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*Re-interpreting Assessment: Society, Measurement and Meaning*

## **School-based Assessment in Hong Kong: Policies, Issues, and Practice**

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### **Abstract**

Hong Kong has long been using high stakes examinations in the education system. High stakes tests are product-oriented which is less helpful for learning. In recent years in particular, Hong Kong would like to make a change to its examination system. The government sees that school-based assessment (SBA) can bring about many educational benefits. It can help reduce examination pressure and helps improve teaching and learning. Subsequently, a much wider use of SBA has recently been added to the assessment system as one important aspect of the assessment reform. The new initiatives have been received by the education sector in different ways. A study was thus conducted to understand how teachers responded to the new initiatives. About a hundred secondary school teachers were invited to complete a questionnaire. Analysis of the quantitative data revealed that teachers generally felt that SBA was beneficial to teaching and learning. However, the qualitative data showed that teachers perceived a lot of difficulties associated with SBA. To make SBA in Hong Kong a success, a lot of issues will need to be addressed. These will be reported and discussed during the presentation.

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For a very long time, public examinations have been used by many education systems mainly for selection purpose - granting or denying prospects for an upward movement of education and career. These exams are labeled as high stakes assessments, so called because the stakes associated with their use are high, usually for the test taker (but increasingly for the schools and their teachers as well). Despite the wide recognition of this assessment system, high stakes exams are challenged for their trustworthiness in reflecting students' performances. These "one-shot" examinations, which usually involve students in doing paper-and-pencil tests in a standardized testing environment, can only depict a partial picture of student learning. Paper-and-pencil tests tend to challenge students cognitively, leaving other important learning outcomes such as social and learning skills not truly represented. High-stakes tests tend to assess what is most easily assessed in a standardized testing condition, rather than what might be the important outcomes of learning. It tends to favor the measurement of knowledge about things learned over the measurement of how that knowledge might be used/applied, and it rarely captures the more complex outcomes of learning that are best demonstrated through 'authentic' tasks. High stakes tests are product-oriented which is less helpful for learning and may even impede learning. Teaching related to high stakes testing tend to gear students towards drills and rote-memorisation of factual knowledge, rather than assisting them in developing deep learning.

In a report on the Hong Kong system of high stakes assessments (IBM, 2003, p. 81), it was concluded that an assessment system that focuses solely on external examination papers can stifle creativity in some students and minimize their opportunities to show true insight in their learning. Mr. Cheng Fangping (2002), a Chinese scholar, points out that examinations can depress student's initiative,











belief would also affect teachers' cognition as well as behavior in implementing the ideas and in instruction. From this we can see that teachers' perception on SBA could have great influence on how they perceive it as well implementing it.

#### *Generalizability of SBA result*

Teachers are responsible for evaluating students' performance. However, individual teachers differ greatly in marking. Some might be lenient markers while others might be strict. Also, marking SBA tasks can be very subjective since teachers are the only one to judge the level of attainment. It is possible that marks obtained in one school might not be comparable with other schools, as well as all the schools in Hong Kong.

From the above, it is clear that bringing about SBA success is not an easy task. The key issue lies with teachers as they are the executors of SBA. Their faith in SBA and skills in executing the good intentions of SBA are the direct and determining factors to SBA success in Hong Kong. A study was thus conducted to understand teachers' perception of the new initiatives of SBA in Hong Kong and to find out what they thought were essential for its successful implementation.

#### **The Study**

This was a small scale study. A semi-structure open-ended questionnaire was used as the research method. Thirty-five teachers studying on a MEd programme in Hong Kong were involved in the study. They all were required to study the core module "Assessment for Learning" with one lesson particularly devoted to the discussion of school-based assessment. Amongst these teachers, fifteen teachers were teaching in kindergarten, ten in primary school, seven in secondary school, and one from special school; one self-employed. The teachers held different duties at their schools: nine participants were school teachers, nine were school subject panel chairs







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