until 1994, all primary teachers were educated at government-run teacher training colleges. They were not graduates; instead, they entered the colleges of education for three years after they left secondary school in Year 11 or for two years after they left secondary school in Year 13. After graduation, all were titled 'Certificated Teachers'.

Before the handover in Hong Kong in 1997, teaching, compared with other professions such as medicine or law, was a semi-profession (Morris, 2004). Historically, there had been no official requirement that a person should be professionally trained before entering the teaching profession. Any person wanting to be a teacher has to apply to EDB to become either a 'registered teacher' (RT) or a 'permitted teacher' (PT). To be qualified as a 'registered teacher', a person must have obtained 'qualified teacher status' (QTS) through completing a sub-degree level certificate/diploma of education, or a bachelor degree in education, or a postgraduate certificate/diploma in education (Lee, 2013).

The low requirement for teachers was associated with the types of professional training courses provided in teacher education. Before 1920, teacher education was mainly conducted at the training school or college level, for example, in St Paul's College, Central School, and Wanchai Normal School. The first four-year undergraduate course on teacher education was launched at the University of Hong Kong (HKU) in 1920. In 1965, the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) also established a School of Education, providing pre-service and in-service training mainly for secondary teachers (Li & Kwo, 2004).

Among the most significant developments in Hong Kong, teacher education was the establishment of the Hong Kong Institute of Education (HKIED) in 1994, which was renamed the Education University of Hong Kong (EdUHK) in 2016. The HKIED was formed by joining the five existing colleges of education at that time (Li &

Kwo, 2004). In 2000–2001, the HKIED joined the other seven tertiary institutions in Hong Kong under the financial, course validation and quality assurance procedures of the University Grants Council. In addition, the HKIED began to offer full-time four-year undergraduate programmes and part-time postgraduate diploma/certificate programmes for those of its former alumni who had, over the years, obtained an undergraduate degree through distance-learning and/or overseas degree programmes.

The entry requirement to a teacher education programme was low. Pre-service primary teachers either received two-year training after completing Form 7 (Year 13), or three-year training after completing Form 5 (Year 11), before they were enrolled in the HKIED for a Certificate of Primary Education. The degree courses were offered at HKU and CUHK, mainly for the purpose of building up specialist secondary teachers (Li & Kwo, 2004).

As teachers could become qualified through either sub-degree courses or degree courses, teachers were assigned to teach students of different levels according to the qualifications they held. Certificate holders who trained in the former colleges of education/HKIED taught mainly at primary and junior secondary level, whereas degree holders taught mainly at senior secondary level (Law, 2003). To cater for the expansion of education which occurred after waves of immigration from China before the late 1970s, the Hong Kong Government had to employ untrained teachers, which affected the quality of the teaching profession for decades. Teachers often had to teach more than one subject and had to teach subjects for which they were not trained (Law, 2003).

As stated above, in 2000–2001, the HKIED, the major teacher educator provider, joined the other seven tertiary institutions in Hong Kong for funding and quality control purposes. In addition, the HKIED increasingly began offering full-time four-year undergraduate programmes and part-time postgraduate diploma/certificate programmes for its former alumni who had, over the years, obtained an undergraduate degree through distance learning and/or overseas degree programmes. CUHK (The Chinese University of Hong Kong), HKU (The University of Hong Kong), and HKBU (Hong Kong Baptist University) also provided undergraduate and postgraduate programmes for pre-service and in-service teachers. The OUHK (Open University of Hong Kong, newly established in 1989), also offered degree courses and in-service and pre-service PGCE courses for primary and secondary school teachers (Lee, 2013).

As a response to the announcement made by the Chief Executive in 1997 that all future new teachers should be graduates and professionally trained, from 2002, all sub-degree courses, except in the area of early childhood education, were closed down (Morris, 2004).

Along with the increasing awareness worldwide that teachers should be both subject trained and professionally trained; a number of measures were taken in Hong Kong—both to enhance teacher professionalism and to gauge teacher professionalism. In 2000, Hong Kong's Education Commission launched a reform proposal entitled Learning for Life, Learning through Life (Education Commission, 2000). Following this report, a number of in-service training courses were provided in tertiary institutions. The language benchmark assessment (the LPATE) was also intro-

duced within this context, to make sure that all English and Putonghua language teachers met minimum language requirements (Li & Kwo, 2004).

Following these moves for greater professionalism, there was a considerable improvement in teachers' qualifications. In the year 2010–2011, of the 21,000 primary school teachers (including about 1600 non-degree holders), approximately 95% were trained; likewise of the 29,000 secondary school teachers (including 900 non-degree holders), about 94% were trained (Lee, 2013). As the discussion in Section II demonstrates the wide variety of language ability of teachers of different levels is invariably linked to the amount of academic and professional training teachers of English in Hong Kong have received.

It was also increasingly recognized by government that the days of non-graduate teachers were over if Hong Kong was to move on as a sophisticated, high-tech, service center with commensurate higher levels of education and language ability in its workforce.

Medium of Instruction in Schools

In Hong Kong, approximately 95% people are ethnic Chinese, most of whom have migrated from China's Guangdong Province. The remaining 5% come from places such as South Asia, East Asia, Europe, North America, or Australia (Census and Statistics Department, 2011). Despite the fact that the majority of people in Hong Kong spoke, read, and wrote Chinese, English was the sole official language until 1974. Chinese (i.e., Cantonese for the spoken language and Modern Standard Chinese for the written language) was recognized as an official language only after considerable pressure (Tsui, 2004).

The medium of instruction, i.e., using English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI), or using Chinese as a Medium of Instruction (CMI), has been debated since colonial times. Tsui (2004) points out that language policy is not solely an educational issue. The language policy must be understood in its social and political context. A review of the changes in the medium of instruction (MOI) in Hong Kong shows that the selection of medium of instruction is closely associated with the social, political and educational context of Hong Kong (see Jeon, 2016; Poon, 2013; Tsui, 2004).

Although English was the major medium of instruction in the colonial period, using Chinese as a medium of instruction was advocated as early as the 1960s, asserting that learning through a foreign language would impact negatively on the quality of learning, and that having a good foundation in the mother tongue was necessary for acquiring a second language (Tsui, 2004). In 1963, a government study about the educational needs of Hong Kong students showed that EMI education placed a heavy burden on students. The colonial government was nonetheless reluctant to support CMI. Indeed, a member of the Education Commission blatantly stated that anglicizing the Chinese would make them intermediaries between the colonial government and the local people (Pennycook, 1998; Tsui, 2004). On the other hand,

EMI education was seen as a means of satisfying parents in that it enabled students to better communicate with the international community.

In 1973–74, the Government once again proposed using Chinese as a medium of instruction but this proposal was not accepted: parental concerns and Hong Kong's economic development were put forward as the major issue blocking such a move. One change, however, was that the government left the choice of MOI to individual schools. For the first time, in 1974, the Hong Kong School Certificate Examinations could be taken either in Chinese or in English (Tsui, 2004). The change in the MOI was also associated with the fact that, in 1974, Chinese was recognized by the government as an official language.

Until 1994, the MOI was decided by individual schools, which Poon (2013) describes as the 'laissez-faire policy period'. Although schools claimed to be EMI schools, the mixed use of English and Chinese was prevalent in classes in these schools (Johnson, 1983; Lo & Lo, 2014). As only around 30% of students were able to learn through English effectively (Poon, 2013), most EMI schools used mixed-code teaching (a mixture of English and Cantonese) because of students' limited English language proficiency (Poon, 2013).

In 1994, the Hong Kong Government adopted a more rigorous language streaming policy. Schools were streamed into EMI schools, CMI schools, and two-medium schools on the basis of their students' language ability. Such a policy was not well received by parents and students, as the policy deprived schools of a free choice on the selection of the MOI (Jeon, 2016; Poon, 2013).

Upon the return of Hong Kong to China in 1997, the HKSAR Government introduced a compulsory CMI policy, whereby only schools with 85% of students achieving a satisfactory level of English over the previous three years would be permitted to use English as the MOI. Despite there being opposition from parents, such a strategy was supported by pedagogical evidence that learning through the mother tongue was more beneficial to students (Poon, 2013).

Since, for historical, ideological, and economic reasons, English enjoyed a high status in Hong Kong, many objections to the compulsory English policy were made by the public. Parents whose children now had to attend 'CMI' schools considered that such a policy deprived their children of access to higher education and good jobs (Poon, 2013). CMI school principals made the point that the policies made many CMI schools appear second class by limiting the number of high-quality students that CMI schools could enroll (Tsui, 2004). The CMI policy was also accused of restricting social mobility by blocking people's pathways to the elite (Poon, 2013). Despite the objections, research indicated that students benefited from learning in their mother tongue (see Marsh, Hau, & Kong, 2000; Ng, Tsui, & Marton, 2001). Nonetheless, despite such positive evidence, Hong Kong parents still showed an unwillingness to send their children to CMI schools.

As a response to some of the objections, the then Education Department issued the *Medium of instruction: Guidance for secondary schools* in September 1997—to permit schools to teach through the medium of English, provided that they demonstrated sufficient capacity to do so (<http://www.edb.gov.hk/en/edu-system/primary-secondary/applicable-to-secondary/moi/guidance-index.html>—accessed June 2016).

Schools that were permitted to use EMI would be subject to scrutiny every six years to ensure the quality of education; schools were also allowed to change their medium of instruction on the basis of student ability, teacher capacity, and the availability of support measures (Poon, 2013).

In 2010, the government amended the strict EMI policy, introducing ‘fine-tuning’ to the mix. Under the new framework, schools were permitted greater flexibility in deciding their medium of instruction. The fine-tuning policy allows a spectrum of MOI arrangements across schools, ranging from total CMI at one end, to CMI or EMI in different subjects in the middle, and total EMI at the other end. Under this policy, schools are allowed to offer EMI classes, partial EMI classes, or CMI classes based on students’ ability to learn through English, teachers’ capacities to teach through English, and school support (Jeon, 2016; Poon, 2013). Research into the fine-tuning policy has, however, reinforced many of the educational issues continually plaguing EMI. These issues concern whether students have sufficient language proficiency to study through a second language, whether teachers have the capacity to teach through English and whether sufficient resources and support are provided (Chan, 2014).

School Type

Originally, the majority of schools in Hong Kong were founded by religious bodies and merchant or clan groups. As education provision expanded, the government itself created schools that were directly funded from the public purse. Later, schools were founded by individuals or private bodies and funded from fees or funds provided by individuals. By the year 2000, government and religious/merchant schools were either directly resourced or ‘subvented’ by the HKSAR Government. It should be noted that the influence of school governing bodies, particularly religious ones, is very strong in Hong Kong. Indeed, it can be said that these bodies effectively set the curriculum in schools not the EDB.

Education Bodies and the Line of Command in Hong Kong

The policy bureau of the HKSAR Government is the Education Bureau (EDB).

The Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority (HKEAA) is an autonomous body, established in 1978 to conduct all public examinations in Hong Kong. The Hong Kong Education Commission was an independent advisory body, established in 1982, in order to provide Government with policy advice (Coniam & Falvey, 2013).

Summary

This chapter has described the education and examination systems of Hong Kong. Chapter 5 describes the methodological approaches to the study and the analytical measurement tools used in the study.

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