Promoting Outcomes Based Educational Reforms:  
Lessons from Hong Kong’s Experience

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Introduction

In the realm of Higher Education, Hong Kong has tended to be a prolific net importer of other countries’ ideas and scholarship and net exporter of students. It is therefore a rare honour to be in the position, as a plenary speaker, of making a very minor contribution to addressing that imbalance – I will not however be attempting to recruit students whilst here.

Where Hong Kong does feature in international scholarship its characteristics have often been selectively raided to confirm generalised propositions such as the value of free markets, the benefits of whole class instruction, or of cultural homogeneity and/or imperialism. As with all stereotypes they hide as much as they reveal. The tendency to portray Hong Kong in a somewhat stereotyped and clichéd way is unfortunate, for this Special Administrative Region (SAR) of China provides a fascinating context for exploring a range of educational issues.

I hope to illustrate this by now providing an analysis of the career of the most ambitious attempt to date at curriculum reform, which began in 1991 and was termed Targets and Target Related Assessment (TTRA) and subsequently renamed the Target Oriented Curriculum (TOC). This paper is based on a four-year study of the impact of the reform, which I was engaged in along with a number of colleagues from the University of Hong Kong (HKU) and a member from the Hong Kong Institute of Education (HKIEd).

The reform was notable in the following respects:
1) It was strongly influenced by a range of reforms that have been termed Outcomes Based Education (OBE). Most notably the National Curriculum in the UK and the Curriculum Frameworks in Australia.

2) The reform was initiated and introduced by the departing colonial government during a transition period that was intensely politicised and saw the emergence of a more pluralistic and democratic political system.

3) It shared with other reform efforts a reliance on a top-down system of decision-making in which superordinate groups made key decisions to be carried out by subordinate groups. However, in contrast to other contexts, there are in Hong Kong no agencies that mediate between the national Government and the schools.

This talk focuses on the four critical dimensions of public policy analysis namely:

• the nature of policy
• the sources of policy
• the means of action employed, and
• the impact on practice.

The perspective adopted is an interpretative one that does not see education policy as a rational exercise in problem solving; nor does it reify policy as well-intentioned goals that are thwarted by reactionary and unskilled teachers.

The Career of the TOC

Before proceeding it is necessary to provide a brief history of the rise and fall of TOC. Overall, three distinct phases emerged, and their features are characterised in Table 1 along with reactions to each phase. In the first, which began in about 1990, the TTRA was recommended by the Education Commission (ECR4, 1990), which is the highest level advisory body on
government educational policy in Hong Kong. The Legislative Council (LEGCO) subsequently accepted TTRA as government policy. The new curriculum was planned to be introduced into Primary 4 classes from 1995, and a system of criterion-referenced assessment was to be developed to replace the existing system, which assesses pupils’ level of academic achievement at Primary 6 and is used to stream them into different secondary schools (Stimpson and Morris, 1998). It was also intended to use the TTRA to identify those pupils who could gain access to English or Chinese medium secondary schools. This resulted in a strongly hostile reaction from the educational and political community, who saw the reform as underdeveloped, rushed, impractical, and most importantly, an attempt to introduce by the back door a means of language-based selection. The overall emphasis in this first phase was on assessment, selection and the promotion of accountability. Specifically, the introduction of a system of national testing was seen by government officials as critical, in so far as it provided a means by which schools could be compared.

The second phase, which began in 1993, involved a process of redefinition as the government responded to highly critical public reaction. This primarily involved the creation of an advisory committee that renamed the policy as the TOC, delayed the implementation schedule, shifted the point of entry of the new curriculum from Primary 4 to Primary 1, and uncoupled the reform from language-based selection. Subsequently, extensive means were provided to schools to support implementation and to the government’s Education Department (ED) to provide curriculum resources; and in promoting the reform the government placed greater emphasis on teaching and learning than on assessment. The government adopted a more flexible and less prescriptive conception of the reform and how it should be implemented. Consequently, school-based initiatives and emphases, such as a focus on Mastery Learning and the Activity Approach, were viewed as consistent with the ‘spirit of the TOC’. Overall, this phase was characterised by the government’s commitment of resources and greater flexibility,
and by a clear shift from a focus on assessment towards a concern for teaching and learning.

The final ongoing phase, which began in 1997, is characterized by a combination of uncertainty and vacillation. Essentially in this phase the TOC has directly confronted a range of critical and unresolved structural issues: its relationship with the system of high stakes assessment at Primary 6 and its implications for the curricula of secondary schools. It has also confronted, by virtue of the passage of time, the test of the extent to which the reform would be supported by the new government. The current perception is that the TOC is no longer a central part of the government’s educational reform agenda despite the fact that the ED continues to promote, modify and support it. In the questionnaire survey conducted in 1998, over 66 percent of teachers (n=3,168) described the uncertainty over the continuation of the TOC after 1997 as a major problem affecting its implementation. Similarly a more recent survey (HKIEd/ED 1999) indicated that many teachers questioned the government’s long term commitment to the TOC.

A number of factors have contributed to this perception that the TOC is in its death throes. First, in 1998, a policy of ‘delabelling’ was introduced by the government, which meant that schools were no longer distinguished (or funded) according to whether they had adopted the TOC. The government subsequently was refused extra funding by LEGCO to support the dissemination and resourcing of the TOC on the grounds that it was no longer a distinct policy initiative. Secondly, in early 1999, LEGCO passed a unanimous motion that the implementation of the TOC in upper primary classes be delayed. Lastly, reference to the reform in the public speeches of senior members of the educational policy-making community has either been avoided or been critical of it.

Table1  TTRA/ TOC: Features and Reactions
The Nature of Policy

As a formal policy the TOC was designed to have an effect on what Bernstein (1975) describes as the three fundamental message systems of the school curriculum, namely: the conceptions of the purposes of schooling, the nature of pedagogy and the means by which pupils are assessed. Figure 1 provides an interpretation, based on the various documents which constitute the formal doctrine, of how each of these systems was to be changed as a consequence of the implementation of the TOC.
This is not to suggest that the intended goals of the reform were interpreted uniformly by those involved in its creation and promotion. The TOC provides a classic illustration of the interaction and tension between formal policies (policy intent) and the ensuing actions of people and institutions whose role is to influence schools and classrooms (policy actions). Its key features changed over time, and the various parties within the policy-making community perceived it markedly differently. Four distinct groupings operated here: the EC, whose role has already been mentioned; the Education and Manpower Branch (EMB), which is the policy-making branch of government; the development team based in the Institute in Language Education (ILE); and the various sections of the ED that were responsible for implementation. The first two of these bodies were primarily involved in the creation of policy intents; the second pair was more responsible for the policy in action. Within the ED a further set of groupings existed which was based on subject divisions: English, Chinese and mathematics.

The EMB saw the TTRA/TOC as a vehicle for increasing the public accountability of primary schools and for assessing pupils’ language competence through a national system of assessment targets. This viewpoint was reflected in the original title of the reform (Targets and Target Related Assessment) and prevailed in the published report (ECR4, 1990). In contrast the development team saw the TOC more in terms of generating a cross curricular framework to encourage school based curriculum reform designed to change the prevailing styles of teaching and learning and reducing the competitive nature of schooling. In further contrast the ED’s conception focussed more on creating a standard curriculum product, which was to be provided to schools for implementation. The specific components on which their energies focussed were the provision of programmes of study and assessment tasks. They also encouraged publishers to provide new textbooks.
Subsequently, as the general prescriptions of ECR4 (1990) were translated into more specific curriculum statements, the formal doctrine moved away from stressing the need to develop strong accountability systems towards a focus on promoting task based learning, group work, and a framework of targets to foster formative assessment.

**Figure 1 THE TOC: Key Dimensions of the Reform**

(These arrows indicate the shifts promoted by the TOC)


The process of translating the general curriculum statements into concrete actions (Ripley, 1985) for the three subjects involved a range of sections in the ED, most notably the Advisory Inspectorate and the Curriculum Development Institute. These are institutions organized around discrete subject disciplines and as they became involved in the operationalisation of the TOC, the nature of the policy actions became increasingly centralized and discordant. Some individuals in the bureaucracy and their union representatives declared their opposition to the reform, and each subject grouping interpreted the policy statements in different ways. Thus, for example, whilst the English section adopted the framework promoted by the TOC, the mathematics and Chinese sections, which had recently produced new
curricular guides for their subjects, tended to incorporate those aspects of the reform that did not require fundamental changes to the prevailing conceptions of their subjects (Clark, 1999).

This divergence between policy intent and policy actions was readily evident to school personnel, who frequently noted that some of those whose task was to promote the TOC in schools - by providing teacher training and advice - openly opposed the reform, confessed a lack of understanding, and/or described it in terms perceived to be wholly inconsistent with the policy statements. At the school level, it was also apparent that the TOC was similarly subject to the ‘Rashomon’ effect, especially in the second phase when the ED became increasingly flexible in their interpretation of the policy intentions. The tendency was for schools to focus on, or appropriate, those aspects of the TOC closest to their own practices or current school-specific priorities. Thus, some schools associated the TOC with changing assessment practices, others associated it with mastery learning, or with the activity approach to teaching. In effect, the TOC became a curriculum reform with universal characteristics. This is discussed in more detail in the final section.

The Sources of Policy

The precise genesis of the TOC is unclear but it seemed to evolve more from a coalescing of factors than an instrumental and linear process of goal directed, or problem solving decision making (Walker, 1990). The process was more akin to those described by Kingdon (1984), March and Olsen (1984) and Weiss (1980) who respectively describe policy as emerging from, a ‘primeval soup’, a ‘garbage can’ and from ‘decision creep’. Kingdon’s (1984) portrayal of policy making as emerging from within a ‘primeval soup’ in which three process streams -- problems, expertise, and the political context -- converge, often in random ways, provides the basis for an appropriate interpretative framework. The framework requires supplementing with a fourth stream to recognize the influence on policy making, especially in small territories such
as Hong Kong, of the availability of external precedents.

Since Hong Kong achieved universal provision of primary and then junior secondary schooling, in 1971 and 1979 respectively, public concern and policy on education have shifted from addressing questions of provision to a focus on more qualitative and curriculum oriented issues. A range of specific problems had for some time captured the attention of the media and the educational policy making community in Hong Kong. Many of these were identified in an internal report of the ED (ED, 1989) and included: the highly centralized nature of curriculum development; a perception of declining standards of language proficiency in both English and Chinese; the lack of clear objectives and targets for learning; a dissatisfaction with highly didactic teaching styles; the competitive nature of the school system; and, a general concern that the changing nature of the economy (from manufacturing to service industries) required a significant reform of the school curriculum.

In terms of expertise the key players in the policy-making community, especially the ED and EMB, provided strong leadership and specialists in curriculum development were available locally to promote and generate proposals that were loosely linked to addressing these problems. Specifically, a group of experts in English language education from the ILE developed a comprehensive range of policy proposals based on their view of the centrality of criterion-referenced assessment and task based learning.

The third stream identified by Kingdon that contributes to the emergence of the policy is the political context and includes swings of national mood, election results, ideological priorities and changes of administration. When TTRA was introduced the political climate in Hong Kong was dominated by the aftermath of the Tienanmen Square massacre. The colonial government was portrayed by an increasingly critical local media as a ‘lame duck’
administration pandering to the wishes of the mainland. In parallel the Democratic Party emerged as a powerful political force and independent source of criticism of the government. A less fractious relationship developed between the policy making and executive branches of government than was evident prior to 1989 (Morris, 1996). The colonial government was thus keen in its last decade to demonstrate strong leadership, and reform of education was one of the few domains of policy in which its room for manoeuvre was less subject to external constraints than other areas, such as the political or economic. The fact that the government’s tenure was to end on 1 July 1997 also served to significantly change the context and horizons of policy making. The maintenance of the long established doctrine of ‘positive non-intervention’ and a minimalist approach to investment in public services were no longer paramount as the long term consequences of policy decisions would be borne by the post-handover government. This confluence of problems, people and political context produced an environment that created both the perception of a need for reform and the means to generate a ‘new’ curriculum.

The fourth stream relates to the availability of external precedents. When policy makers in Hong Kong have identified a problem and the desired policy direction in an area of public provision a common strategy is to look overseas for available models. These are then used to both legitimate the need for a policy and as models for transplantation or modification to the local context. The imitative nature of Hong Kong’s culture, the relatively small size of the society, its colonial political system and a long standing philosophy of laissez faire government have encouraged the use of this strategy. In the case of the TOC, when the problem was identified there was a range of curriculum reforms elsewhere (especially the UK, Australia and New Zealand) which were promoting forms of outcomes based education in an attempt to improve the quality of schooling (Clark 1994). These provided policy makers not only precedents as to the nature of reform but also a burgeoning research literature and a source of expertise. The staff of the ILE development team were drawn from those involved in such
initiatives in the UK, Australia and the USA.

A focus on the genesis and nature of the TOC as a policy can serve to distract us from considering the unresolved conflicts and non-decisions which surrounded its emergence, and the changing mix of the policy ‘primeval soup’ which contributed to the demise of the policy in the third phase. The TOC contained a number of features that were in fundamental conflict with many of the structural features of the system of schooling and the school curriculum. These were not the object of policy decisions and remained in place -- thus ensuring ongoing tensions between the reform and the context in which it was implemented. In effect, the TOC was actively promoted by the government but it was left to the schools to resolve a number of tensions which emerged inevitably with implementation. The two key tensions related to the continuation of a curriculum organized around discrete subjects, and of the assessment and selection of pupils at the end of Primary 6.

The TOC was premised on the need for pupils to learn through involvement in task based learning and the belief that they should develop what are termed the five fundamental ways of learning -- problem solving, reasoning, inquiry, conceptualizing and communicating -- which transcend specific subjects. Despite this it was to be implemented through the three core subjects -- Chinese, English and mathematics -- which comprise the primary school curriculum. The capacity for integration was thus strongly constrained by the boundaries that operate between subjects. A further tension of a less structural nature also emerged. The TOC saw pupils as learning through a process of constructing meaning in social contexts. This did not sit comfortably with a curriculum that stressed preconceived learning targets and an initial focus on assessment and accountability.

The TOC was also justified on a critique of selective, norm-based assessment and the
need for the curriculum and assessment to be aligned through the development of formative school based assessment. It also stressed the value of a broad range of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that went beyond the traditional emphasis on academic aptitude. However, despite the expectations, what emerged was that schools were encouraged to develop more extensive systems of recording and reporting pupils’ progress in addition to their traditional systems of grades, marks and rank orders. At the end of Primary 6 pupils’ academic aptitudes are assessed and this assessment is used to allocate pupils to one of five bands of academic aptitude which determines the secondary school they attend.

Schools, therefore, have had to reconcile a number of unresolved tensions, especially the conflict between the formative functions of assessment promoted by the TOC and the selective function that prevails in the school system. Many schools have decided that, given the continuance of the existing structures for selection and allocation of pupils, the selective function should continue to prevail and drive the school curriculum. What emerged is a classic example of what McNeil (1986) terms the ‘contradictions of control’ that are embedded in the policy-practice relationship. Schools are caught in the contradiction between society’s pursuit of goals associated with social efficiency (grading, selecting and sorting) and broader educational goals that stress social inclusion, catering for individual differences, and measures supportive of pupil learning. These contradictions were not only left unresolved by the TOC reform, they were exacerbated by it, and it was up to schools to decide how best to reconcile them.

The current status of the TOC is not wholly clear for the messages being sent by the groups associated with policy action and policy intent are discordant. While the ED is continuing to develop and support the TOC in response to the reactions of teachers and realities of schooling, the messages from the other sectors of the policy-making community (Chief
Executive, EMB, and EC) are interpreted as less supportive. Overall, as noted above, the public perception is that it is no longer central to the government’s education policy agenda. A number of reasons might be advanced to explain the change in the status of the TOC. The weaknesses and criticisms of the TOC, its internal contradictions, its conflict with the prevailing structures for assessment and selection and its strategy of dissemination are potential explanations. But these issues existed from the outset. The public criticism was relatively muted after 1996/7, and the more flexible approach to its implementation had been accepted in many schools. Further, the indications are that the current review (Education Commission, 1999) of the education system and its aims, is promoting curriculum reform that embodies many of the characteristics of the TOC. It seems that the TOC will be recreated and emerge under another name with its key features redefined. The Activity Approach will probably replace task-based learning and objectives will replace learning targets.

It is thus difficult to explain the perceived demise of the TOC, or at least the label, primarily in terms of the intrinsic features of the reform or in terms of the public reaction to it. A stronger explanation for the source of policy change has to focus more on the changing nature of the same combination of policy streams (problems, expertise, political context and external precedents) referred to earlier. In terms of the link between policies and problems, the emphasis has shifted from (a) the initial concern with developing a system of assessment which would ensure public accountability, to (b) improving the quality of teaching and learning, and towards (c) remedying the tensions and contradictions of both a structural and attitudinal nature created by the promotion of the TOC. The nature of the expertise required has also changed with this new conception of the nature of the ‘problem’.

The changing political context, specifically the change of sovereignty and the replacement of the British colonial administration by the first government of the Hong Kong SAR has changed the perceptions of the status of the TOC. Since the handover the government
has primarily sought to promote its vision of the nature of society and its citizens through reforming the education system. In other areas of public policy, such as the economic and legal system, which are more directly linked to Hong Kong’s role as a centre for global trade and investment, a premium has been placed on maintaining stability. Further, the prevailing socio-economic climate since the transition of sovereignty has been dominated by the recession in Asia. This has served to undermine the traditional source of the government’s legitimacy, namely the provision of a stable political climate in which rapid economic growth provided the basis for high employment and socio-economic mobility. In response, the government has sought to establish its legitimacy through the promotion -- primarily through the school curriculum -- of a cultural form of nationalism that stresses Chinese values. The government has also sought to establish its credibility and legitimacy in the eyes of a population sceptical of the policies of the Chinese Communist Party -- primarily by establishing itself as a strong and decisive force in contrast to the more laissez faire approach of the colonial government.

In parallel, other reforms, especially the focus on Information Technology (IT) and Putonghua (Mandarin), have emerged as the primary items on the new government’s educational reform agenda. External precedents are now sought primarily in the area of IT education and Singapore’s initiatives have emerged as a role model in this area.

**Forms of Policy Action**

Through the actions undertaken by the government to promote the TOC, schools were essentially encouraged, exhorted, and cajoled by the ED to adopt the reform. The degree of direct influence seemed to correlate positively with the extent of state control of the various types of schools. Government run schools were placed under strong pressure to adopt the TOC, and where this was resisted the school principal was sometimes changed to ensure compliance.
In the larger aided sector -- in which schools are funded by government but run by charitable and religious bodies -- the strategy was more indirect and circumspect.

The key benefits held out by the government to encourage schools to embrace the TOC were the provision of financial grants, teacher education programmes, and a multitude of curricular resources. Consequently many school principals opted to adopt the TOC on the grounds that it provided opportunities for teacher professional development and access to extra resources. The willingness of schools to choose the TOC label was also associated with the degree of specificity by which it was defined. As it became a more flexible and broad reform that was increasingly loosely coupled with classroom practice, so schools became more willing to adopt the label.

The basic modes of policy action thus involved a mixture of essentially indirect measures, namely inducements, exhortation, and capacity building. The more direct forms of policy action, mandates and systemic changes were notably absent. This reliance on indirect forms of policy instruments, and the avoidance of more direct forms, was typical of the colonial government’s approach to curriculum policy. The rationale for this would seem to lie in the problems that emerge from the use of more direct and coercive forms.

Direct forms of action, such as requiring all schools to adopt the TOC, raise the basic problems of enforcement and resistance. Faced with a situation where some schools were opposed to the TOC, such policy actions would have required the government to ensure compliance or else accept the consequences of the rejection of their policies. Attempts to ensure compliance would generate public confrontation, which was anathema to a colonial government with a very low level of legitimacy. Accepting rejection would also serve to undermine the government’s credibility. A reliance on more indirect forms of action ensured
that conflict was minimized and strategies such as defining the TOC in increasingly flexible ways and delabelling ensured that evidence of manifest non-compliance and the need for enforcement was averted.

The same conditions serve to explain the key non-decisions that affected the TOC. The introduction of fundamental systemic changes to support the TOC would have required, as noted earlier, radical changes to both the subject based curriculum and to the system for selecting pupils at Primary 6. Essentially such changes would have fundamentally challenged the existing distribution of power and the prevailing beliefs about the nature and purposes of schooling. Defensive reactions would have been guaranteed if such systemic changes were pursued and conflict between the government and various sectors of the community would have been inevitable. A government with a tenuous legitimacy could not pursue strategies that would generate tension and conflict in the public arena, especially during a time when political parties were emerging.

The reliance on indirect forms of policy action created a further contradiction of a more strategic nature. The attempt to encourage and exhort schools to adopt the TOC took the form of a moral crusade in which the TOC promoters appropriated the rhetoric of curriculum improvement (progress, quality, standards, process, etc.) and this was linked to the achievement of a wide range of worthwhile goals. The clear subtext was that those who did not adopt the TOC were reactionaries opposed to improving the quality of schooling. More importantly, the promotion of the need for and value of the TOC was based on a critique of prevailing pedagogic practices, which were portrayed as mechanistic, behaviourist, and reliant on rote learning. Whereas this may have served to promote the reform, it also suggested that the competence and professionalism of serving teachers were wholly inadequate. This negative portrayal of teachers’ professionalism and competence contributed to both their initial
resistance to, and criticism of, the reform.

Previous curriculum reforms in Hong Kong had similarly relied on indirect forms of policy action and had also been promoted primarily by exhortation, legitimatory evaluations (Morris and Tang, 1989) which portrayed policy as being readily implemented in the schools. Thus initiatives such as the Activity Approach and the Cross Curricular Themes (moral, sex, civic and environmental education) were adopted by schools, and generally accepted as worthwhile, but had little impact on classrooms. This was partly because of the loosely coupled nature of the reforms to the implemented curriculum and because little support was provided to support change. In effect the government was able to point to the worthwhile nature of its policies, but these were primarily symbolic and not designed to change the implemented curriculum. The TOC marked something of a watershed, insofar as it saw the government move beyond a reliance on symbolic action. In the second phase of the TOC the government launched a massive exercise in capacity building which saw the provision of central and school based teacher education programmes and a wide range of classroom resources.

Impact on Schools
The final strand of analysis relates to the relationship between curriculum policy and practice. Analysts of curriculum policy have focussed primarily on two dimensions of the policy-practice relationship: the extent to which there is or is not an influence of policy on practice and whether it is positive or negative. The combinations of these posited in the literature have tended to suggest that curriculum reforms have a low positive impact (Meyer and Rowan, 1977, 1978; Tyack and Cuban, 1995), or have a high but negative impact (Wise, 1979; McNeil, 1986). A full analysis of the impact of the TOC is beyond the scope of this paper; other papers address that question with reference to different contexts (e.g. special
education, Chinese, mathematics) or to different themes (teacher professional development).

Overall, it is difficult to make categorical and generalized statements as to the impact of the TOC, for how it affected individual schools, classrooms, and teachers varied markedly in both degree and in terms of what was affected. With regard to the latter, some of the major impacts were in areas that were not central to the goals of the reform. Thus, for example, we found many instances where the TOC was essentially appropriated by school principals as a vehicle for legitimating their vision of school improvement, which was often only loosely linked to the characteristics of the reform. It was also evident in many of the case study schools that teachers’ engagement in activities and experiences arising from the TOC served, for some, as a powerful source of professional growth and generated greater collegiality and collaboration amongst teachers. This in turn contributed in some schools to the emergence of a greater sense of solidarity, professional awareness, and empowerment amongst teachers, which was sometimes in tension with the predominant style of decision making in schools.

This tendency for schools to appropriate the TOC and link it to their ongoing institutional priorities was also reflected in the motives that school principals provided for adopting the TOC. Generally, the decision to adopt the TOC was taken solely by the school principals, and their motives were not primarily linked to the intrinsic features of the reform per se. Rather, they tended to see the TOC as a vehicle for achieving one or more of the following goals: legitimating existing programmes of school improvement generally; improving the school’s capacity to compete with other local schools for pupil intake; and increasing the input of resources which were linked to the TOC into the school (curriculum materials, teacher training).

In terms of the more manifest goals of the TOC, its most evident impact was again
primarily a legitimatory one -- especially with regard to pedagogy. Some teachers claimed that they had been trying to use pedagogies which promoted task based learning, interaction, and group work prior to the introduction of the TOC but had found this difficult to sustain as it was in tension with the established patterns of schooling. The introduction of the TOC served to change this scenario, and some teachers perceived that their status had shifted from being ‘outsiders’ to valued role models in their school. There were also some indications that the TOC had supported the greater use of group work and task based learning, but this occurred in classroom contexts that remained teacher centred and in which whole class teaching prevailed. Further, in the subject of Chinese specifically, the indications were that the TOC served to encourage a greater focus on the teaching of oral communication skills. The curriculum materials provided to schools had also greatly improved the resource base available to primary schools. Consequently, when in the third phase there emerged the perception that the TOC was no longer supported by the higher levels of the policy making community many of the more innovative school principals and teachers expressed a strong sense of betrayal.

The dimension of the TOC that was most problematic was assessment (Morris et al, 1999). Schools invested a great deal of time in developing systems of assessment designed to support the TOC. The initial development of these systems, and their subsequent use, created a substantial extra workload for teachers and this proved to be a major source of dissatisfaction. More importantly, the systems of assessment developed were essentially added onto existing systems so that pupil assessment increasingly contained information that was both norm and criterion referenced. However, the way this was used remained overwhelmingly summative. Schools had developed more complex and diverse means of assessing pupils, but these were not used to provide the sort of feedback on learning which is the raison d’être of formative assessment. The means of assessment had been diversified but its function did not significantly change. In some cases this resulted in teachers drawing a clear boundary between their
response to new demands arising from assessment. They were willing to try to implement changes which were designed to improve the quality of learning but reluctant to do the same with those which they associated with satisfying bureaucratic and administrative needs. Unfortunately most of the changes associated with assessment practices belonged to the latter category.

A clash between the formative assessment promoted by the TOC and its selective function at P6 was inevitable. It was also a tension that was publicly manifest and difficult either to shift to the schools for resolution or to conceal. Insofar as assessment affected individual pupils and required operational measures to implement, it was the one aspect of the TOC that was tightly coupled to the realities and consequences of schooling. The two most direct effects of assessment were that it generated an administrative system that greatly increased teachers’ workload and it changed the way assessment data were reported to pupils and parents.

In contrast, the other features of the TOC -- pedagogy and the aims of schooling -- were more amorphous and rhetorical in nature and thus more loosely coupled to practice. Herein lies a dilemma – on the one hand, loosely coupled curricular reforms, such as those relating to pedagogy and educational aims, provide weaker prescriptions for practice, less potential for conflict with prevailing practices, and thus less potential for undermining public confidence in schooling. On the other hand, the more strongly coupled and prescriptive nature of assessment reform required real changes to the status quo that generated both conflict and clear evidence of non-implementation. This supports Meyer and Rowan (1977, 1978) and Weicks (1976) contention that the impact of educational policies is weak because policies that are politically viable are only loosely linked to educational practice. Conversely, those curriculum reforms that have clear and direct implications for educational practice, such as assessment, are less
viable politically.

The overall indications therefore are that the effect of the TOC on practice was multiple (different elements were affected), often unintended (change occurred in unplanned ways) and varied (some individuals and organizations were affected positively and others negatively).

**Conclusion**

This paper has examined the career of the TOC through a focus on the four key issues central to public policy analysis. In terms of the nature of policy, the analysis underlines the need to recognize the multitude of ways in which the reform was interpreted by different stakeholders within the policy making community and to distinguish between the policy intent and the related policy actions. This highlights the need to avoid portrayals of policy which suggest that it is a homogeneous and stable phenomenon that emerges from a superordinate group dominated by the government or state. Clearly, the TOC was a shifting and contested policy as much within the various levels of government as it was between the government’s intentions and its implementation in schools.

The analysis of the sources of policy suggest that the TOC emerged as a result of a confluence of factors which generated the perception of a problem and a need for reform, the expertise to provide it, a supportive political context and the availability of external precedents. Subsequently and conversely, the redefinition of the TOC as the problem (as opposed to the solution to the problem), weak leadership at the policy making level, a new political context and the identification of alternative external precedents, provided the combination of conditions that resulted in the demise of the TOC as the vehicle for curriculum reform.

The forms of policy action associated with the TOC were also portrayed as strongly
linked to the broader political context and the government’s sensitivity to its fragile legitimacy. Specifically, the standard forms of direct action used to achieve the implementation of policy were avoided to ensure that non-compliance and the potential for public conflict were minimized. This reliance on non-direct forms of action was accompanied by a strategy of resolving conflicts over the implementation of the TOC by redefining it in ways which were increasingly flexible and able to incorporate a range of school-based interpretations. Whilst this reduced the potential for confrontation between schools and the government it was less effective in reconciling the tensions when the more tightly coupled aspects of the curriculum, namely assessment, had to be addressed.

Finally, the impact of policy on practice defies a simple or singular explanation. It affected individual schools and teachers in varying degrees and both positively and negatively. What emerged is that, firstly, many of its effects were on elements that were essentially unplanned and secondly, the TOC was appropriated, interpreted, and used in some schools in ways designed either to legitimate ongoing attempts to support school improvement efforts or more innovative teaching practices. In brief, the impact of the TOC in classrooms was significantly influenced by the antecedent conditions of curriculum development within schools. This parallels Watt’s (1998) claim that the antecedent conditions of curriculum development within the Australian states explained the variety in patterns of implementation of the national framework.

A number of themes emerged that transcend the four strands of analysis which have structured the analysis thus far. The first relates to the relationship between curriculum policy and the shifting nature of the broader political context in Hong Kong. Just as the TOC served to change the context within which teachers and principals worked in ways that legitimated ongoing innovative efforts, so the shifting political context changed the conditions in which
the TOC operated and the criteria by which it was judged. Specifically, the period leading up to
the handover created conditions conducive to educational reform as the outgoing colonial
government sought to rebut allegations that it lacked commitment and was merely complying
with the pressures exerted by Beijing and London. Similarly, the uncharacteristic shift from
using policy primarily as a form of symbolic action towards a greater concern for
implementation, and the initial focus on more strongly coupled elements of curriculum change
-especially assessment), were linked to the short tenure of the outgoing government and its
desire to demonstrate strong leadership. The subsequent demise of the TOC as the vehicle for
reform was linked to the post-colonial government’s attempts to establish its legitimacy, which
was seen to require new educational policies, not the leftovers of the colonial regime.

In brief the career of the TOC illustrates vividly that educational reforms operate in
socio-political contexts which are themselves changing and those changes can have a powerful
impact on the perceived role, value and status of reforms. The career of the TOC thus
underlines the limitations of interpreting curricular policies solely as an exercise in
instrumental and rational planning either at the systemic/national level or at the level of
curriculum planning. The prevailing political context was critical in both legitimating and
deligitimating systemic curriculum reforms.

Secondly, and associatedly, the intrinsic nature of the curriculum innovation in terms of
its conceptual and theoretical underpinnings, especially its embodiment of a
social-constructionist view of learning, did not emerge as critical across the four dimensions of
analysis. Neither in the process of policy making nor its implementation did major tensions
arise which related to the beliefs embedded in the TOC concerning how pupils learn and
appropriate pedagogic strategies. From the perspective of most schools their concerns
focused on the impact on their workload, and the logistics of implementing change. From the
perspective of innovative schools the internal logic of the reform was secondary to its potential
to provide external support for innovation and improvement of a school’s capacity to compete
with other schools.

A variety of surveys also indicate that teachers and principals were generally supportive
of the intentions of the TOC (Morris et al, 1996; HKIEd/ED, 1999). This would not seem to
support the contention that the assumptions underlying the TOC were fundamentally in
conflict with a set of values about schooling which were distinctly derived from Chinese or
Asian culture. There were many tensions and conflicts that confronted the TOC, especially the
prevailing pedagogic patterns, the strong subject based culture of the curriculum, the
competitive and selective role of schooling, and the authoritarian organizational culture of
many schools. In the initial stages these were viewed as central elements of the problem the
TOC was designed to address. Its implementation thus required fundamental and radical
changes to long-established arrangements and this inevitably caused tension and conflict. In
itself however evidence of conflict and tension in the pursuit of curriculum reform between
existing cultures of schools, classrooms and assessment is not sufficient ground to infer an
east-west cultural clash.

Thirdly, the TOC provides a classic example of a highly centralized strategy of
curriculum development. Clearly, the authoritarian system of decision-making and the
minimal levels of consultation contributed to the hostile and critical reception the reform
received in the first phase identified. The more flexible and conciliatory strategy of the
government, along with its provision of resources, served to ameliorate the response in the
second phase. This suggests that in itself the responsiveness of the superordinate group and its
willingness to resource ongoing reforms may be as influential as the extent of participation in
designing curricular innovations.
Finally, a full portrayal of the career of the TOC as a curriculum reform will require the analysis of a longer time period than is possible at this juncture. The final obituary will require a consideration of both how the experience of the TOC influences the next phase of curriculum reforms promoted by the government. Two influences, one positive and the other negative, can be discerned. As noted earlier, it is likely that the TOC’s key features will emerge in another guise and there are also signs that the tensions surrounding the TOC has resulted in the existing structures for selecting and sorting pupils being increasingly perceived as problematic and requiring fundamental reform. Specifically the system for allocating pupils to one of five bands based on their academic aptitude is being reconsidered. There are also indications that at the school level the TOC has served to encourage teachers to consider aspects of the curriculum (e.g. the integration of language skills, catering for pupil differences, assessment practices) which were previously taken for granted. In this regard the TOC may have paved the way for future curriculum reforms.

On the negative side, as a result of the TOC, the government will have to overcome the growing skepticism of principals and teachers towards systemic curriculum reforms. Many principals, especially those from more innovative schools, described their reaction to the delabelling of the TOC in terms of a sense of betrayal and similar sentiments were expressed in a more recent study (ED 1999). Their experience has reinforced the perception that the government lacks long term commitment, that new initiatives are symbolic, short term, transitory gestures in response to changes of the political context and policy personnel, and that inertia or surface changes in schools are the optimal response to policy initiatives. Stokes (1997) clearly articulates the long term consequences of changing the status of reforms especially on those schools that use systemic reforms to support school based innovation. ‘Withdrawing policy support for radical change that is barely underway leaves even reform
minded, high capacity practitioners vulnerable to the forces that stabilize status quo practices and outcomes. That comes perilously close to a seduction and abandonment model of reform policy’.
References


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